**Sermon Matthew 10:24-31 (Proper 7A)**

INTRODUCTION

**Sing a new world into being.**

**a church where all who worship find their lives and loves belong.**

**A world where each gender, class, and race**

**brings its rainbow gifts and colors to God's limitless embrace;**

**where the homeless find a home,**

**where no children ever hunger**

**where all people work for justice,**

**where all hate and vengeance cease.**

**a time of health and plenty when all tears have been wiped dry;**

**when compassion flows like waters, pouring balm for all who grieve.**

 **Sing a new world into being: live the promise you believe!**

Friends, we gather this morning along with over 1800 different United Church of Christ congregations that are Open and Affirming of LGBTQ+ people and their families. This congregation of St Andrew UCC joined that number in 2009, and continues to provide space for worship, opportunities to serve and lead, advocacy and support to LGBTQ+ individuals, families and organizations. This is essential and challenging work. It is the work of bringing a new world into being.

Because, although the world OUT THERE may undermine your sense of self-worth, your right to access gender-affirming healthcare, or use the name and pronouns that give you a sense of wholeness, the right to feel safe and secure in your home, your school or place of employment…IN HERE…the moment you walk through these doors, we here at St Andrew, want you to be able to breathe a sigh of relief…for this is the Sunday where we re-commit ourselves to bringing about a new world inside these walls…so that we can leave here refreshed and energized to engage more hostile forces outside.

We have publicly declared that we believe that this work is divine work. We have promised/covenanted to grow and learn and adapt and respond to the changing needs and the evolving challenges that LGBTQ+ folks face in this world, and in our city and state. And do not be mistaken, we are convinced that this is work that is central to the gospel of Jesus Christ which is characterized by love and healing, wholeness and community, kindness, and justice.

LINK

This is lens through which we read and interpret the scripture of the Old and New Testaments. It is an unapologetically progressive and inclusive lens, and one that is faithful to the life and ministry of Jesus. And so, when we come to a bible passage like the one, we just read, found in Matthew 10, we do so in solidarity with the needs, and experiences of the LGTBQ+ community (and all marginalized communities) in the forefront of our minds. And when we do that, I believe, I am convinced that we are holding ourselves accountable to the same communities that Jesus did. Afterall it is in this same gospel, a little later on in chapter 25, he says, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these siblings of mine, you did for me?”

So, before we jump in, let us pray:

Lord of the Least, you came to give honor and hope to those forgotten, overlooked, misjudged and actively discriminated against. May we in our reading of scripture and our worship today, learn to live more faithfully in your Way, so that those who feel unloved may know they are loved, that those who feel hurt or injured may be made whole, and that those believe that they have no purpose may be flooded with a sense of significance and dignity. Amen.

TEXT & INTERPRETATION

Matthew 10 verses 24 through 31 doesn’t so much speak to a “new world” we hope to bring into being, the one shaped by the values of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control… so much as it speaks of the barriers we and others face in doing so. And boy, do progressive people of all faiths that work for justice and equality, and the LGBTQ+ people in particular …boy, do they know something about barriers.

This time last year, I stood in front of you right as we heard that news that Roe versus Wade had been overturned. At a time in the year when at least 195 anti-LGBTQ bills were already pending in state legislatures, more than half of which specifically targeted transgender youth and banned them from being able to fully participate in everyday life. Today, we heard from Dr Bobbie Glass at our celebration and fundraiser on Friday that in the first 5 months of 2023 there has been 530 anti-trans bills in states across the country. Today, we live in a state with one of the most restrictive anti-abortion laws in the country and with one of the worst anti-trans laws in the nations. And just this week ABCNews reported that LGBTQ+ families are fleeing states like ours, for Illinois where their rights are protected. The barriers that we have faced this past year, in bringing about a more just and loving world, have been significant and have caused so much fear and hopelessness.

And so it is into this very context that we read the words of Matthew, and I want to draw your attention to the dominant, recurrent message that says, “Do not fear,” DO. NOT. FEAR. Now, you’ll see first, in verses 24 and 25, Jesus offers a warning: he says, whatever fate awaits teachers or masters also awaits their disciples and servants. If folks call Jesus “the prince of demons” or “Beelzebul” (cf. 9:34, 12:24), then the those committed to following in Jesus’ footsteps should be ready for at least similar name-calling, and other strategies designed to discredit and discourage.

