



## Trinity Sunday, Year A

### Reading Difficult Texts with the God of Love and Peace

We all read Bible passages in the light of our own experiences, concerns and locations in society. It is not surprising that interpretations of the Bible which seem life-giving to some readers will be experienced by other readers as harmful or oppressive. What about these passages that are used to speak of the concept of the Trinity?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Psalm 8; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"Despite the desire of some Christians to marginalize those who are different, our faith calls us to embrace the diversity of our personhood created by God and celebrate it." Bentley de Bardelaben



"People often are unable to see 'the goodness of all creation' because of our narrow view of what it means to be human and our doctrines of sin, God and humanity." Valerie Bridgeman Davis



"By affirming that we, too, are part of God's 'good creation,' lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of faith begin to take responsibility for fostering love and peace throughout creation." Ken Stone



"When we creep in the direction of believing that we absolutely know God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, we have not only limited the Trinity, but also sown the seeds of hostility and elitism. We need to be reminded of the powerful, mysterious and surprising ways that the Trinity continues to work among all creation." Holly Toensing

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### What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

LGBT people know that Scripture can be used for troubling purposes. Unfortunately, the creation account in **Genesis 1:1-2:4a**, with its emphasis on "male and female" and its command to "be fruitful and multiply," is sometimes cited to oppose homosexuality. In addition, its emphasis on human "dominion" over other creatures (found also in **Psalms 8**) has been associated with ecological destruction. Also, the command of Jesus in **Matthew 28:16-20** to "make disciples of all nations" has served as justification for missionary enterprises sometimes linked to Western imperialism, racism and religious intolerance.



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How should people of faith approach biblical passages that have been used for harmful purposes?

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We all read Bible passages in the light of our own experiences, concerns and locations in society. Thus, it is not surprising that interpretations of the Bible which seem life-giving to some readers will be experienced by others as harmful or oppressive. In a diverse world, disagreements about biblical interpretation are to some degree inevitable.

However, it is important to remember that, even in the earliest years of Christianity, people of faith did not always see eye to eye. In the diverse Corinthian church, disagreements among the Corinthians led not to healthy debate but rather to factionalism and competition for leadership.

Writing to those Corinthians in **2 Corinthians 13:11-13**, Paul indicates that Christians who worship "the God of love and peace" should attempt to "live in peace." Paul's admonition to his readers may offer one guideline for reading the Bible in our own diverse communities. We may not always "agree with one another," as Paul hoped. However, we can certainly struggle to

articulate our disagreements in a spirit of love and peace and read biblical texts in ways that contribute to a life of peace.



What does it mean to read biblical passages as testimony about the God whom Paul called “the God of love and peace”?

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If the Genesis creation account is read as a story about the same “God of love and peace” that Paul referred to in his letter to the Corinthians, we may find ourselves highlighting different elements of the text than do readers who promote a God of judgment and hierarchy. The Genesis passage was probably written by exiles from Judah, living in a “foreign land” (Psalm 137:4) under Babylonian imperial powers. These exiles found the assertion that Israel’s God created the cosmos to be a source of encouragement and resistance. Even while facing difficult circumstances, they wrote that “everything” which their God created “was very good” (Genesis 1:31). Reading this potentially inclusive statement in our own time, we may wish to emphasize its affirmation that all human beings, regardless of race, gender, nationality, sexual practice or other differences, belong to God’s “good” creation. Indeed, even other creatures, such as the animals created with humans on the sixth day, assume a larger significance when we affirm with God that “everything” God created “was very good.”

Of course, we can never eliminate the use of Scripture as a tool for prejudice and oppression. But on Trinity Sunday, when Christians affirm that the “Holy Spirit” which Paul associates with community (2 Corinthians 13:13) is the same Spirit of God that moved over the waters at the beginning of creation (Genesis 1:1), we do well to find in Bible passages a reminder of God’s desire to extend shalom – God’s wholeness and peace – to all parts of that creation. Perhaps even the statement of Jesus in **Matthew 28:16-20** can be reread in such a light. Instead of justifying modern Western missionary expansion, it might be reinterpreted as an affirmation that the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sustainer are with us whenever and wherever we work to realize God’s love and peace, among all nations and throughout the earth.

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Holy One, Holy Three,  
Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer,  
be with us whenever and wherever we work  
to realize your love and peace –  
here among those close to us, yet also  
among all nations and throughout the earth.  
Holy One, Holy Three, to you we pray. Amen.

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## 8th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

### Coming Out to Hope

In the passages for today, the Bible speaks of coming out. Yet, what are distinctive characteristics of this coming out? What has God to do with it? What is called from us?

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#### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"Hope is necessary for all people who need to come out of difficult circumstances, and not only for those who are leaving closets of sexual or gender oppression." Ken Stone



"Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people often do not feel cared for. Matthew's gospel comforts by affirming just the opposite." Valerie Bridgeman Davis



first by  
to those who

"Whenever I experience feelings of being overwhelmed, frightened and forgotten, the comforting message of hope and trust in these texts has been a constant to still my restlessness." Bentley de Bardelaben



"Even lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folks who are no longer in exile need to be encouraged to refocus our priorities, looking Godward, and then by redirecting our concerns outward are shut out, overlooked or abused." Holly Toensing

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

The call to “Come Out” has long been a rallying point in the LGBT movement. Thus **Isaiah 49:8-16**, with its explicit admonition to “Come Out” (49:9) and its promises of freedom would seem to be an ideal passage for a welcoming and affirming Christian community.

Of course, “coming out” in the face of social, political and individual prejudice continues to be difficult. Given such realities as employment discrimination, religious intolerance, and family rejection, LGBT folks have many justifiable reasons for worrying about possible consequences of “coming out.”

The exiled Israelites addressed in **Isaiah 49** apparently had reasons for worrying about their future as well. Indeed, verse 14 indicates that they felt “forsaken” and “forgotten” by God. Yet the author of Isaiah 49 responds to such despair by “transgendering” Israel’s deity. Although God is most often represented as a male deity in the Hebrew Bible, the prophet here characterizes God as a compassionate mother who cares for the child that she nurses (verse 15). Even if mothers do occasionally forget their children, the prophet continues, God will never forget the Israelites. The message of this gender bending oracle is therefore one of hope and encouragement.

The reader is invited to trust God even in the most difficult circumstances, in a passage that resonates with the words of the psalmist who asserts, in **Psalms 131**, that “I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother” (verse 2). Such hope, trust and care continue to be important for all people of faith who “come out” from any set of difficult circumstances in order to journey into an uncertain future.



How does the image of God as nurturing mother assist people of faith who are trying to leave oppressive circumstances?

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Hope and trust are also emphasized in **Matthew 6:24-34**. Jesus’ admonition against worrying “about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear,” is well-known but difficult to follow. Yet it can be crucial advice for those who struggle against injustice or support unpopular causes, since excessive anxiety about the future can prevent one from taking any action at all. By calling attention to birds, flowers, and other living elements of God’s vibrant creation, Jesus reminds us of God’s care for God’s creatures and that worry often gets us nowhere. Moreover, such reflection on creation offers one route for re-centering ourselves in the face of challenges.

This re-centering may be helpful to people who are coming out of all sorts of difficult circumstances, as will Paul’s confident assertion in **1 Corinthians 4:1-5** that only God’s

judgments about us finally matter. Neither the opinions of others, nor even (as Paul suggests in verse 3) our own tendencies to judge ourselves, should cause us to turn aside from the tasks to which we are called.

However, while Isaiah 49's admonition to "come out" may encourage today's people of faith, it is important to keep differences of context and situation in mind. Isaiah 49 was written to real people in the ancient world who were dealing with geographical displacement in the wake of military occupation by an imperial power. Those who are invited to "come out" are referred to explicitly as "prisoners" (verse 9). Far from making this passage irrelevant for contemporary readers, recognition of the chapter's historical context may encourage us to broaden our understanding of the various struggles faced by different peoples around the world, in the past as in the present. After all, geographical displacement, military occupation and physical imprisonment are as real today as they were in the ancient world. All people who live with such realities need to hear words of encouragement and hope. Thus, careful reflection on Isaiah 49 offers welcoming churches an opportunity to find connections and make alliances among multiple movements for justice, peace and compassion.



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What links do we as LGBT people of faith make with other communities who suffer injustice and violence? How might LGBT people be called to minister to or be in solidarity with those communities?

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



God of Hope and Care, and Mother to us all,  
we look for your support while coming out  
from our own difficult situations.  
Help us to remember and support others  
who are also coming out from difficult circumstances  
that are often very different from our own.  
Held in your strong arms, we pray, Amen.

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## 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

### Justified by Heterosexuality or by Faith?

God breaks down barriers. God justifies not based on any narrow family values, but on grace, grace alone.

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#### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"The sacrifice of Christ is redemption enough no matter who we are or what we've done." Bentley de Bardelaben



"These readings remind us not only how easily we turn on one another, but also of God's boundless love that shelters us." Holly Toensing



"The promise that the gospel is 'to everyone' seems to stand against the polemics that exclude anyone." Valerie Bridgeman Davis



"Though Romans is often cited to condemn homosexuality, its insistence that God justifies everyone equally provides a more welcoming and affirming message." Ken Stone



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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

By combining **Romans 1:16-17** with **Romans 3:22-31**, this week's lectionary reading underscores some of Paul's most important theological arguments about a "gospel" that is, in Paul's words, "the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (1:16). The details of Paul's arguments are shaped in part by their original context in the earliest decades of Christianity. Yet his arguments also have implications for contemporary Christians, and the ways in which we think about homosexuality.

One of the central components of Paul's gospel is his view that all human beings, including both Jews and Gentiles, "have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23). The sinfulness of humanity was still apparent to Paul, as it had been to God in the days of Noah according to **Genesis 6:9-22; 7:24; 8:14-19**.

In order to make his point in the context of early Christianity, however, where some Christians came from Jewish backgrounds and others came from Gentile backgrounds, Paul finds it necessary to challenge the belief that following Jewish law in itself allows a person to become righteous before God. Paul, who was himself Jewish, does recognize some "advantages" to being a Jew (3:1); for the Jews are those who were first given the law, which Paul in 3:2 calls "the oracles of God." These oracles are the same "words" and "commandments" of God referred to in **Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28**. While acknowledging this "advantage," however, Paul in Romans insists upon a kind of equality for everyone in the eyes of God.

Whereas the Christians of Paul's day were apparently making distinctions among themselves on the basis of such matters as the practice of circumcision (a requirement for Jewish men according to biblical law), Paul refused to allow such differences in bodily practice to mark a boundary between those who had been justified by God and those who had not. Everyone has sinned and so needs to be justified before God; but all human beings, including both Jews and Gentiles, "are now justified by [God's] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24). Thus in Paul's view Jewish Christians have no reason for "boasting" (3:27), as some of them seem to have been doing, about the fact that they practice the "works" prescribed by the law. Each person alike is in need of being made righteous by God, but ultimately "a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law" (3:28). Since "God is one," God "will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith" (3:30).

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There is a danger of anti-Semitism and Jew-bashing by simply identifying Jews with law and Christians with grace. All live in grace. Like the LGBT community, how has the Jewish community suffered from misuse of Christian Scripture for demeaning and violent purposes?

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Such matters as circumcision are no longer commonly used to make religious distinctions among Christians. Yet appeals to bodily practice, as a way of differentiating those who are (at least by implication) justified by works from those who are not, may take new forms today. Although most Christians do not openly “boast” about their observance of law, many do speak as if such matters as sexual practice, gender practice or family practice could be used to distinguish those who are justified in God’s eyes from those who are sinners. Indeed, the “gospel” preached in some quarters sounds perilously close to a doctrine of “justification by heterosexuality” or “justification by family values.” Paul’s letter to the Romans is often quoted out of context, along with certain biblical laws, to reinforce such doctrine. Ironically, this way of using Paul’s letter quotes a few of his words while contradicting a core element of his message: that all people are equally sinners before God, but everyone has been justified by faith.

