

Sermon
Rev. Sonja L. Ingebritsen
August 19, 2018
Pride Sunday

Humanity Confirmed

May the words spoken and the words received be only in your service, great God of Love. Amen.

I subscribed to a list-serve this week. I followed a link to an online form where I filled in the requisite information and clicked “Subscribe to List.” I got to a familiar gatekeeper: a screen that asked me to confirm that I was not a robot. Familiar to most of us, right? But what caught eye was how this pop-up box was labeled. It said: “Confirm Humanity.”

That’s the heart of our worship today, isn’t it? Confirming Humanity.

In this week of the liturgical Season of Creation we celebrate Humanity’s place in God’s good creation. Our ancient ancestors used imagery to describe our relationship with the Creator. In the first chapter of Genesis we hear that we are made in the image of God, endowed with creativity and generative powers. That we are made in the likeness of God, charged with caring for creation as God cares for it. In the second creation story in Genesis, we’re described as being fashioned out of the clay of the earth, receiving our breath from the very breath of God, and receiving a charge to tenderly care for God’s garden. The process of humanity’s

development through a complex evolutionary process is no less a story of wonder.

God confirmed the goodness of humankind in creation, and reaffirmed it in no uncertain terms when, through Jesus, God put on the human skin, lived the human life, experienced the human heart, and died the human death. But God didn't stop there. Through the resurrection of Jesus, God declared that not even death separates us from the Creator.

When we think about creation, we often tend to think of the non-human world, and we marvel at its diversity. We are awed by the variety of flowers and birds, the species of trees, the way the Kettle Moraine differs from the Niagra Escarpment. Okay, to be fair, as a new Wisconsinite, I don't yet understand what those geological terms mean, but you get my point. We recognize that the prairie is different from the forest and the cardinal is different from the toucan. We recognize the need for biodiversity, and we celebrate it. The words, "And God said, 'It is good'" easily roll off our tongues.

On Pride Sunday we name that the same kind of diversity exists within gender identity and expression and sexual orientation as part of God's good creation. As with a bot-detering pop-up box, God checks Confirm Humanity for queer-identified people as surely as God does for non-queer-identified people.

Humans, on the other hand, don't always get that checkbox right for one another. The words, "And God said it is good," don't always roll so easily off our

tongues in regard to one another. We engage in corporate sin any time one group of us presumes to play God, deciding whether another group should have their humanity confirmed. Straight people believe they can gauge the humanity of gay or queer people. Cis-gender people believe they can gauge the humanity of trans people. And gender binary people believe they can they can gauge the humanity of those who are non-gender conforming. But our de-humanizing projects go even farther. Citizens believe they can gauge the humanity of immigrants and refugees. Educated people believe they can gauge the humanity of those disenfranchised from education. Those with wealth believe they can gauge the humanity of those excluded from wealth. Men and boys believe they can gauge the humanity of women and girls. And white people believe they can gauge the humanity of brown and black people.

This cooption of privilege and a desire to lord over others is the dynamic at work in our Gospel reading this morning, isn't it? Let me set some context. Before we enter this text, twice in their recent journeys Jesus has told his disciples about his impending death at the hands of those in power. Twice Jesus has told them that whoever wishes to be first among them must become the servant of all.

Now, I don't know whether James and John suffered from amnesia because they were road weary, or if they just managed to convince themselves that surely Jesus wasn't talking to them personally about this "first shall be last" business. In

any case, they feel entitled to ask Jesus for the ultimate privilege of being positioned by Jesus' side when Jesus comes into his glory. Think about this. They don't ask to be at his right and left hand for the remainder of Jesus' all-too-human, messy ministry. They don't ask to stand next to Jesus when he heals a man by touching his diseased skin or when he spits into a blind beggar's eyes. They don't ask to be at his side when Jesus heals a man from a legion of demons and the demons stampede off a cliff in a herd of swine. James and John don't ask to be by Jesus' side when he talks to the despised Samaritan woman at the well. And they don't want to be anywhere near his side when Jesus is tortured and executed by the authorities. Instead, they want to be in a place of unearned privilege, far from the suffering of life, where they can expect to be lauded above of the rest of humanity.

Before we can judge James and John too harshly, though, don't we have to confess that this is our temptation, too? Wouldn't we (whoever we define as part of our human kin) rather be comfortable, without critiquing whether our comfort comes at someone else's expense? Wouldn't we rather ensure that we have all that we need, without assuming responsibility for others to have access to resources? Isn't it tempting to live within our varied and particular bubbles of privilege and not wade through the mire of oppression to stand at the side of those oppressed?

But yielding to these temptations is neither just nor faithful. The costs of elevating some while denying the humanity of others has a high price: bullying and

other forms of violence, economic marginalization, political disenfranchisement, mass incarceration, terrorism, colonialism, genocide, slavery. And “power over” is not the way of Jesus, whom we profess to follow.

Today, on Pride Sunday, we name and claim the lives of LGBTQ+ folk. Soon we will begin the Big Read that Lisa mentioned that focuses on racism. We can’t separate the two. Every one of our lives are intersections of human constructs. For us as a predominantly white, cis-gender, straight church to say we affirm the full humanity of LGBTQ+ folk, we must also do our work around racism and white supremacy. Otherwise, the result is affirming white gay folk while failing our gay siblings in Christ who are people of color.

Recognizing these intersections of oppression are critical because the accumulation of oppression creates more jeopardy—economically, socially, emotionally, politically, and physically. Did you know, for example, that transgender women of color experience among the highest rates of poverty, homelessness, trafficking, intimate partner violence, police brutality, and murder?¹ And some of you may be aware of the controversy in Madison this year over police participation in the Pride Parade. By-and-large, cis-gender white members of the LGBTQ+ community, those least likely to be threatened by police, support law enforcement marching in and providing security for the parade. People of color,

¹ <https://www.thedailybeast.com/2018-is-shaping-up-to-be-another-terrible-year-for-trans-murders>

especially trans people, who are most likely to be endangered by police, oppose their involvement. Whose needs do you imagine Jesus saying should be primary?

For us, as people of faith, issues of dominance and intersectional oppression aren't social problems, they are spiritual problems. In his book *Trouble I've Seen*, Drew Hart calls the church to remember that Jesus was a poor Jew under Roman occupation who ministered with those who, like himself, lived on the underside of society and had neither privilege nor social power. Hart writes:

To move toward a ... transformative, and relational solidarity with marginalized and oppressed people ... requires learning to see again from oppressed people's perception of things, rather than through one's own lens, (and) to imitate the same Jesus who is alive and still leading his followers alongside the oppressed of our day. ..[This] must be understood as a Christian discipline, as necessary a practice for Christian formation as is praying, gathering in Christian community, reading Scripture, sharing resources, worshiping, and giving thanks.²

Today we celebrate Humanity Sunday, Pride Sunday, and Kick-off-to-*Trouble-I've-Seen* Sunday. We don't do so because of a gay agenda or even a liberal agenda. We do so because remembering the God-created, God-confirmed humanity of all people, especially the oppressed, is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Amen.

² Drew G. I. Hart, *Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* (Harrisonberg, VA: Herald Press, 2016), p 96