“So do not be afraid of them,” Jesus says in verse 26. If anything, their name-calling is a lame- and toothless- tactic, designed to undermine your confidence and your resolve that what you are doing is GOOD, is RIGHT, and is FAITHFUL. In fact, being met with the same vitriol spewed at Jesus, ought to reinforce your assurance that the world you are building does indeed threaten the status quo, the powers-that-be that would seek to keep you oppressed and downtrodden. Their name-calling and targeted slander proves that your actions are reminiscent of Jesus’ actions. If anything, their hyper-focus on the most vulnerable actually clarifies the relationship between you and the divine, your actions and your values, with the actions and values of Jesus.

So, on this ONA Sunday, let me say again “have no fear”. Have no fear of those who call you names and mischaracterize you because of your sexuality, your gender identity or expression. Have no fear, for your very presence is evidence of a new world coming into being, where all God’s beloved children are celebrated and cared for.

In verse 26 and 27, we read that whatever is covered up will be uncovered and secrets would be made known. This is the power of transparency, the disclosive power of a gospel that declares that there is no place for shame, for backroom dealings, for closed-door conversations. Real power, the kind that comes from the presence of God who demonstrated again and again their desire for wholeness and justice, does not wheel-and-deal when it comes to people’s lives, their dignity and humanity.

And so to the LGBTQ+ people in this sanctuary today –Your being visible in this world, your resilience in standing against all the forces that would seek to erase you from public life, bears witness to a new way of being in which things that have been unknown are becoming known.

And you who count yourselves as allies and advocates for justice and love, you are a critical part of bringing about broader societal change. A revelatory change, such that we can indeed “sing a new world into being” and be a part of creating a church where all who worship find their lives and loves belong. This is gospel work, kin-dom and it is holy and divine.

[PAUSE]

So much of what we experience as barriers to the kind of world that God-desires, is fueled by fear. And fear begets fear, begets fear, begets fear. In fact, is there any more pervasive or powerful motivating force in human experience as fear? From the moment we are born, we learn to fear the world around us, certainly to fear the stranger, sometimes to fear even those who are closest to us. And political leaders have long recognized the power of fear in ensuring our conformity to the structures this world, even when doing so does not serve our best interests. Fear is the driving force behind vast segments of our economy, as well as political priorities. This is as true today as it was in Jesus’ time.

Jesus recognizes that faithful people are not immune to fear and its effects, fear will also cause IN US the failure of following-through with the Way of life he practiced and desires for us. And even though Jesus’ disciples courageously leave the security of their homes and families to follow him as they proclaim the advent of God’s reign, they too, will know and ultimately bow before the power of fear. The practice of the gospel, the justice-building gospel, inevitably puts followers of Jesus on a collision course with the powers of this world.

In verse 28 Jesus’ addresses the threat of death directly, the most powerful form of fear, though with a touch of irony. The right to kill is one of the chief props in the façade of human political power. Jesus admits that humans exercise this power, but notes that they have power *only* to kill the body, not the whole person. God alone can destroy both soul and body (10:28); God alone, therefore, is the one we should fear. God’s power, though similar in kind to that of human rulers, also surpasses. And YET Jesus reassures the disciples that God is not, in fact, like those humans powers.

Instead in verses 29 through 31 we see *what* God’s power is like. It’s a power used to show care and concern for even the sparrows that are sold “two for a penny.” It’s a power that is demonstrated in God’s intimate knowledge of even the hairs on our heads (10:29-31, cf. 6:25-33). The threat of violence and death are real concerns, but they need not be the determining forces in our lives. For the one who has ultimate power over our whole being exercises that power with mercy and love.

CONCLUSION

Friends, Sundays like this sustain me for the ongoing difficult work of new-world-building OUT THERE. So, we declare from the rafter this Sunday, that we believe in a God that welcomes ALL, no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey and invites you to participate in divine work of bringing a new world into being, a loving kin-dom to ALL. It will not be easy work, but it is divine work. We will face setbacks (both old and new) and yet we are not to fear, for we see clearly the façades of human power, even those rooted in the threat of death. And still we are convinced that God is present in the world, in mercy and compassion whispering in even the darkness places, that you are loved. You are loved.