Of course, Paul’s emphasis on justification by faith rather than works does not entail the conclusion that “anything goes” for Christians. Indeed, Jesus himself underscores the importance of doing God’s will and acting on the words of Christ in **Matthew 7:21-29**. Nowhere, however, do the words of Jesus show any concern about homosexuality or traditional gender identities. Ultimately, we are not redeemed by whether our sexual practice or gender identity is deemed appropriate by others. Rather, as the psalmist recognizes already in **Psalms 31:1-5**, we are redeemed by God on the basis of God’s righteousness alone.



How have you refused to hear the word of God’s grace open to LGBT people of faith? How does a life filled with grace live? How do you declare and live the good news among others who are pushed outside?

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**Prayerfully Out in Scripture**



(A prayer based on Psalm 31)

*God, form us into your free and loving people.*

*You are our life!*

*Your goodness is abundant.*

*Your love is steadfast.*

*Your redemption is for all.*

*Held in your heart, we are fearless.*

*Thanks be to you, God.*

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## 10th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 5), Year A

### Coming Out Across Borders, Hoping Against Hope

Just as Abraham and Sarah left Haran, just as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folks leave their closets, and just as immigrants leave their homes, so also contemporary people of faith must leave their fears and prejudices behind and respond to the call of God.

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#### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



“Whether we are leaving closets, families, or homelands, hope is necessary for our journey of faith.” Ken Stone



“A true coming-out demands acceptance of the other as brother and sister. In a true coming out, blessings flow; cultures are exchanged and enriched; the stranger becomes a friend, the sojourner becomes a citizen.” Manuel Villalobos Mendoza

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#### What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

**Genesis 12:1-9** tells the story of people who are called out of their country and their family of

origin. God tells Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (12:1). Abram (later Abraham) and his wife Sarai (later Sarah) are considered symbolic ancestors of three great religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Paul, in **Romans 4:13-25**, considers Abraham “the father of all of us” (4:16). However, our recollection of Abraham and Sarah is a consequence of their willingness to be called out of family and homeland.

Abraham’s journey from Haran did not happen in a single move. In fact, Abraham as well as his descendants continued to travel throughout their lives. Moreover, Abraham is initially given only limited information about the ways in which God will “bless” him (Genesis 12:2-3). His first move is therefore a step taken in faith. As Paul notes about Abraham, “hoping against hope, he believed” that God would provide the blessings promised to him (**Romans 4:18**).

In modern society, the experience of leaving behind one’s family of origin is more common than it was in the ancient world. Nevertheless, few people are more familiar than LGBT folks with the uncertainty and pain that can accompany such leave-taking. Far too often, a break with family happens for LGBT folks under conditions that are characterized by alienation or hostility. Even when relations are less strained, differences in experiences and ways of life can make LGBT people feel as removed from their families of origin as those who travel great distances.

Yet the story of Abraham reminds us that coming out of one situation and traveling into another has always been a part of the journey of faith. Although it is sometimes necessary to leave loved ones behind, the presence in Abraham’s story of Sarah and Lot reminds us that we do not usually travel alone. Companions are found along the way.

Neither the difficulties nor the joys encountered during his travels are completely revealed to Abraham in advance. Similarly, our own future difficulties and joys are seldom revealed to us. Nevertheless, “hoping against hope,” and sustained by “the steadfast love of God” referred to in **Psalms 33:5**, we, like Abraham and Sarah, come out of current circumstances to journey towards God’s welcome and affirmation. Our blessings, moreover, are not only for ourselves. As God tells Abraham, “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” when people “come out” to a journey chosen by God.



How can the journeys of Abraham and Sarah symbolize “coming out” experiences and other journeys traveled by LGBT people of faith?

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It is important to keep in mind, however, that Abraham and Sarah do not simply travel away from their families of origin. They also cross borders of nation and land. They do not cross borders empty-handed. They bring with them “possessions they had gathered” (12:5) and blessings for others (12:2-3). But they are immigrants.

Like LGBT folks, contemporary immigrants often face a journey filled with both peril and

promise. Like LGBT folks, they frequently face not simply prejudice or hostility, but legalized discrimination. “Hoping against hope,” they leave families of origin behind to travel an uncertain path. They bring with them talents, visions, and blessings for others. Instead of being met with compassion or welcome, they find themselves being made scapegoats for all sorts of social ills.

Should a church that is truly welcoming and affirming accept lesbians and gay men while ignoring or turning away immigrants? How can such a stance be justified if Abraham the immigrant is considered today, as he was by Paul, “the father of all of us”?



How should a “welcoming and affirming church” respond to immigrants?

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Both religious tradition and legal custom are used today, as they were in the ancient world, to draw borders and boundaries between peoples. Many Christians are afraid to embrace anyone who is marginalized by society or seems to threaten those borders and boundaries. In the contemporary United States, both LGBT folks and immigrants of all genders and sexual orientations suffer as a consequence of such fears.

In **Matthew 9:9-13**, however, Jesus openly associates with those who are mistrusted and disdained. When adherents of the law criticize Jesus for keeping company with outcasts, he reminds them that God, in **Hosea 6:6**, desires mercy more than the observance of legal stipulation. Just as Abraham and Sarah left Haran, just as LGBT folks leave their closets, and just as immigrants leave their homes, so also contemporary people of faith must leave their fears and prejudices behind and respond to the call of God, who “loves righteousness and justice” (**Psalms 33:5**). In this way we show that we are “hoping against hope” for a more welcoming and affirming world.

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Hoping against hope,  
O God, we long for a world that welcomes and affirms all.  
Bless us and inspire us to bless others  
with your vision of a holy place – safe, just and loving for all. Amen.

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## 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 6), Year A

**Called Out to Ministry**

Let us, like the psalmist (Psalm 116:12), be ever mindful to ask what we can return to God for all of God's bounty to us.

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"One of the ways that queer folk can follow Jesus is in imitating his compassion for the harassed and hopeless in our communities, especially young people searching for hope and meaning." Julianne Buenting



"When we deny our 'calling,' hope eludes us. Without hope, how can we heal others?" Jack Seymour



"The gifts that LGBT people bring to ministry are as important as the needs of LGBT people for ministry." Ken Stone

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

In this week's gospel reading, **Matthew 9:35-10:8**, Jesus ministers to crowds of people who are described as "harassed and helpless" (9:36). Significantly, when he sees how many people are actually in need of healing and assistance, Jesus calls his twelve disciples and gives them "authority" (10:1) to minister to the crowds as well.

The compassion shown by Jesus is as necessary today as it was in first-century Palestine. In a homophobic society characterized by such things as verbal abuse, physical bashing, religious prejudice, legalized employment discrimination and high rates of suicide among queer youth, LGBT folks can easily feel that they are numbered among those who are most "harassed and helpless." Ministry with LGBT folks is therefore an important calling, to which, unfortunately, relatively few ministers or churches have been willing to respond.



What particular types of ministry are especially necessary among LGBT folks?

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LGBT people of faith, however, do not simply need ministry. They are also called *to* ministry. Like the disciples of Jesus, many LGBT folks find themselves responding to a summons from God to work among those who are, as Jesus recognizes, "like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36).

Many Christians find it difficult to accept LGBT persons as ministers. Some denominational policies explicitly prevent LGBT people of faith from serving as "shepherds." For people who support such policies, the suggestion that God might call LGBT people and give them "authority" for ministry seems incredible.

However, biblical tradition often speaks about a God who accomplishes incredible things. In **Genesis 18:1-15**, for example, Abraham and Sarah are told that they will have a child. Sarah laughs when she hears this news, for both she and Abraham are very old. Natural childbirth seems to be physically impossible at such an advanced age. Even Paul, recounting their story in Romans 4:19, notes both "the barrenness of Sarah's womb" and the fact that Abraham's body "was already as good as dead." The notion that God would call Abraham and Sarah to be parents, in their particular life circumstances, is therefore hard to believe. Yet in **Genesis 21:1-7**, Sarah does give birth to a son. God works through Sarah and Abraham even though their life situation makes childbirth unlikely. We might even say that God is able to create family under circumstances that appear to be "unnatural."

This same ability to accomplish miraculous things, which may not seem natural to onlookers, is evident in the Gospel's story of call and ministry. After all, it is not only Jesus who is "curing every disease and every sickness" (Matthew 9:35). When he sends out his disciples, he tells

them that they, too, will “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons” (10:8). It is easy to imagine the disciples of Jesus finding it difficult to believe that they would soon be curing the sick or raising the dead. Like Sarah and Abraham, they are called to do things that appear to be impossible. With God-given “authority,” however, they are able to minister to others in amazing ways.

The pain and alienation that many LGBT folks have known from an early age may actually make them particularly well-suited to minister to others who are, for whatever reason, also subject to pain and alienation. Perhaps the sort of compassion for the “harassed and helpless” that characterized Jesus even comes easier, at times, to those who have themselves been “harassed and helpless” than it does to those who have always fit into society’s norms and conventions. Of course, it is important not to glorify or justify the difficulties faced by those whose life circumstances put them at odds with prevailing norms for sex, gender and family.

When God calls us to ministry, however, God calls us as particular people who have been shaped by particular experiences. If God can allow an old woman to give birth to a child, or human disciples to raise the dead and heal the sick, then surely even difficult and painful experiences can be turned into gifts for ministry. As Paul suggests in **Romans 5:1-8**, “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts.” Perhaps this same transformation from suffering to hope explains the willingness of the psalmist in **Psalms 116:1-2, 12-19** to respond to God’s deliverance by becoming God’s servant.



How might the specific experiences of LGBT people of faith serve as resources for a ministry to those who are “harassed and helpless”?

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



“What shall I return to God for all God’s bounty to me?” (Psalm 116:12)  
O God, you come and offer aid and comfort  
even after tough days, defeated days, days without hope.  
O God, in gratitude for your very presence,  
turn me to ministering to others who suffer  
during tough days, defeated days, days without hope.  
Amen.

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## 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time, (Proper 7), Year A

### Claiming God's Promise in the Midst of Exile

When Hagar cries out to God, God hears and reminds her that the outcast child has not been forgotten. God does not forget us in our exile, but finds us and embraces us where and as we are.

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#### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



“Our Genesis passage represents the many people who are cast out and kept out because of race, economic status, sexual orientation, gender, and ability. The Good News is God continues to speak liberation and hope to situations that often appear hopeless.” Vernice Thorn



“Ishmael’s very presence is threatening to those around him, but Hagar’s love for her son won’t allow her to disown him or cast him aside. As with the mother of a gay child, Hagar stands up for Ishmael, even though it results in her being cast into the desert along with him.” Jennifer Pope



“Resurrection means that whatever the cost of following the gospel’s call to love and justice, death and despair are behind us as we remain open to God’s renewing life in us, walking in ‘newness of life’ and affirming our God-given sexual orientation, gender, race, ethnicity and ability.” Arlie Sims

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

**Genesis 21:8-21** provides us with the stories from the Hebrew Scripture about two women who stand up for their children in the only ways they know how. As a woman of her day, Sarah had little power or protection of her own. To hold onto what she *did* have — the promise of an inheritance for her son — Sarah demanded that Abraham throw out her Egyptian servant Hagar and her son, Ishmael. We see in Sarah the plight of many oppressed groups; when faced with limited resources and rights, those who are marginalized often feel their only option is to compete with others in the same situation for access to power.

In Hagar we meet a woman whose son, Ishmael, threatens those around him simply by existing. Hagar's love for her son won't allow her to disown him or cast him aside. Like the mother of a gay child, Hagar stands up for Ishmael, even though it results in her being cast into the desert along with him. Though we are troubled by the text's portrayal of God as complicit with Hagar's being cast out, we can find hope in the fact that God hears Hagar's cries. She is assured that God has “heard the voice of Ishmael where he is” (Genesis 21:17). Many LGBT people who have finally found a place in the church where they are valued, honored and celebrated know that this story speaks poignantly to the experience of exile that too many LGBT children of God have suffered.



