

**Sermon starters on LGBTQ inclusion  
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**Reading the Bible through the lens of Jesus**

“Jesus is Sovereign”

To say that ‘Jesus is Lord’ is to become his disciple, living by his example and teaching, and centering our moral vision in his dual command to love God and to love our neighbor as the fulfillment of the whole law. This confession leads us to trust continually in Christ’s gracious mercy when we fail to follow Christ as we should. For some of us, to say that ‘Jesus is Lord’ is to acknowledge the place of both the gospel and the law, a recognition that transforms how we engage ethical and moral questions. Others of us are more cautious about differentiating gospel from law too sharply but agree that the lordship of Christ provides the proper context within which to address these questions.

*Scripture and Moral Discernment: Report on the consultation among representatives of Formula of Agreement churches*

If I was told that I needed to preach on LGBT inclusion and the following texts, I might at first be tempted to run away, very far away, as fast as I could. And yet, these scripture passages call us to the very core of our faith, perhaps even the very core of our being. They further call us to “Change the Church to Change the World to Change the Church” (Emily Eastwood, Reconciling Works: Lutheran for Full Inclusion).

“Jesus is Lord—and Caesar isn’t.” Okay, let’s say Marcus Borg is right. How does this affect the way that we approach reading, interpreting, and teaching scripture? It means the Gospel will trump society hands down.

And just what did this Jesus teach? Simple . . . love the Lord your God with all of your heart, mind and soul and love your neighbor as yourself. This is the center of our faith and at the very center of how we are to read and interpret the scripture. I learned as a seminarian to put on the lens of Jesus when reading the scripture. Doing so, I quickly learned that people seem to have one plan for their world, and God seems to have other plans for God’s world.

## **Upside-down world turned downside-up**

“Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?” [Jesus] replied, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands. *Matthew 22:36-40, Common English Bible (CEB)*

Clearly, according to Christ, we are to love ourselves and our neighbors and our God. Self-acceptance, and acceptance of others, is part and parcel of what it means to be a Christian. According to the Gospels Jesus takes that which is seen as different (upside-down) and makes it (downside-up) no longer different but acceptable in the eyes of God. Those whom society thrusts to the margins have a place of value in the eyes of God.

The very heart of scripture (love the Lord your God with all of your heart, mind, and soul; and neighbor as self) is meant to change our hearts. As we are first loved and forgiven, so we love and forgive others. As we bless those whom society rejects, we become blessings to ourselves. As we change ourselves, we change the world.

Those who have been silenced, pushed to the margins, excluded . . . have found grace. And, as they share that grace with us, we become blessed. Why do we need to welcome LGBTQ and persons of different races, cultures, abilities into the church? So that we can receive the blessings *God expects them* to bestow on Christ’s church.

## **Ministry of reconciliation**

*Text: II Corinthians 5:11-21*

As radically inclusive Christians called to represent Christ, we minister through reconciliation. Our ministry invites the marginalized, the outsiders, to come inside and to take seats at the table as equals. LGBTQ people (all marginalized people) of God equally loved and respected for who and whose they are. It seems like Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians got it. God makes an upside down world—downside up! Paul wasn’t alone, the writers of the Hebrew writings got it too.

## **Outsiders in Hebrew scripture: Naomi and Ruth**

*Text: Ruth 1*

In the culture in which the Book of Ruth originated, Ruth and Naomi are outsiders. And yet, from these outsiders we learn about love and relationship. We see God’s vision through the most unexpected and the unlikely of people. And yet, it is through them that the world would be changed from a human vision to a God vision. Certainly this is a story about laying down your

life for another, loving them as you would love yourself. Only by God turning things downside up can we claim our identity as the church. Many people ask me when considering becoming an ONA (Open and Affirming) congregation, “Why do we have to do that? We already welcome everyone! Won’t we become a gay church?”

If we take seriously a God who turns the downside up and expects us to love and welcome the marginalized, including LGBTQ people, we would want to become a gay (happy) church. We would want to claim our welcome and take the time to spell out all whom both the church and society have claimed are not worthy of God’s grace. We would want to build a church that is inclusive of all because we need to hear the message that God has given to them for us to hear.

Change begins within. “Let peace begin with ME.” I suggest, let change begin with me and let the church’s identity be centered in the one who brought peace into the world in only the way that God could. Let us change ourselves, to change the church, to change the world, to change the church. One thing society and its cultures have always been good at is drawing lines in the sand. These people are in and those are out. The church is called to welcome all (all means ALL). The church and society are destined to never agree for one is the way of the human world and one is the way of God.

What would a church be like where the marginalized are embraced to change the church, to change society, to change the church? Scripture and history have shown us that as soon as those who have been marginalized get inside, there exists a new group of outsiders. When these outsiders are included inside, there is still a new group of outsiders. By God, when will we get it right? When will we learn that through our baptism we are all made equal in the eyes of God? Luke tried to help us to get the message.

### **Outsiders in the New Testament: Luke**

Luke is a most vigorous champion of the outsider. An outsider himself, the only Gentile in an all-Jewish cast of New Testament writers, he shows how Jesus includes those who typically were treated as outsiders by the religious establishment of the day: women, common laborers (shepherders), the radically different (Samaritans), the poor. He will not countenance religion as a club. As Luke tells the story, all of us who have found ourselves on the outside looking in on life with no hope of gaining entrance (and who of us hasn't felt it?) now find the doors wide open, found and welcomed by God in Jesus.

