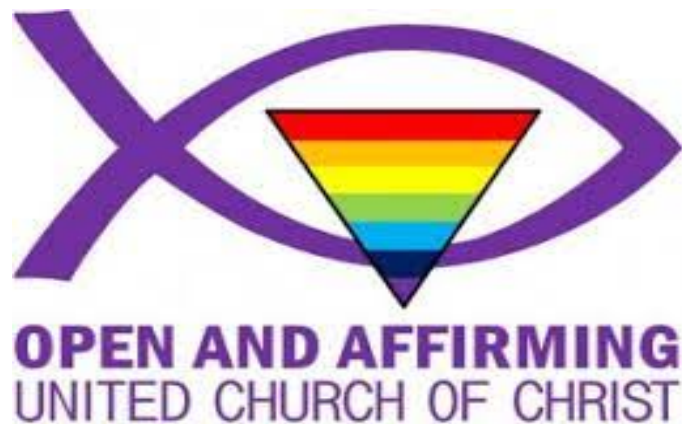


**Centre Congregational Church, UCC
The Rev Dr Scott Couper
Sunday, June 11, 2023
Second Sunday after Pentecost
Pride Sunday at Centre Church**

“Compassion and Mercy vs. Retribution and Sacrifice”

Scripture: Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26



Our scripture this morning presents us with at least four characters. In the first section we have those who are introduced as ‘sinners’ and ‘tax-collectors’. And in the second, we have a woman bleeding and a deceased daughter of religious leader. What I like about this reading is that Jesus showed mercy to all four. Often, we tend to understand that mercy is best bestowed upon those who perhaps ‘deserve’ it. Yet in our reading, I find who was deserving of mercy and who was not a non-existent issue. In Jesus’ eyes, all need mercy and thus all should receive mercy.

The deceased girl was, well, deceased, presumably without blame, and in need of mercy (or at least her mourning father was in need). The woman bleeding, also was without blame. Yet, she was theologically contaminated by bleeding that was understood at the time to be caused or willed by God for some sin (either committed by her or even by her parents). Moving further toward deserving of 'blame', we have tax-collectors. Tax collectors were not sinners *per se*, they were traitors, collaborators with the Roman empire, and hence enemies of God's chosen people. And finally, we have 'sinners' (labelled very broadly and generically) who are presumably the least deserving of mercy. Yet, aren't all sinners, all?! Aren't we all sinners, as evidenced by Jesus asking the Pharisees, "Who among you has not sinned and will cast the first stone?" (John 8:7). Even the girl who was deceased, that we assume to be blameless, is not. In reviewing the cast of characters, we realize that none deserve, and all need, mercy – and Jesus showed it to all.

As many of you are aware, states across the country are considering bans on transgender health care for minors. The American Civil Liberties Union reported that in 2022 states initiated a record setting 315 anti-LGBTIQ+ bills. Several of the legislative efforts even criminalize gender-affirming procedures. Thankfully, the Human Rights Campaign reports that last year 91% of anti-LGBTIQ+ efforts failed. Yet, we should not feel at ease – we cannot rest assured. This year

321 anti-LGBTIQ+ bills have been introduced or debated, already surpassing last year's record.¹

Gender affirming care is most often required to treat what is called 'Gender Dysphoria'. Gender Dysphoria (GD) is a psychological condition wherein a person experiences a state of severe distress or unhappiness caused by feeling that one's gender identity does not match one's sex as registered at birth. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)*, the rate of GD among children is estimated at **much** less than 1 percent.² Why then do we have 321 laws being introduced across the United States against less than one percent of children with a diagnosed psychological condition? Why do we have laws against parental rights and against the professional advice of doctors and trained psychiatrists?

The answer is found in the Bible. It is called 'scapegoating'. "Scapegoating is the practice of singling out a person or group for unmerited blame and consequent negative treatment. Scapegoating may be conducted by individuals

¹ Kiara Alfonseca, "Map: Where Gender Affirming Care Is Being Targeted in the US", *ABC News*, May 22, 2023. Found at: <https://abcnews.go.com/US/map-gender-affirming-care-targeted-us/story?id=97443087>, accessed June 11, 2023.