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Do we sometimes use what privilege we have against others with less power? How can we always be aware of our own tendency to leave someone out and, instead, trust God to provide what is needed for the good of all?

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The passages from the book of psalms echo Hagar's own cries. In **Psalms 69** the psalmist cries out: “Answer me, O God, for your steadfast love is good; according to your abundant mercy, turn to me.” Similarly, the cry in **Psalms 86** is a plea for divine care. The psalmist starts with a cry for survival in verses 1-3 (“I am poor and needy...preserve my life...be gracious to me”), but quickly moves in verse 4 to a cry for joy and wholeness (“gladden the soul of your servant”). Just as Hagar wanted more than water and food so that she and her son could survive, and the psalmist wants not just preservation of life but also joy. LGBT people do not want the crumbs of tolerance and pity at the table; we cry out for full inclusion in the faith community and

celebration as children of God.



In what ways have we settled for mere survival — for tolerance and pity — rather than demanding that we be celebrated for who and what we are? In what ways have we confined others to mere survival as well?

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In **Jeremiah 20:7-13**, the prophet describes God’s way of causing the truth to well up in us, demanding to be heard even when we prefer to be comfortable and safe in our silence. The words of the prophet resonate with our experience: “When I say ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot” (verse 9). LGBT clergy and teachers, lay leaders and musicians, singles and couples-in-hiding in the church are familiar with the “fire shut up in our bones,” and we have known the weariness that comes with holding it in. May we speak our truth and claim our part in the promise of God.



What truths have we been holding in that need to be proclaimed? Are there truths in our pews that we have neglected to see?

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The call to death and resurrection is familiar to many LGBT people who have finally accepted as dead their experience of silence, invisibility and shame. We connect with **Romans 6:4-5**: “Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of God, so we too might walk in the newness of life. For if we have been united with Jesus in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

Resurrection means that whatever the cost of following the gospel call to love and justice, death and despair are behind us as we remain open to God’s renewing life in us, walking in “newness of life” and affirming our God-given sexual orientation, gender, race, ethnicity ability and all the things that make us who we are.

Finally, the troubling words in **Matthew 10:24-39** remind us that discipleship, with its life-giving freedom, comes also with cost. When LGBT believers choose to be full and unapologetic participants in the promise and mission of discipleship, we call out the lies of injustice and oppression by our very presence. When we come out of the silence and stand with Jesus on the side of full humanity and liberation, we may find that people who claim to be our family begin to act like enemies. This passage also reminds us that the hairs of our head are numbered and that we are of more worth than the sparrows (verses 29 and 30), a reassurance of God’s care and



presence, even as our commitment to the Gospel shakes up the established order and makes us vulnerable.



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How have LGBT people of faith and their allies faced division and rejection when they decide to follow their call to be faithfully out of the closet? When have LGBT people and our allies — as well as people of color, women and members of other oppressed groups — seen friends, family members or members of our faith communities turn against us when we openly claim God's promise that we are fully welcome to God's table and that our gifts for service and leadership are equally valid?

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Loving God, welcoming God,  
challenging God, sustaining God,  
May we be attuned to your presence with us and  
be present with others who need our support.  
Make us advocates for truth, workers for justice and beacons of hope  
wherever we go and whatever we do,  
that your embracing love for all the world may be known.  
Amen.

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## 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 8)

### From Violence to Peace, Exclusion to Hospitality

This week we encounter terrifying commands and prophesy from patriarchs, prophets and apostles. Abraham is asked to sacrifice Isaac, the very embodiment of God's promise of a great lineage. Jeremiah recalls those who prophesied war, famine and pestilence. Paul notes that we move from slavery to sin to slavery to righteousness. In each instance, hard words give way to promise: Isaac is spared, the true prophet speaks peace, discipleship is recast as freedom.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Genesis 22:1-14 & Psalm 13 or Jeremiah 28:5-9 & Psalm 89: 1-4;](#)  
[Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"Will I worship a God who demands human sacrifice? Decidedly not! But this story of Isaac and Abraham seems to me to say that God continues to communicate and calls us to keep our ears and hearts open to new understandings of God's will in our lives. I can embrace that!"  
Julienne Buenting



"If obedience to God can only be proven through one's willingness to sacrifice one's child, then faithful disobedience is required." Scott Haldeman



“As we listen for God's word amid all that we hear — as we try to discern what comes from the Spirit and what is false prophesy — these texts guide us. They call us to listen for the word which saves, which challenges us with its truth telling, which calls us to be instruments of God's goodness and grace, and which invites us to welcome all in God's name.” Nate Metrick



“Faithful discipleship sometimes requires engaging a world of conflict. Our desire for peace and our longing to raise the ‘festal shout’ ought not to be satisfied with vain hopes and cheap imitations of shalom, but only with the real thing, which requires, as Jeremiah knew, a truth-telling about our vulnerability and our failings.” Timothy J. San-doval

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### What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

This week we discover that the Word of God, words that nourish and empower, is not always the same as the word-by-word text read from the Bible. Where is the Word of God in the midst of so many words in the Bible?

Paul, in **Romans 6:12-23**, with no hint of hesitation, relies on the metaphor of slavery to communicate the dynamic between obedient disciple and divine Master. Of course, slavery is not remarkable in his day. Slavery was simply one of the institutions that “was” and so serves well his purpose of describing the conversion of the heart in those who find themselves turning to God as known in and through the Crucified One: “You, having been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and ... you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness” (verse 17-18).

Yet, even as he proceeds, Paul lets us know that such an analogy is not necessarily the last word: “I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations” (verse 19). And so, are we not free to shift the metaphor, to find more fitting words to describe our relationship with the One whose very name is Love? While slavery still exists, the ownership of one human being by another can no longer be justified. Faith that is reduced to obedience to tyrannical power is similarly unsuitable as a description of the Gospel’s good news.



We have discarded both the institution of slavery and its usefulness as a metaphor to describe the life of faith. Can we not also leave behind the stories that have been used to condemn same-sex love, listening instead for a word of freedom?

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In **Genesis 22:1-14**, Abraham hears a voice that stays his hand, halts the arc of the knife: “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to harm him!” (verse 12). Does God repent of the command? Did Abraham pass the test or did he fail it? Might the words that are placed in the mouth of a male angel actually be the cry of Sarah, Isaac’s mother, who laughed at the news that she would bear a son in her old age, this son now bound upon an altar?

Many LGBT daughters and sons have been sacrificed on the altar of so-called obedience to God, to church authority, to the idol of “family values.” Whether told directly that this is the best way to deal with a child who has come out or simply having absorbed the deadly message that to be queer is to be condemned, many parents subject their children to harmful reparative therapies or reject them altogether. Even when rooted in sincere concern for both happiness in this life and salvation in the next, such obedience is not faithfulness. Abraham and Sarah are, after all, on a risky yet rewarding sojourn into unknown territory – a promised land towards which God is leading them. They leave everything behind to risk that God’s promises are true. This is not a story of keeping things the way they have always been, but of striking out towards an ill-defined but exhilarating future. “Do not harm the child” (verse 12), the angel says still. And, we might add, “Come with me to a land where God provides, where the vulnerable are protected, where the knife of sacrifice is laid aside.”

An additional image of God’s promised future may be contained within **Psalms 137**. Is it Isaac who cries out? Is it the one bound on an altar of narrowly construed propriety or morality (even so-called faithful obedience) who feels as if God is hiding the divine face and yet who continues to trust? Is not this one the one who is saved, who rejoices as God’s love embraces, who sings of God’s bountiful gifts of life and love?

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What or whom are you sacrificing — whether by condemning, killing or abandoning — in the name of obedience as the angel cries out “do not harm this one”?

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**Jeremiah 28:5-9** challenges us to discern the welcome-but-false prophesy from the harder-but-true divine word. The prophet Hananiah predicts peace and return — yet conflict, alienation and exile define reality for those to whom he speaks. In our own day, disease ravages, famine sweeps across the globe, and war and rumors of war are heard at every turn. As in Jeremiah’s time so in ours, we must listen closely for the word that is from God. In this passage, Jeremiah is criticizing Hananiah for prophesying wrongly, for promoting peace and restoration of the people. Jeremiah is convinced that such promises are false. Hananiah, one might say, preaches an easier word, a word that people in the ruler Zedekiah’s court no doubt longed to hear, a nationalist word, a word in his and his own people’s self-interest. But according to Jeremiah, this word is *deceptive* — a term he uses not here, but in other places to great effect (for example in 7:4)). The word of peace must wait.

For Jeremiah, and so perhaps for us, this is a moment in which we are called not to shrink from or turn a blind eye to conflict, but instead to enter and diagnose the signs of the times so that the word of peace, the word of shalom, that we long to hear, long to proclaim, might come to pass.

**Psalms 89:1-4, 15-18** offers the deeper truth, assuring us of God’s abiding covenantal faithfulness and peace. God’s love is steadfast. God’s faithfulness need not be doubted. Whether or not, as it seems for Jeremiah, we will only know that the promise of peace is sure when it comes to pass. With the psalmist we can walk in the light of God’s promise and join in the festal shout that God is leading us home!



Where do you hear a word of hope that can sustain faith when you feel far from home? What word of hope do you have to sustain others who may find themselves on the verge of despair?

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**Matthew 10:40-42** places the responsibility for hospitality back in our own hands. We are to welcome the prophet in the name of a prophet, the righteous one in the name of righteousness, the little ones who are thirsty in the name of the disciples. Of course, we are also to allow ourselves to receive hospitality — to be welcomed and, thereby, to represent Christ to those who offer us a place at the table and a cup of refreshment. God is not pushing us away but waiting to be welcomed. The word of exclusion gives way to the word of welcome — the word of violence to the word of peace and the word of bondage to the word of freedom.

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What water, what word of welcome, do you have  
to offer those who remain thirsty for love and  
hope and embrace?

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## Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Holy One, in whom alone we trust,  
You who do not delight in the blood of children sacrificed,  
You who do not take pleasure when parents reject or  
try to “fix” their LGBT daughters and sons,  
You who require that we never say, “I have no need of you”  
to another member of the One Body,  
You whom we welcome when we ignore the thirst of those parched in the  
deserts of alienation,  
You who entrust us with your work of reconciliation, hospitality and  
healing,  
Provide for us this day grace, freedom, power and hope,  
that we might communicate your welcome to all,  
In the name of the One who said “Come unto me and I will give you rest,”  
Amen.

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## 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 9)

### God - Confounding Expectations

Over and over again, God uses the unconventional to speak truth, to bring peace, to shape the life of faith in new and surprising ways. On a donkey, the one who brings peace to the nations confronts mighty armies who bear down upon the nation in their intimidating chariots. Here is our Ruler — not looking or acting the way we expected, not following the way of common sense or conventional wisdom. So, too, even Jesus does not appear as he “should.”

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67 & Psalm 45:10-17 or Song of Solomon 2:8-13 or Zechariah 9:9-12 & Psalm 145:8-14; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



“Will I worship a God who demands human sacrifice? Decidedly not! But this story of Isaac and Abraham seems to me to say that God continues to communicate and calls us to keep our ears and hearts open to new understandings of God's will in our lives. I can embrace that!” Nate Metrick



“If obedience to God can only be proven through one’s willingness to sacrifice one’s child, then faithful disobedience is required.” Julienne Buenting





“As we listen for God's word amid all that we hear — as we try to discern what comes from the Spirit and what is false prophecy — these texts guide us. They all us to listen for the word which saves, which challenges us with its truth-telling, which calls us to be instruments of God's goodness and grace, and which invites us to welcome all in God's name.” Timothy J. Sandoval



“Faithful discipleship sometimes requires engaging a world of conflict. Our desire for peace and our longing to raise the ‘festal shout’ ought not to be satisfied with vain hopes and cheap imitations of shalom, but only with the real thing, which requires, as Jeremiah knew, a truth-telling about our vulnerability and our failings.” Scott Haldeman

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### What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

In **Zechariah 9:9-12**, we see a description of life that is not wholly unfamiliar. Mired in a war without end, we remain vulnerable and afraid. Terrorism is a tactic, not a discrete group of people. It cannot be defeated; it can only be proven ineffective. We need a peace-maker. But will we recognize our “king” (verse 9b), our new leader, if she appears? We may expect a general. We may wish for a “decider.” We may even get one — and regret it! But, entrapped by the wisdom of the world and notions of a leader as one who is strong, authoritative, charismatic, mighty — we may miss the arrival of the one who is meek, self-effacing, vulnerable. Yet it is precisely the “weak” sort of leader that may be the one sent by God to interrupt business as usual, to “command peace” (verse 10).