*“Introduction to Luke” from The Message by Eugene H. Peterson*

According to Luke, what do we know about Philip?

Philip was the first one to minister to Samaritans (Acts 8:4-17). And we are all familiar with Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan. What do we know about them? Leviticus 19:17-18 and Deuteronomy 15:7-11 tell us that they were well etched into the mind of every Jewish person

who knew the Torah. In the world at the time the neighbor is confined to “your kin,” “your people.” How could Jesus, himself a good Jew, call a Samaritan good, and a neighbor?

In Acts 8:14-16 the Christians in Jerusalem were concerned with Philip’s preaching in Samaria. They sent the “senior leaders of the church,” Peter and John, to investigate. They hoped this kind of preaching would stop and the church would not change. But Peter and John found that God had a different plan and affirmed what Philip was doing in changing the church. Philip’s teaching went beyond the Torah, beyond the literal reading of scripture. People who were previously rejected were now welcomed, included, accepted and baptized.

### **Peter, Cornelius, and the Gentiles**

*Text: Acts 10*

Peter didn’t get it, so God sent him a vision. God set up the invitation for Peter to leave his comfort zone. God turned the *downside* (Roman “outsider”) *up*. Peter gets it: “Jesus Christ is Lord of *all!*” People who were previously rejected were now welcomed, included, accepted and baptized. Peter got it, but others in the church didn’t. Peter had to continually defend his actions to the apostles (Acts 11 and following). If people are made by God and no person is unclean it would stand to reason that LGBT persons are included as being clean as well. No longer outsiders!

It is also interesting to note that “ethnos” is any group of outsiders. In scripture it is often translated as “nation,” always persons who are not Jewish. There was tremendous resistance to the acceptance of these outsiders just as there is tremendous acceptance to LGBTQ persons and all who are marginalized in church and society. Still, God continues to challenge Christ’s church to a new kind of wholeness where the one who was once outside can lead the insiders to the truth about God and God’s love for all.

### **A unique eunuch**

*Text: Acts 8:27-39*

There are over five different uses of the Greek word *saris* in the Hebrew Scriptures. *Saris* can be defined in several ways: An officer or manager of monarch’s residences, court officer, eunuch, chamberlain, or official. Jesus too knew the many uses of the Hebrew word; in Matthew 19:12 there are three: “*For there are eunuchs who have been eunuchs from birth. And there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by other people. And there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs because of the kingdom of heaven. Those who can accept it should accept it.*” (CEB)

According to Brown-Driver-Briggs the origin of the word could be old Assyrian with its root meaning the one who is the head. Not only was the eunuch an outsider, the eunuch was a caretaker of great things.

Why all of the focus on eunuchs? In the story of Philip and Ethiopian eunuch in Acts, the word “Ethiopian” shows up only once, but “eunuch” five times. Certainly if Luke wanted us to focus on the place of the eunuch, Ethiopia, he would have listed Ethiopia five times. But he didn’t. The term related to gender expression is the key to the story. And about this, Jesus had a lot to say. “Those who can accept it should accept it.”

It doesn’t matter where you are on the sexuality, gender, gender expression spectrum, you are welcome in Christ’s church. Acceptance of who you are is key to Christ’s welcome. That which the world has placed upside down, God has made downside up.

### **Moral Discernment and Scripture**

All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. *Galatians 3:27-28 (CEB)*

Paul shares with us God’s visions, God’s dream if you will, with regard to our ethnos, national; social status, gender, sexuality. ALL of us who are baptized into Christ are now clothed in Christ.

Our new identity is that of being one in Christ—all of us equal participants in the family of God. We are no longer subordinate one to the other but equally responsible to serve as Christ instructed us. You recall: love the Lord your God with your whole person and your neighbor as yourself. No longer should gender or gender expression or sexual identity or anything that marginalizes you in society keep you out of the church; rather it is the reason you are here. You are in the church as the marginalized, as LGBTQ people to share your love for God with the church so that we all can live into God’s dream for us. We are all invited to live into God’s dream of inclusion as though we see it already in the kin-dom that is yet to come.

God breaks through religion and society.

God is Still Speaking through those at the margins.

Open our hearts to where God is speaking.

A ministry of reconciliation. Radical hospitality, inclusivity and welcome. It doesn’t matter what society says about any group of people. God so loved the world that who-so-ever believes in Jesus is saved from themselves and the world so that they might live as representatives of God here in God’s world to reflect the truth from God’s Heaven. We are called by the Still Speaking

God to love our neighbor (and the marginalized) as we love ourselves (sometimes marginalized too) and show the world God's love for us all through our inclusivity.

### **Links for more sermon ideas**

[www.roomforall.com/resources/preaching-helps-and-sermons](http://www.roomforall.com/resources/preaching-helps-and-sermons)

[www.hrc.org/resources/entry/out-in-scripture](http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/out-in-scripture)

### **Sources**

*Common English Bible*

*The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem* by Marcus J. Borg

“Introduction to Luke” from *The Message New Testament and Psalms* by Eugene H. Peterson

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Oct. 15, 2014