² Newport Academy (Teen Mental Health & Substance Abuse Centers), "Understanding Gender Dysphoria in Children", April 3, 2019. Found at: <https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/restoring-families/gender-dysphoria-in-children/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20DSM%2D5,later%20diagnosed%20with%20gender%20dysphoria.>, accessed June 11, 2023.

against individuals, individuals against groups, groups against individuals, and groups against groups.”³ “Scapegoating has its origins in a ritual of atonement described in chapter 16 of the biblical book of *Leviticus*, in which a goat is released into the wilderness bearing all the sins of the community, which have been placed on the goat's head by a priest.”⁴ Today, we are witnessing a political ‘scapegoating’ against an already wounded population. Worse, all of these laws are being proposed and debated are initiated primarily by Christians who should know that scapegoating is the blaming of an innocent, a sacrifice for the sins or the problems experienced by a population. In fact, Jesus himself was a scapegoat and, though innocent, was crucified. These laws are most often introduced by Christians who should know that Jesus desired compassion and mercy, not retribution and scapegoating. Remember how Jesus demonstrated this?: For the sinners, mercy; for the tax collectors, mercy; for the woman bleeding and thus an outcast, mercy; for the deceased girl and her mourning father, mercy.

In our reading this morning, Jesus quoted from the prophet Hosea when he proclaimed that God desires “mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6). Jesus always chose mercy, and so should

³ *Wikipedia*, found at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scapegoating>, accessed June 11, 2023.

⁴ *Wikipedia*, found at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scapegoating>, accessed June 11, 2023.

we as Christians. When Jesus quoted from Hosea, Jesus spoke against a theology whereby judgement, ostracization, retribution, and sacrifice (of goats and people) are efforts to appease God.⁵ God desires compassion and mercy. The 321 anti-LGBTIQ+ laws are being introduced as political and theological means to scapegoat a very small vulnerable population for many Christians' fear of modernity. Modernity has disclosed that racism, sexism, gender-binaries, and heteronormativity are no longer scientifically and thus morally justified. Patriarchy, white-supremacy, and heterocentrism are dying and those who seek to scapegoat the queer community need to get over their insecurities and not unload them on vulnerable populations. Those who wish to impose a bigoted caricature of Judeo-Christian religion, white supremacy, gender binaries, and heteronormativity need to read the scriptures and learn that God desires knowledge of God and not hundreds of laws to persecute less than one percent of an already suffering and marginalized people.

I have reviewed our church's Open & Affirming statement. While I am proud that we at Centre are O&A, I am disappointed by what I read to be a very watered-

⁵ Hence a Christology that affirms 'sacrificial atonement' (God requiring the sacrifice of a human, his only begotten son) is very 'Old Testament' and thus, from a Christian perspective, is an obsolete theology.

down statement.⁶ First, our O&A statement is a long litany of every form of human difference. While perfectly appropriate in and of itself, our O&A statement ought to focus on the queer community. Ours does not. Second, our statement curiously ‘welcomes’ and ‘invites’, but it does not explicitly ‘affirm’, the queer community. I would like the Mission & Service Board to form a subcommittee to revise and update our O&A statement and propose explicit means by which our church will live-out the ‘affirmation’ part of our O&A designation. I believe in today’s context that affirmation requires, first, protection, and, second, proactive inclusion, not simply a passive welcome. I am proud of our church’s O&A designation. I would not have answered the call to Centre Church if it was not an O&A church. Yet, together as a faith community we can more authentically live-out that who we claim to be. I know this church and I know that we are fully capable to be more faithfully who we claim to be. And we are a faith community that hears Jesus when he proclaims to desire mercy.

This was the Word of God. And it was spoken to the people of God. And the people of God responded, “Amen”!

⁶ “We invite and welcome all persons of every race, age, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, economic and social status, marital status, mental and physical ability and all other differences within our humanity, to grow together in faith and love.”

“We invite and welcome all of God’s children to join in living our faith here at Centre Church...”

Dorothy VanderMeulen, *This Jewell on Main Street: Centre Congregational Church at 200 Years 1816-2016* (Shires Press: Manchester Center, Vermont), 2015, 55.