The prophet may also make us wonder if we misrecognize ourselves. Are we the blessed of God under threat from invaders, terrorists and radical clerics? Are we those confined in the waterless pit (verse 11) , who have forgotten our need, lost our way, become entrapped by our own self-concern? Are we the ones who are vulnerable outside of our stronghold or those who build the walls to bar the way of the stranger and alien? It seems we may be all of these at the same time — at once understandably fearful of the many dangers that may harm us and regretfully preoccupied only with our own fate, reluctant to dismantle barriers and build bridges to those whom we see as enemies. May we yet become “prisoners of hope”(verse 12) rather than of cynical self-interest.



Are you willing to be a “prisoner of hope,” one who risks humiliation and scorn to bring a word of peace, to declare that the conflict is over and a new day is dawning?

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While our bodies have often been labeled as the occasion of sin, as Paul writes in **Romans 7**, we have nonetheless been promised rescue. That Paul was at war with his body can be some comfort to those of us who feel at war with our body — especially if that body does not reflect our sense of our own gender in a society that strongly enforces that one is either “man” or “woman” (and that the body is the determiner of that identification). For any of us who identify along the trans and gender-queer spectrum, for any of us who have come to resent or even hate our bodies (the ways they’re shaped, the particular fluids they produce, the various ranges of sound they make, the sort of barrier they can be to other people seeing us as we want to be seen), Paul can offer both company in that frustration, and a deeply felt faith in the rescue of Christ. It is not clear how Christ is rescuing us — and has already rescued us — but it is easy to imagine that this rescue might take many forms. These forms include, but not limited to: reconciling us to our bodies, helping us through the process of transforming them, guiding the transformation of our communities and the ways they perceive and perform gender. What Romans makes absolutely clear, however, is that we are meant to “delight in the law of God in [our] inmost [selves]” (verse 22), whether or not our bodies feel like a sin against us, whether or not our flesh feels like something in which nothing good can dwell. And it gestures towards the knowledge that God comes into the frustration and the wrestling and confusion to be with us and to free us, and to support that truest law of love and alignment in us.



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Are you willing to allow yourself to be rescued from dualistic notions that in the flesh there is nothing good, from the war so many of us wage against our bodies, from the condemnations of the churches who cannot see us as anything but sinners? What are the things you need to be rescued from in your relationship with your body? What role does God play in that relationship, or rescue?

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As they are juxtaposed by the lectionary, our selected verses from **Genesis 24** and the **Song of Songs** seem to define faithful forms of erotic relationship in rather stereotypical forms. Isaac needs a wife, it seems. The wife must be of respectable lineage — not a Canaanite but a relative of his leading servant, the one who “had charge of all that [Abraham] had” (verse 2). And so the unnamed servant is dispatched to his home country to procure a maiden. All pretty familiar stuff and pretty awful — ethnocentrism, sexism, the arbitrary exercise of patriarchal authority, the epitome of an arranged marriage, the wife as comforter of a beloved son who recently lost his mother.

Still, the story is far from simple. Rebekah consents without coercion to leave her family and set out on an adventure. She brings both her nurse and her maids. As soon as she sees Isaac, she “slips from the camel ... took her veil and covered herself” (verse 64) — this covering may reflect conventions in which the public exposure of a woman’s shape is suspect, but given that she apparently rode her camel without the veil, Rebekah may also be feeling the stirring of attraction at the sight of a new love. It is, at least, made clear that Isaac “loved her” (verse 67).

While few today would agree that this is the best way to find a spouse and begin a marriage, in the end, it seems, Isaac and Rebekah establish a relationship built on love and consent.

For the lovers in the **Song of Solomon**, sex is not confined within marriage. But the scandalous nature of the book is well-hid from our eyes by the lectionary. Here, especially in relation to the romance of Isaac and Rebekah, we are almost stifled by gauze and lace hearts as the handsome young stag calls the beautiful maiden out of the garden and into fields of wildflowers where they will make passionate love (verses 8-10). For the LGBT community, it may be crucial to emphasize the unconventional descant above the familiar melody of heterosexual coupling. Loving partnership, mutual care in the context of uncoerced consent provide some pleasant, if rather safe, harmonics — but the unfettered passion of lovers embracing beyond the confines of institutional bounds, gender complementarity, and vanilla sex in other portions of the Song (to which the lectionary does not point us) are indulgences that we should also savor.



Are you willing to risk sharing the depths and complexities of your erotic life as witness to the liberating power of the transforming love of our promiscuous God?

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In **Matthew 11:16-30**, Jesus expresses his frustration that so many signs have been revealed to so many and yet misrecognition continues. His outburst that constitutes our passage is prompted by a question from John the Baptist, who is in prison but wants to know more about what Jesus is up to. “Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he,” says Jesus (verse 11). But the crowds do not understand. They did not understand John. They do not understand Jesus. They do not enter the kingdom, the new age that is “at hand” and offers the opportunity to live differently, to know forgiveness, to practice justice. John, an ascetic, was ridiculed as one possessed by demons. Jesus, who loves a good meal, appears to many as a glutton and a drunk. The promise of liberation, healing and embrace is fulfilled before us — but we do not allow ourselves to see it, to join in the party.

Such misrecognition has consequences. On the one hand, we could be “greater” than John the Baptist, but we refuse the honor. On the other hand, in verses the lectionary unfortunately leaves out, ignoring the signs provokes Jesus’ wrath: “Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. ‘Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you’” (verses 20-24). Hmmm.

Let those who have ears hear! The punishment comes not because of anything we do, but because we don’t join in the celebration. The King is in the camp! Wisdom is vindicated! The Spirit moves among us! Get on board, little children! Open your eyes. Open your hearts. The

New Age is now. The promised land is wherever you are. Turn, grasp, embrace, serve — live differently — and the Holy Party Boy named Jesus of Nazareth will meet you on the dance floor, at the banquet table, at the peace protest, in the AIDS ward, in the leather bar, in the board room, in the halls of Congress — anywhere that justice is being done, bonds are being loosed, strangers are being embraced and the hungry are being fed. And, when we acquiesce to take on this yoke, the yoke of this gentle Savior, where we expect a burden, we find an easy load. Thanks be to God!



Are you willing to leave behind your expectations of who God is, of what it means to be a disciple, of what it means to be church and to allow your eyes to be opened again and glimpse the promises that are already coming true?

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*Holy One,  
You who have taken upon your own shoulders  
the burden of the redemption of all creation,  
You who offer us a yoke that is light, a weight to bear that is not heavy,  
bear us up, strengthen our limbs, embolden our hearts,  
that we might be of help to others,  
to set them free,  
to restore their hope,  
to remove the obstacles in their path.  
to repair the breach between enemies,  
and that your Body may grow strong and the face of the earth may be  
renewed,  
in the Name of the One who bore it all that grace might abound.  
Amen.*

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## 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 10), Year A

### Queer Belonging

The desire to belong is so foundational to us. Yet at what cost? For what benefits? How would this "belonging" function in one's life? Boundary-drawing or boundary-transgressing?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Genesis 25:19-34& Psalm 119:105-12 or Isaiah 55:10-13 & Psalm 65 \(1-8\) 9-13; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



“Believing in God for me is to cherish the down-to-earth affirmation of the dignity of the human being, regardless of who or what one is.” Namssoon Kang



“Loving the Queer God is about being unafraid to be exactly who we are. It is about learning to trust the worth of our own experiences of the divine.” Steve Sprinkle



“Participating in God’s good and gracious and life-giving purposes for all people involves belonging to and living out of a welcoming and inclusive community.”  
Warren Carter

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

**Genesis 25:19-34** continues the soap opera involving the tension-filled and divided “normal” household of Isaac and Rebekah. Their sons Esau and Jacob fight with each other even in Rebekah’s womb. They are incredibly different. Esau is his Daddy’s boy; Jacob is his Mommy’s boy. Esau, red and hairy, is a macho outdoors man, a skilled hunter. Jacob, the quiet one, hangs around the household tents, and cooks. He is also an opportunist who knows how to survive. Esau has the birthright of inheritance as the first-born, but doesn’t care. Jacob doesn’t have it but wants it, and gets it – for a bowl of stew!

In the midst of this so very typical household beset by alienation, dysfunction, and disenfranchisement, is there any good news? As queer as it sounds, Jacob challenges and overturns all expectations in the patriarchal household. Not only does he gain the birthright, the alienated, estranged and anti-macho Jacob is God’s means of reaching out to the nations. And eventually he and Esau will reconcile (Genesis 33). The incredibly surprising – and hopeful – message is that there are no permanent enemies.



No permanent enemies? Is this true in your own situation? What does it mean to “love our enemies”?

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**Isaiah 55:10-13** engages the experience of Israel’s exile under Babylonian imperial power. Like Jacob’s situation, issues of belonging, identity and struggle pervade the scene. God, previously seen as oppressive in allowing the exile, is now presented as the one who liberates from it. Here God’s purposes expressed through God’s word center on life and hope. The exiles are challenged to hold on. They are promised return to their land and the abundant, extravagant, flourishing of all creation. There are no boundaries to God’s goodness, including LGBT communities. No matter what, all belong in God’s life-giving purposes. The affirmation of God’s faithfulness emerges from their lived experience.



Is the Bible a source of hope and help for you? If so, how so?

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**Romans 8:1-11** contains some potentially misleading vocabulary, notably Paul's language of "spirit" and "flesh." Paul does not use the language of "spirit" to refer to disembodied existence where human "souls" are separated from bodies. Nor does the language of "flesh" refer to "bodies" and condemn physicality. Rather, "spirit" refers to the Spirit of God and of Christ who indwells communities of believers and the bodies of believers – affirming the significance of relationships and daily life (8:4-11). "Flesh," as Paul defines it in verses 7-8, is not physicality but refers to a way of life hostile to God. Life in God's Spirit means belonging to God who frees people from all condemnations, and affirms the significance of embodied life. Life in the Spirit means belonging to God's purposes and people. Such belonging mandates that others not be excluded from that life.

**Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23** urges readers to have "understanding" or discerning "ears." Crucial to the parable is hearing or discerning what God is like and how God acts. The parable describes God's indiscriminate sowing or reaching out to all people, as well as the abundant, extravagant, fruitful life that follows for those who continue in relationship with God. Often distorted hearing or "closed ears" hatefully try to restrict God's sowing by declaring exclusions from God's work. But the parable's reference to "hundredfold" yield offers a much bigger and more beautiful vision.

For LGBT communities, the parable points not just to "coming out" but to an abundant and fruitful life marked by, among other things, a radical inclusivity that transcends all boundaries, as well as by joy and celebration. Seeds need to be resilient to grow. But they have to move beyond survival to fruitfulness or flourishing. Discerning ears participate with wonder and awe in the goodness of God's abundant ways.



How might LGBT communities live in the midst of often difficult circumstances seeking not just to survive, but to flourish and to celebrate God's goodness with wonder and awe?

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*Gracious God, the Power of all be-ings,  
Help us believe that  
you are the One who shields our heart*

*against despair,  
against hopelessness,  
against turning cold,  
against indifference.*

*Grant us the two beautiful companions of Hope:  
the sacred Anger that things are the way they are, and  
the Courage to make them the way they ought to be.*

*In the name of the One who shows us  
the spirit of deep compassion and justice.  
Amen.*

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## 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 11)

### Divine Lover

How do you encounter God – in fear and flight, or in faithfulness and freedom?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24; Psalm 86:11-17;](#)  
[Romans 8:12-25; Matt 13:24-30, 36-43.](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



“For lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folk, trust is often hard to come by. Yet the struggle is worth it, because trusting in God’s love heals us and sets us free to love in return.” Steve Sprinkle



“The ground of our hope is not the guarantee of victory but the struggle itself for a more just world – where every living being is regarded as the image of God. We may encounter the Divine in our taking risk on a lonesome journey of exile.” Namsoon Kang



“All sorts of people in all sorts of circumstances participate in God’s ways, knowing God’s presence and responding with courage, faithfulness, and hopeful anticipation.” Warren Carter

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

**Genesis 28:10-19a** locates Jacob in an unfamiliar place because of continuing strife in Isaac and Rebekah’s divided household. Their son Esau, having renounced his birthright as the first-born, plans now to kill Jacob. But Rebekah intervenes to protect her favorite son Jacob, advising him to flee. His self-imposed exile, though, will mean not only his survival, but also the extension of God’s purposes, as well as Jacob’s encounter with God.

Having abandoned his household and especially his mother to flee, Jacob lies down at night to sleep. In the midst of alienation, danger, self-exile, isolation and unfamiliar location, he encounters God. His flight and self-exile are reframed as places of new possibilities. He dreams of a ladder and God’s presence. God graciously appears to him and surprisingly God renews to the fugitive Jacob the promises made previously to Abraham to provide land and ancestors.



God’s love is always surprisingly personal. How has  
God’s surprising love touched your life? Your  
situation?

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**Psalms 139:1-12, 23-24** continues the theme of flight into the arms of God. The psalmist recognizes that God is everywhere, knowing the psalmist’s thoughts and actions. There is nowhere to flee, no circumstances of despair, stress, depression or conflict from which God is absent. Yet the psalmist does not lament this encounter or seek to hide from it or feel hounded by God. The psalmist welcomes it and embraces the ever-present embrace of God. Basic to the psalm is the love of God that loves the psalmist into loving God, self, and the psalmist’s community. **Psalms 86:11-17** celebrates similar trust and security.

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How would you tell someone else the story of your encounters with God? What seemingly unlikely people and events would be part of it? What does that communicate about how God works in human life?

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**Romans 8:12-25** continues to contrast two ways of life under the rubric of “flesh” and “spirit.” (See last week’s conversation.) The former term refers to a way of life hostile to God’s life-giving purposes; the latter refers to a way of life that participates in God’s loving ways. It is the latter way that dominates this passage. Life in the Spirit offers welcome qualities for LGBT communities. It means belonging to or the special identity of being children of God (verse 14). It means freedom from fear (verse 15). It does not mean escape from the suffering and brokenness of the present (verse 18). But it does mean not only experience of salvation now but also a hopeful longing for participation in the final establishment of God’s good purposes (8:19-20). It means being set free from bondage and recognition of solidarity with all God’s creation (8:22-23). Life in the Spirit is a life of hope, not of failed nerve or lack of courage, but of actively participating in God’s ways and anticipating their completion.

**Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43** describes weeds and wheat growing together until the final judgment when the weeds are destroyed. This parable has often been used as a “text of terror,” a weapon that threatens people with condemnation to hell. Some groups have used it to declare God’s inevitable judgment on those whom they oppose for whatever reason (as LGBT people). Such readings are utterly out of line in part because they usurp God’s role. But they also ignore another emphasis running through the parable. The “good seed” planted by the master produces wheat in abundance. Such fruitful wheat can never be confused with weeds. In terms of the Romans 8 reading, a life marked by actively pleasing God, the divine lover, disqualifies the fruitless attempts of those who hatefully declare wheat to be weeds.

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Like the Jewish people, GLBT folk can learn to argue creatively with Bible texts. How might you wrestle with this text until it yields “good seed” for you, your community, and even your adversaries?

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*O Love that will not let us go:  
Teach us to love ourselves and others  
as you love us!  
Where you find fear in us,  
replace it with trust and hope;  
and lead us to show mercy to all,  
for your name's sake.  
Amen.*

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## 17th Sunday of Ordinary Time (Proper 12), Year A

### All Things Working Together for Good

*Today's Bible passages invite us to embrace the ways God is working in us for the good of all people as we challenge attitudes and theology, even definitions of marriage, that can separate us from loving one another.*

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Genesis 29:15-28 & Psalm 128; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 and \(1 Kings 3:5-12 & Psalm 119:129-136; Psalm 105:1-11,45b commentary not included\)](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



“Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus – that includes attitudes and theological positions as well as angels and principalities.” Mona West



“Regardless of the rhetoric, no one who takes the Bible seriously wants a biblical marriage – for such a marriage would encourage polygamy, marrying girls once they reached puberty and making war booty into sex slaves.” Miguel De La Torre



“Today’s Bible passages celebrate the intimacy that is possible in God – intimacy built on love, trusting each other and being present to one another even when times get tough.” Deborah Appler

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

**Romans 8:26-39** is part of a larger passage in Paul’s letter to the Romans in which Paul names the reality of suffering in human lives and in creation. Paul also names the reality of hope in the midst of suffering that is grounded in our future in God and in the Spirit’s presence with us, “groaning” with us, interceding for us and helping us in our weakness.

Verse 28 is often quoted out of context, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose.” For some this verse has come to mean that if people suffer then they are not called by God or loved by God. For others the approach has been to trivialize suffering by claiming God will eventually salvage our suffering and turn it into something good. In its context, however, the force of this verse suggests that God is present to us and at work for good in us in all things — even suffering.

Verses 31-39 sound more like a hymn, a song of God’s love for creation in all its myriad forms, rather than a doctrine or theological proposition. Miguel De La Torre reflects, “When I converted to Christianity, the church community I belonged to taught me what being a Christian meant. Unfortunately, they fused and confused their social and political views with biblical interpretations. Some of those views – as those which were homophobic – when uncritically accepted as biblical – caused separation between God and the object of God’s love. Honestly, this is a contradiction to the promise of verses 38 & 39. These early views which I adopted, although believing they were in-line with God’s will, actually caused obstacles for relationship between God and those for whom Christ suffered. But the good news is that regardless of death, angels, princes, powers or even my misunderstanding of Christianity, none of this can separate the LGBT community from the love of God.”



In your personal journey of faith are there beliefs and views that you once held that are different now? What are they?

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For Mona West, this has been a very powerful passage from the apostle Paul for LGBT people:

“‘If God is for us, who is against us?’ (verse 31) ‘Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus’ (verse 39). I can remember the palpable feeling of hope in the room when these verses were read at a funeral for a young man who had died of AIDS in the early years of the pandemic. Even though there were those in his own family who had been ‘against’ him as a gay man and there were others who believed that certainly AIDS had ‘separated’ him from God and those who could not bring themselves to physically touch him in life or in death, this promise from Romans 8 resounded throughout the church of his childhood. Nothing in life or in death could separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus.”

**Genesis 29:15-28** is part of a larger narrative cycle concerning the patriarch Isaac’s sons, Jacob and Esau. The tables are turned on Jacob who earlier ‘tricked’ Esau out of his birthright (Genesis 25-28). Now it is Jacob who is ‘tricked’ by his father-in-law Laban who gives him his daughter Leah instead of his daughter Rachel on the wedding night. This story in Genesis 29 sets up a fierce competition between Leah and Rachel to see who can produce more sons for Jacob. A woman’s worth was measured in this patriarchal society by the men she belonged to (husband or father) or the male offspring she produced. Today oppressive systems and structures often pit LGBT people against other marginalized groups. In our efforts to “fight over the same piece of the pie” the dominant culture has chosen to give us, we fail to work together to make sure the “whole pie” is shared.

Deborah Appler points out that although the lectionary cuts off the rest of Leah and Rachel’s story, these two women do form an alliance at times within the restrictions of their patriarchal marriage. Some Jewish interpretations, *midrashim*, suggest that, maybe out of respect for tradition or out of love for her sister, Rachel shares information with Leah to help her deceive Jacob so that she will be cared for. Another suggests that Rachel might have talked to Jacob under the bed when Jacob and Leah consummated the marriage. Although Rachel and Leah’s ultimate goal was to have sex with Jacob in order to produce children, Leah and Rachel shared mandrakes (Genesis 30), an ancient plant believed to be both an aphrodisiac and to increase fertility. Both of these women are revered in the Jewish tradition as mothers of Israel. Again, even when they work together, they seek to fit in with the system as it stands and there is a competition.

This reading of the marriage between Jacob, Rachel and Leah complicates the picture of marriage found in **Psalms 128** and today. One hears much rhetoric from the radical right about the need to return to a biblical definition of marriage, but as the Genesis text illustrates, imposing a biblical definition of marriage upon modern society is oppressive, especially for women. These biblical values are based on the assumption that women’s bodies are chattel that can be sold or traded in return for seven years of labor. Men could acquire these women as possession once they reached puberty and could produce children. A literal acceptance of the biblical marriage would allow for polygamy. Fortunately the definition of marriage evolved to what it is today for most Westerners – a relationship based on love, not on obtaining female bodies, or creating financial security or insuring reproduction. Just as the definition of marriage has evolved toward a love-based relationship, maybe in the next stage we will care less about the gender of those adults entering into marriage and more about marriage as a mutual and self-giving relationship.

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How might the definition of marriage continue to evolve in your community of faith?

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The parables in **Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52** are part of a larger chapter in Matthew in which Jesus talks with his disciples about his use of parables. The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast proclaim that although seemingly imperceptible, God's action is still at work in the world and in us (in Paul's words from Romans 8—with utterances too deep for words). While the parables of the treasure in the field and the pearl of great value emphasize not the finding, but the overwhelming response made to the discovery. God's work, no matter how big or how small, always calls for human response.

Those within the LGBT community who are declaring their Christian beliefs are this mustard seed. They are little when compared to the more established organizations that would prefer this seed not be planted in the fields of faith at all. But like the mustard seed, the contributions that the LGBT community can make to the broader faith community could be so big that straight and LGBT biblical scholars, theologians and ethicists would be able to find rest upon its branches.

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Pray Romans 8:38-39 as a breath prayer.

*On the 'in breath,' pray "nothing can separate us."*

*On the 'out breath,' pray "from the love of God."*

*On the 'in breath,' pray "in Christ Jesus."*

*On the 'out breath,' pray "in Christ Jesus."*

After praying this prayer several times, write in a journal or share your experience aloud with a group.

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## 18th Sunday of Ordinary Time (Proper 13), Year A

### Bread — and Struggle — for the Journey

*Our spiritual journey to authenticity often involves struggle, even without preconceived notions of God. The scars we may take away from the struggle can be signs of hope and our hard won newness.*

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Genesis 32:22-31 & Psalm 17:1-7, 15 or Isaiah 55:1-5 & Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



“This story of transformation indicates that the journey to ‘a new name’ is often marked by struggle. As transgender folk will testify, like Jacob we often bear the marks of that struggle in our physical bodies.” Mona West



“All are welcome to God’s banquet table. Only by breaking the bread that sustains our physical and spiritual lives can we become companions in Christ. To deny any believer a place at the table is an abomination.” Miguel De La Torre



“At times the struggle for justice can leave scars. However, doing this work is the right thing to do. It is our call from God and where our hope rests.” Deborah Appler

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### What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

Life giving images of bread are found in **Isaiah 55:1-5** and **Matthew 14:13-21**. Chapters 55-56 of Isaiah use imagery and language to describe new possibilities in a future that God will provide for all of creation. All who hunger and thirst will be filled without need for money to buy bread (verses 1-2). God's everlasting covenant will include the sexual outcast and the foreigner who will be given “names better than sons and daughters” (Isaiah 55:3, 56:3-5).

This same imagery can be found in Matthew's account of Jesus' feeding of the 5,000. The bread that Jesus provides for the diverse crowd of men, women and children parallels the messianic banquet that is the symbol of fullness of the realm of God. Jesus' action of taking, blessing, breaking and giving the loaves and fish to the multitudes is reminiscent of the action he will repeat with his disciples which institutes the Eucharistic meal or Holy Communion of the church. The “banquet” that occurs in the wilderness in the feeding of the 5000 with five loaves and two fish is juxtaposed with Herod's banquet (Matthew 14:1-11) in which John the Baptist was beheaded — which is the larger context for this miracle in Jesus' ministry.

The promise of a banquet that is offered to all, and the invitation to participate in a life-giving covenant that honors those who have been marginalized in religion and society because of their sexuality and otherness is indeed life giving bread “without money and without price” for LGBT people. This is a powerful image of Eucharist or Holy Communion for LGBT people who have been denied access to the table either as participants or celebrants — “Ho, everyone who thirsts...come!”



What are the Eucharistic or Holy Communion practices of your faith community? In addition to an inclusive banquet, what are other images from Scripture or the liturgy of the church that are life giving for marginalized people?

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The word “companion” is derived from the Latin, *con pan*, “with bread.” Only companions

(comrades) share bread. When I share bread with you, then that substance that enters my body to nourish my physical life is the same substance that enters your body to nourish your physical life. This holds true with Holy Communion or the Eucharist which spiritually nourishes both our lives when we partake together as companions. Breaking and partaking of bread testifies to our mutual need for physical and spiritual life. Becoming companions in eating bread occurs regardless of our gender, race, ethnicity, economic class or sexual orientation. We all need physical and spiritual life. It is through sharing meals together that true intimacy and caring can take place. The unrecognized Jesus is only made fully known when a meal is shared together – through the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:35).



How does this understanding of Eucharist or Holy Communion — the need that all people have for physical and spiritual life — apply in a global context.

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**Genesis 32:22-31** records the famous story of Jacob’s wrestling match with God right before he is to meet his estranged brother Esau. In the struggle, Jacob’s name is changed to Israel and he will forever walk with a limp. Discovering our true identity in God often involves struggle — a life long struggle to peel back the layers of a false self in order to expose who we are authentically in the image of God. That image of God, however, is contained in our ordinary human lives, signified in this story by Jacob’s limp. This story of transformation, like the promise from Isaiah 56:3-5, indicates that the journey to “a new name” is often marked by struggle. As transgender folk will testify, like Jacob we often bear the marks of that struggle in our physical bodies.

It is so easy to have religion – to be part of a community that tells you what the truth is – and then blindly follow it. But all too often, this truth is nothing more than the cultural beliefs of a people having little, if no connection, with the Word of God. To wrestle with God so that one can see God face-to-face requires the risk of losing the certainties of life. The mystery of God leaves much room for complexity. An encounter with God may mean we walk away limping – an injury caused when one abandons the false crutches we called truth, or an injury awaiting us from the community of faith we come from when we challenge preconceived truths about God.

Sometimes, however, those injuries and scars are proud marks of making it through the struggle — of demanding the blessing at all costs. In Indigenous African religions and Native American tribal cultures, initiation marks are displayed proudly as signs of being part of the community. There are those in the LGBT community who have struggled, risked, and won inroads into co-creating a just community. Their scars, though a constant reminder of the struggle, are also signs of hope to others that there is hope in wrestling, even with God!



How do you identify with Jacob's struggle and limp?

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Genesis 32:22-31, like Isaiah 55:1-5, looks toward community restoration — Jacob with his estranged family and the exiles of Judah with those with whom they will rejoin in Jerusalem. Restoration and feasting go hand in hand — restoration and feasting for all people, not just a few chosen. Paul's words in **Romans 9:1-5** (and the verses that follow) indicate that God continues to extend the promise of transformation first attested to in the story of Israel's ancestors to all people. Many Christians teach that all that matters is getting saved. Our culture's hyper-individualism has reduced salvation to a personal act. But here we have Paul willing to forfeit individual salvation for the sake of his community.

**Psalm 17:17 and Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21** lift up the themes of God's steadfast love and compassion to all people and God's willingness to hear those who call out in times of distress. This basic affirmation is at the core of the notion of liberation theology's understanding of God's preferential option, commitment, to the poor.



What does communal salvation look like? How does a community get saved? What does it mean and what will it look like for the LGBT community to find their salvation, that is liberation from the forces of sin imposed upon them due to heterosexism? Who, like Paul, is willing to pay the ultimate price — even losing his or her assurance of heaven -- for the sake of their community?

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**Prayerfully Out in Scripture**



*Read aloud the story of Jacob's struggle in Genesis 32:22-31.*

*As you hear this story, imagine yourself to be Jacob.*

*Prayerfully ask yourself these questions:*

- *What is my struggle?*
- *What certainties am I being asked to let go of so God can bring a new name forth in me?*

*Write your prayerful answers to these questions in a journal.*

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## 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 14), Year A

### A Community of Many Colors

*All of us – people of color, people who have disabilities, as well as those of us in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community – are confronted with obstacles placed by those who cannot or will not accept the wondrous variety of God's creation. Collectively, today's Bible readings convey the message that faith in God will sustain us in the face of those obstacles*

*This week's lectionary Bible passages:*

[Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 & Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b or 1 Kings 19:9-18 & Psalm 85:8-13; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-23](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



“Resisting the desire to hibernate, we are called to remember that we struggle for justice along with countless people, many whom we don’t even know both in and outside the LGBT community.” Deborah Appler



“Speaking out as a member of the transgender community, I have been scorned and ridiculed by those who would prefer to act on their own feelings about transsexuality – rather than having to accept it. This is God’s test for me.” Sarah Carpenter-Vascik



“It is important to recognize the way ‘preference envy’ works in our lives. Are not LGBT people vulnerable to envying the ‘normality’ of non-LGBT people?”  
Ron Hopson



“Envy and misunderstanding each other’s dreams can divide us as brothers and sisters in God’s human family.” Mona West

### What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

In **Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28**, Joseph was the 11th of 12 sons of Jacob and Leah, Zilpah and Rachel, and the firstborn son of Rachel. This made Joseph a favorite of Jacob who was 90 years old at the time. This favoritism was demonstrated when Jacob presented Joseph with the “coat of many colors” (verse 3). Jacob’s willingness to display his preference for Joseph sets Joseph up for the envy of his brothers. Joseph’s apparent naiveté suggests a willingness on his part to revel in his preferred status. While it might be easy for marginalized people to identify with Joseph, it is important to recognize the way “preference envy” works in our lives. For example, Ron Hopson ponders, “Are not LGBT people vulnerable to envying the ‘normality’ of non-LGBT people? Sometimes I find myself envying the ease with which straight people can move through the world so unselfconsciously regarding their affectional orientation.”

The lectionary omits verses 5-11 which also indicate another source for the envy of Joseph’s brothers: he is a dreamer. Granted the dreams do not seem to be favorable for the brothers, but – as the end of the Joseph story indicates – the fulfillment of Joseph’s dream means life for the brothers, not subservience. Martin Luther King Jr. was a dreamer and while his “I Have a Dream” speech continues to inspire many in the work of justice today, it is a dream that has been threatening to others. Envy and misunderstanding each other’s dreams can divide us as brothers and sisters in God’s human family. Joseph’s brothers are so envious they want to “kill this dreamer” (verses 19-20).



What are some misunderstood dreams in the life of your community and what can you do to promote understanding? What are the ways you “revel in your preferred status?” Name some



ways 'preference envy' works in your life, the life of your community.

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**Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b** requires us to give thanks and to tell of God's works and promise. This thanksgiving recalls the covenant made with Abraham, a covenant not only for Abraham, but also with all his decedents. In these selected verses we meet up again with Joseph (verse 17), who is being tested by God and is now a slave in Egypt. Joseph's faith in God is unwavering and indeed, God re-emphasizes the covenant by setting Joseph free. Joseph goes on to become a prominent member of Pharaoh's household. Sarah Carpenter-Vascik reflects, "Speaking out as a member of the transgender community, I have, like other transgender advocates, been scorned and ridiculed by those who would prefer to act on their own feelings about transsexuality – rather than accepting it. I have occasionally faced threats of physical violence. This is God's test for me."

However, when this psalm is read in its entirety it exemplifies the best and worst of Exile literature. At once celebrating the goodness of God in the face of catastrophe, while also looking toward the vengeance of God disguised as promise to be restored (verses 11 and following), it cannot be acceptable to see ourselves as "falling heir to what others had toiled for" (verse 44). We must hold the tension of honoring our own reality without diminishing the reality or fate of the "other" even if the other is perceived to be our perpetrator. Only as we hold the humanity of even those who are homophobic and wish to deny us the full rights of personhood, do we insure that we will not become the oppressor to an "other" of our own choosing once we are in the privileged position.

In **1 Kings 19:9-18**, Elijah believes he is the only prophet left and we find him hiding in a cave – deep in the Judean desert throwing a pity party. Elijah's role in creating a just and God-centered world in Israel is undeniable, but he mistakenly suggests that he alone is responsible for this justice ministry: "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away" (verse 10).

Elijah seems unable or unwilling to recognize that others still remain who are working for justice alongside him. He is not alone, nor was he ever alone. God called Ahab's official, Obadiah, who is feeding 100 other of God's prophets in a cave (1 Kings 18:4). God called the widow of Zarephath and a host of angels and ravens to care for Elijah so he could fulfill his call. Now that Elijah appears tired and burned out, there are still others God can turn to — Elisha, Hazeal and Jehu. Throughout his ordeal, God never leaves him.

There are times when we may feel like Elijah and want to retreat. The magnitude of homophobia and other forms of injustice overwhelm us to a point where it appears that we are working alone — that nobody cares or understands the struggle.



When have you felt alone, abandoned in your struggling for justice for the LGBT communities?

How do we sense the presence of God? By  
listening for the sound of God as wind and fire or  
by keeping ourselves open to God's presence

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So that we resist the desire to hibernate, we are called to remember that we struggle for justice along with countless people, many whom we don't even know both in and outside of the LGBT communities. To act as if all depends on us alone is an act of pride and rejection of God and the community. It will also immobilize us.

The psalmist in **Psalm 85:8-13** reminds us that God still speaks a word of peace to God's faithful servants as God did to Elijah when he was feeling abandoned and overwhelmed in mission. This is good news! We who give ourselves for the work of justice may be heartened by the level of intimacy and power of the words in this psalm. Indeed, the very words that define the hope of the messianic reign appear: God's *salvation* is near and *glory* will dwell with us on earth. God's *loyal love (Hesed)* and *truth* will come to fruition in this world. Further, *righteousness* and *peace* will be so much a part of this co-created world that they will kiss each other.

While reading **Romans 10:5-15**, be careful not to fall into an exclusivist or anti-Semitic reading of this text from Paul's letter. What can be lifted up here is Paul's effort to level the playing field? No one can say who's who in God's economy. This is particularly applicable to LGBT persons who are often scapegoated and stigmatized.

In **Matthew 14:22-33**, the disciple Peter has the audacity to think that he can be as powerful as Jesus and asks him to have him walk on the water. The real miracle is when Peter is truly focused on Jesus and is able to remain above water. When we focus fully on our call to work for justice, especially for the LGBT communities, we have the resources to remain afloat in shared community. However, when we forget that Jesus and others in the larger community are also working for justice, we risk feeling abandoned and self-righteous like Peter. When Peter refocuses his gaze from Jesus to the raging sea storm, he becomes frightened and vulnerable and starts to sink. The good news is that Jesus saves him and brings him back to safety – as Jesus does for all of us.



When do we draw upon our faith in God? When  
we are faced with adversity or confronted with  
something we can't handle? Do we keep our  
faith in God with us all the time?

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In the tradition of first century miracle workers, Jesus had to be able to do extraordinary things in order for the ordinary to grant him credibility. Perhaps, similarly, we who follow Jesus should aspire to doing extraordinary things (such as loving and embracing our enemies, absorbing the anger and fear of homophobic persons without responding in kind, and living openly, courageously and faithfully, in order to provide inspiration and hope for others).

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*Divine One who comes to us often in our dreams,  
we pray this prayer with our brother Martin today:*

*"I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted,  
every hill and mountain shall be made low,  
the rough places shall be made plain,  
and the crooked places shall be made straight  
and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it  
together."*

(Adapted from Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech delivered at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963.)

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## 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 15), Year A

### A Vision of an Inclusive Community

These Bible passages invite us to push the envelope on what we mean when we say that "all are welcome" in our families, churches and synagogues.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Genesis 45:1-15 & Psalm 133 or Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 & Psalm 67;](#)  
[Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:2-28](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"The Gospel - how dare we exclude, how daring we include!" Ron Hopson



"In order to be inclusive, we are called to enter into dialogue even with those with whom we disagree. It is difficult work, but more authentic." Deborah Appler



"Isaiah's vision makes room for you and me alike. Those of us among sexual minorities find God's favor." Sarah Carpenter-Vascik



"In a society that valued men and women based on procreative status and inheritance rights and even excluded foreigners and sexual minorities, but gives them a *name better than sons and daughters*" Mona West

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### What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

**Genesis 45:1-15** can be read as an allegory about coming out. Joseph's family ostracizes him (in effect killing him). No doubt — they do this because he was favored and perhaps because he was not rough and ruddy. In any case, the family wanted him dead as many families may want LGBT people out of the family picture. As with many LGBT people, Joseph once thrust out of the family, finds a way to survive and flourish as he realizes his talents and potential. Eventually the family comes to him for help and he, generously and appropriately, embraces those very persons who once wanted him dead. How terribly important it is not to become as the oppressor once we are free of oppression.

**Psalm 133** continues the theme of affection between siblings. What does it mean that God bestows blessing, even live forevermore (verse 3) when "kindred live together in unity!" (verse 10)? First we need to understand life evermore in some kind of metaphorical sense. As we strive to be in unity, can we say that we share in the blessing and happiness which continues to reverberate beyond the span of our days (life forevermore)?

In the U.S. context, could it be that we are living now with the benefits from the decision of those early settlers who decided to live in unity with one another? In the same way, we are living now with the curse from the decision of those first settlers not to consider some (for example, American Indians and Africans) as brothers and sisters. If we choose to live in unity succeeding generations will experience blessing. If we choose to live in disunity, succeeding generations will experience curse.



Are there family 'coming out' stories in your community of faith that have caused some to

experience a blessing and some to experience a curse?

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In considering **Isaiah 56:1, 6-8**, it is interesting that the creators of the Revised Common Lectionary left out one of the most meaningful set of verses in all of Scripture for LGBT people. The omitted verses from the Isaiah reading for this Sunday are a profound promise for sexual outcasts: "For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off" (verses 4-5).

In a society that valued men and women based on procreative status and inheritance rights and even excluded foreigners and sexual minorities (eunuchs) from the worshipping community (Deuteronomy 23:1-8), Isaiah's version of community after the Exile not only includes sexual minorities, but gives them a *name better than sons and daughters* — an honored place *beyond* procreative privilege.

Having said that, it is important to notice about this passage that the inclusion (bringing the foreigners to the holy mountain) is premised upon obeying the rules of the insiders (keep the sabbath, hold fast the covenants). What if I don't observe the sabbath? What if I don't do burnt offerings and sacrifices? What if what brings me joy, is desecration to you? Am I still welcome at the table? True inclusivity means accepting the ultimate concerns of the "other" even if they are not my ultimate concerns. True inclusivity means figuring out a way to live with and welcome people who don't worship my god or keep my holy days.



Who are people we exclude from our table because we do not think we can learn from them?

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**Psalms 67** describes a worshipping community giving thanks to God for abundance and blessing. In verse 3, the psalmist declares "let *all the people* praise you." How might we read this psalm in light of the thoughts on blessing and inclusive worship above?

In **Matthew 15:2-28**, the theme of inclusive community continues in the gospel lesson as a Gentile woman challenges Jesus to practice what he preaches. In the beginning of this chapter, Jesus has been calling people to go beyond purity laws (washing th hands before eating) to true holiness — what comes from the heart. He claims "It is not what does into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles" (verse 10).

How interesting that right after this teaching, we have the story of a Gentile, non-Jewish, woman, whose first words to Jesus out of her mouth are cries of mercy for her sick daughter. Just as Jesus invited the Pharisees to go beyond their tradition with regard to purity laws, the Gentile woman

challenges Jesus to go beyond his traditional understanding of his mission: "I was sent only the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (verse 24).

Jesus was himself too narrowly focused. He perhaps had gotten caught up in his own particulars so much so, that he couldn't see the enactment of his program (God's realm) being offered to him through this Gentile Canaanite woman. Thus, Jesus himself needed to be challenged to open up. Perhaps this is a lesson for well-meaning and well-trained clergy persons who have a clear view and deep attachment to God's program — who themselves (ourselves) may sometimes be vulnerable to missing that opportunity to enact the realm of God by ministering to a real outsider (whomever that may be). No one is beyond correction, not even Jesus!



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When have we made false assumptions about people based on incomplete information and pre-judgements? Who have been some people or incidents who have caused us to think outside of our box?

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Once again, in reading **Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32**, it is interesting to consider what has been excluded from the lectionary reading. Paul continues his presentation of his understanding of God's work among Jewish and Gentile communities. In verses that have been left out of the lectionary selection for this Sunday (verses 17-24), he uses the image of grafting branches onto an olive tree to speak about God's inclusion of Gentiles into the community of faith. In verse 24 he uses the Greek phrase *para phusin*, "against nature," to speak of God's act of incursion of Gentiles. This is the same phrase he used at the beginning of his letter to the Romans to speak about the need of Jew and Gentile alike for the grace of God (Romans 1:26-28). How interesting that the same phrase that has been lifted up to condemn LGBT people in Romans 1 is used by Paul to speak of God's inclusion of all people in chapter 11.

All these texts — including those omitted from the lectionary — are good news to all people who have been marginalized based on narrow definitions of church or synagogue or narrow traditions and theologies that invoke Scripture to justify their exclusion. Even the creators of the lectionary cannot keep God's word of inclusion silent.

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**Prayerfully Out in Scripture**



*Amma-Abba, Mother-Father, in heaven  
let us be like Jesus--  
open to the correction of those  
whom we exclude from our acts of compassion.  
Let us follow your way —  
to go against nature  
when we want to limit access to your*

*Welcome Table*

*Amen*

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## 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 16), Year A

### **Saving Waters**

Water and salvation hold all these Bible passages together. Discover here powerful waters that cleanse, challenge, destroy harmful powers of death and create new life.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Exodus 1:8-2:10 & Psalm 124 \(Isaiah 51:1-6 & Psalm 138 are not included in this conversation\); Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20](#)

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### **Who's in the Conversation**

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"We are born having passed through water and we encounter troubled waters throughout our lives. The good news is God's promise to provide flowing and flourishing waters that offer new life and healing in our liberator Jesus Christ!"  
Linda Thomas



"Within this week's readings, so many people risked their lives to bring about salvation — Shiphrah, Puah, Jochebed, Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter, Paul, the Disciples and Jesus. We are called to reflect on how much we are 'willing to bleed.' Deborah Appler



"Bodies matter in the transforming work that Paul is speaking about in these verses from Romans. Bodies co-operate with God's work of grace in each of us and these are the bodies that are joined to each other as Christ's body."

Mona West

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

In **Exodus 1:8-2:10**, the attitude of Egypt's pharaoh toward the Hebrew people and his plan to get rid of them is all too familiar to marginalized people. LGBT folk hear echoed in the pharaoh's words "let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land" (Exodus 1:10) such phrases as "don't ask don't tell" or "love the sinner hate the sin." As with the Hebrews, when those of us who are LGBT folk come out of our closets, we become too many and our pharaohs become nervous. They claim we are a threat to national security which justifies their efforts to escalate their oppression. This kind of attitude has been at the root of genocide and ethnic cleansing for centuries, but what has also been true as this first part of the Exodus story reveals is that the more marginalized people are oppressed the more they multiply. We know, as do our pharaohs, that there is strength in numbers.

Water plays a major role in the salvation of the Hebrews. Women, marginalized in ancient Egypt and Israel, draw upon water for salvific purposes. First, Shiphrah and Puah, midwives to the Hebrews, "subvert" the waters of the womb and play on the ruler's racist beliefs about Hebrew women as being fertile animals who pop out babies before the midwives have time to kill these infants (Exodus 1:19)! By playing on the ruler's prejudices and doing their jobs, the midwives are able to save many Hebrew boys at a risk to their own.

Second, Moses' mother risks her life and violates the intent of pharaoh's law by placing her son into the Nile as commanded, but in the safety of a basket. Even pharaoh's daughter willingly draws the Hebrew Moses out of the water and rears him in the royal household. Water in the Exodus story symbolizes chaos yet in the early chapters of Exodus water provides life, particularly for the Hebrews who will be led toward the Promise Land by Moses whose life is spared because of the daring "aquatic acts" of a few brave women who willingly and at risk break the law.



How much are we willing to risk to participate in each other's liberation? There are examples of clergy who have risked their credentials to perform Holy Unions against the church's official stances. Some have effectively joined together as a large group to officiate such ceremonies in order to create a hardship should they all be dismissed. Where are we willing to jump in and risk? Or,

when have we risked in order to do what is right?

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In **Psalm 124**, water again plays a role in national deliverance and recalls the chaotic water that exists before creation as well as the chaos that results from being pursued by enemies. Without God there would be no creation or human beings. God watches over all of us and grants all of people protection. God even keeps us from dangers that attempt to take away our life. There are times as members in the LGBT communities that we feel as if we are drowning in the water of homophobia and hate directed at us. Yet the psalmist promises us that God will take these chaotic waters and create a world that includes us in our fullness. God will deliver us.

In **Romans 12:1-8**, Paul is affectionately calling the Christians in Rome to offer their full bodies to God. Bodies matter in the transforming work that Paul is speaking about in these verses. Often society values one particular kind of body -- white, male, able, thin heterosexual. But God has made our bodies in all their shapes, colors, sizes, genders and sexualities. These are the bodies that co-operate with God's work of grace in each of us and these are the bodies that are joined to each other as Christ's body.

In verse 3, Paul asks the Roman Christians to sincerely and humbly be honest about who they are -- their strengths and growing edges. For us today this honesty means that we praise God for our abilities, and talents and confess to God our weaknesses and shortcomings. When we make these assessments of ourselves, we will have a grateful attitude toward God and a more loving attitude toward other people no matter their attitude, race, gender and sexual orientation.

Once again, water is an important theme in these admonitions from Paul. This transformation and renewal that Paul is claiming for all Christians is possible because of the waters of baptism (Romans 6:4).

In **Matthew 16:13-20**, Jesus asks the disciples "Who do people say that I am?" They give a variety of responses: "John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Then Jesus changes the question and asks the disciples directly, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter immediately responds, "You are the Christ, the Messiah and the Son of the living God." Jesus says to Peter, the one who will deny Jesus three times, "God has blessed you for God has revealed this to you -- this is not from any human source." Jesus continues saying to Peter, "You are Peter, a stone, and upon this rock I shall build my church."

The place where Peter makes this statement of faith is at Caesarea Philippi also known as Baniyas -- the place where the Romans worshipped Pan, the God of everything. This site is located at the bottom of Mt. Hermon and contains a hill with a huge cave where water once in its history gushed out to start the northern flow of the Jordan River. In a land often deprived of water, Baniyas was an oasis and a symbol of new life and fertility. It is significant that Jesus is proclaimed the Messiah/Christ and Child of the Living God in a place so full of life and living water. Peter also makes this radical faith statement at risk to his own life.

Jesus asks all disciples today, "Who do you say that I am?" Marginalized communities usually have special names for the spiritual entities that center if not save their lives. This question is a

liberating query because each of us gets to answer. Some may answer, "Abiding Friend, Loyal Lover, Co-sufferer Liberator."



Who is Jesus for you? And what do you understand the role of the Church that he established through Peter to be?

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*Reflect on the Scriptures for the day once more and as you do think about a body of water that is special for you. Imagine yourself in that water or at its edge. How might this body of water be calling you to participate in an act of liberation, a statement of faith, or in transformation or healing? Journal your answers or share them with a friend.*

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## 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 17), Year A

### The Thin Line Between Good and Evil

Today's Bible passages remind us that it is possible for those oppressed to become the oppressors when the balance of power shifts. God, however, always shifts to the side of those who are oppressed and outcast.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Exodus 3:1-15 & Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c; \(Jeremiah 15:15-21 & Psalm 26:1-8 are not included in this week's commentary\);](#)  
[Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"These texts remind me of the spiritual practice of bearing — bearing one another's burdens, but also bearing that thin line that exists in each of us between good and evil. When we acknowledge both the capacity for good *and* the capacity for evil, we embrace wholeness more fully." Mona West



"It is powerfully insightful to acknowledge that God is always on the side of the marginalized even when we find ourselves to be in a position of power." Linda Thomas



“After living a life of oppression, it is tempting to get revenge when the power shifts in our favor. Yet, we are reminded that when focus on worldly emotions rather than on God’s love and justice, we can easily become oppressors.”

Deborah Appler

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

**Exodus 3:1-15** provides a frame for us to see Moses' transformation from the role of shepherd to spokesperson for God. Though reluctant to take on the role God is calling him to, Moses has encountered the God of his ancestors in a burning bush and therefore cannot ignore this call. This powerful God tells Moses that he will go to the pharaoh to demand the release of the Israelites for God had witnessed their suffering.

Moses was the perfect person for this job because he was educated; knew how the royal court functioned and had the skills necessary to give visionary direction to others. While Moses may not have had a positive view of himself (after all he was a murderer), God called this ordinary person to an extraordinary role. Moses was a Hebrew. The Hebrews were displaced Semites of unknown or mixed ethnicity. Ancient Near Eastern sources lump the *Habiru* (a possible derivative word for Hebrews) with outlaws, marauders, rebellious nomads and all out trouble makers! Moses' relationship to this group makes him even less likely to be called to such a role.

Those of us involved in the work of justice do not always feel we have the skill-set to do what God calls us to do. But let us like the reluctant Moses find support to go forth to acknowledge and act upon what God is calling us to do and be.



In what ways might you identify with Moses?

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God hears the cries of the oppressed Hebrews, yet there are textual reminders that those who are now oppressed were at times associated with the oppressors. These verses also give a glimpse of a God who will use power to destroy other people (the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusite in verse 8) in order to give land to the chosen people -- the Israelites. Those who are travelling the 'thin line between good and evil' must resist the presentation of God in this passage because all people's lives are sacred -- even those whose religions, cultures and ideas are different from our own. This resistance is important, lest verses like this one give license for powerful nations and people to wage war upon others who carry difference -- religion, culture, race, ethnicity, sexuality or gender. Other images of God in Scripture must be presented to

provide a contrast to the God in this passage who seeks to destroy people and land.

**Psalm 105:1-6; 23-26, 45c** recites God's saving acts in Israel's history. While the psalmist calls the people to give thanks to God for these acts, we must be reminded that history is often told selectively by those who are the "winners."

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What would be the Canaanite version of this psalm?

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In **Romans 12:9-21**, Paul tells the Christians in Rome to be bold in their love for each other. He wants them to support and honor each other. He urges them to take a stand on things -- to always stand on the side of good. He tells the Romans to pray for anyone who mistreats them because of their Christian faith. He emphatically tells them not to curse those who mistreat them, but to pray that God will bless them. As they are in ministry with others he instructs them to be happy with those who are happy; to share sorrow with those who are sad. They are encouraged to work together in a positive fashion. An individual is not to be prideful and bring attention to her or his self. They must not pay back a misdeed with a misdeed. He tells them not to fight with another but try to live in peace with all.

This is a tall order for any person living in today's world. One might even think that Paul is telling the Romans to let others walk all over them. But this is not Paul's intent then or now. We will feel more joy when we walk the high road and leave spiritual justice to God. Although this is a tall order for heterosexual allies and LGBT folks it is what we are called to do so that we may have inner peace as well as fight for justice.

Paul's strategy might also serve to keep people from becoming oppressors or turning from good to evil. Perhaps Paul allows us to get some wicked joy in "killing our enemies with kindness." After all, feeding and caring for our enemies "heaps burning coals on their heads" (verse 20); it makes them feel very uncomfortable.

When Westboro Baptist Church came to Bethlehem, PA, to protest churches who welcome LGBT communities, instead of hurling angry words and actions at the protesters, the LGBT supportive churches served tea and cookies. Such actions demonstrated hospitality. They also opened opportunities for miraculous encounters.



When have we experienced an unexpected miracle when encountering our enemy? When have we experienced good overcoming evil (verse 21)?

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In **Matthew 16: 21-28**, Jesus tells the disciples the details of his approaching death. Peter denies that this will happen but Jesus revokes Peter severely telling him that he is thinking as a human but not the way that God does. Jesus tells the disciples that if they want to follow him they must



take up his cross. Is there any profit in a person gaining the world but losing eternal life? Jesus also asserts that he will return with glory to judge each person according to her or his deeds. He also claims that some who are listening to what he had to say would live to see him coming in his realm.

Peter, in last week's gospel reading, was praised for his statement of faith at Caesarea Philippi and, was made the foundation of the church and was given the keys to heaven. Here he is likened to Satan because he rebukes Jesus as Jesus prepares the disciples for his death. Even though Peter is one of the "good guys," he soon becomes a threat to Jesus' mission.

Again, we are reminded how thin the line is between good and evil. Perhaps it is for this reason that Paul emphasizes the need for vengeance to be in God's hands alone. Although our human instincts are to take revenge, God calls us to love and hope, to have patience in suffering and to extend hospitality.

None of us like to think about death, but Jesus provides a model for us. Those who love us will discourage this kind of talk. Whoever we are -- LGBT or straight -- we are called to be disciples of Jesus. Only God will be the final judge of what we have done in this life.

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*Lord, strengthen me that I may fight  
wholeheartedly against racism, sexism, classism, ageism,  
and all other acts of oppression which demoralize  
both the oppressors and the oppressed.  
Let my fight for liberation be authentic rather  
than just a struggle for self-aggrandizement.  
Rid me of the narrowness of my mind.  
Help me not to have a tunnel vision,  
but rather to view life from the perspectives of all Your children.  
Give us courage now to correct the evilness of our ways,  
and give us strength to go forth and without bias,  
to investigate truth, so that all may see*

*Your kingdom realized here on earth.  
In Jesus' name. Amen*

*"Prayer to Aspire to Justice" by Chestina Mitchell Archibald, in Say Amen! The African American Family's Book of Prayers (New York: Dutton, 1997), 183. © The Philip Leif Group, Inc., Princeton, NJ. Used by permission.*

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## 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 18), Year A

### In Place of Vengeance

Is there any room for vengeance in the life of faith? Is it not our obligation in this day and age to insist justice does not mean "reversing the tables," but rather putting an end to enmity between and among all people?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Exodus 12:1-14 & Psalm 149 or Ezekiel 33:7-11 & Psalm 119:33-40; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"Even when others are unwilling to hear us, God still provides hope." Michael Joseph Brown



"The presence of God may be hard to discern at times, but abides with us nevertheless." Marvin Ellison



“Perilous times make us question God’s presence, but even with our impatience God nourishes us.” Linda Thomas



“Rather than praying to God for help out of distress, unbelief and as a last-ditch effort to survive, the psalmist petitions God for help through expressions of trust in God’s goodness.” Virginia Ramey Mollenkott

### What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

Today's lectionary texts provide us with an opportunity to think through the human practice of vengeance, the hope of liberation and the prospect of forgiveness. **Exodus 12:1-14** is familiar to many — recounting the institution of the first Jewish Passover. The surface rationale behind this dramatic act of Passover is to force the hand of Egypt's ruler, who had refused to allow Moses to lead his people out of the land.

In this passage, vengeance is portrayed as judgment. It is not a judgement only upon a recalcitrant ruler, but also upon a society that refuses to allow those at its margins the ability to make their own choices and determine their own destinies — including its religious establishment. As the text says, “I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt . . . on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am [God]” (Exodus 12:12). Notice that Exodus 12:11 highlights how individuals are to live in readiness for liberation: dressed, shoes on, staff in hand, as if liberation had already occurred.

Many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people do this constantly, serving the church or living in respectfully mutual “marriages” even while society continues to deny them first-class citizenship. Conversely, the Exodus story highlights how blinding and entranced oppressive systems can be. Martin Luther King Jr., in his “Letter from the Birmingham City Jail,” was most certainly correct when he wrote, “We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.” In this narrative from the Bible, we are confronted with the possible result of a society grown deaf to those at its margins and blind to its own contaminating practices.

Alternatively, Exodus 12:4 highlights how several small families could share a lamb in neighborly solidarity. This simple act points to the importance of LGBT organizations making common cause with one another and with other social justice organizations in order to achieve liberating moment traditional outsiders (goats) are equally acceptable to God as those who are traditionally insiders (sheep). We are the revolution we are seeking to achieve!

**Psalm 149** provides us with a perspective on vengeance from those who feel the need to be

vindicated. The language is troubling — "Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands" (verse 6) — but the sentiment is real. This troubling fantasy of liberation through violence is something that may make psychological sense to an oppressed community without power. Is it not our obligation, however, in this day and age to insist that justice does not mean "reversing the tables," but rather putting an end to enmity and estrangement between and among all peoples?

Even in our more "enlightened" circles we must ask: In our attempts to be polite and nice, how often do we dismiss or deem inconvenient the real pain of those who have been mistreated? Also notice that we are told that God takes pleasure in human happiness (Psalm 149:1-4). The psalm reminds us that experiences of injustice are not overlooked by God, and the real pain of injustice must be allowed to find its voice. The punishment that those who hate bring upon themselves is they must hear the joyful praise of those who are in tune with God — having to witness "glory for God's faithful ones" (Psalm 149:9).

**Ezekiel 33:7-11** presents us with an awesome and often scary responsibility, to "speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways." How often have LGBT people been mislabeled the wicked and godless, but as the poet Audre Lorde pointed out, "Our silence will not protect us," so we must speak our truth and demand justice for ourselves and all peoples, along with the earth itself?

The irony is that LGBT people are not sinners because of our love, but rather are the *sinned against* whenever same-gender loving people are falsely accused of blasphemy and worse. Yet the burden often falls on us to educate and prod others, not just crass homophobes but the much larger majority of people who live "innocently" with heterosexual and other kinds of privilege. We must challenge them, as we need to challenge ourselves, to "turn from their [wicked] ways and live" by embracing differences as assets for community-building and by exhibiting an unquenchable passion for justice. Yes, indeed, LGBT people also need to examine our own unearned privileges that we hold onto "innocently" and be held accountable for how we use our relative social power and privilege — whether of gender, race, class, religion or nationality. Ezekiel 33 emphasizes that as the sentinels of a just God, oppressed people must speak up for justice.



What are my unearned privileges? In what ways will I live a life that seeks justice in concert with those who are marginalized?

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The New Testament passages for today supply us with yet another vision of vengeance. It may not be readily apparent that **Romans 13:8-14** addresses the topic of vengeance, but that is the background conversation to what is stated here openly. When the apostle Paul writes, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law," he is calling his readers and

hearers to embrace a way of life distinctly different from what was customary (Romans 13:10). Retaliation, grudges, feuds, even the evil eye and curses were the order of the day. Individuals and entire families (even over succeeding generations!) could get caught up in a never-ending cycle of repayment for past wrongs.

More immediately, for LGBT people facing same-sex domestic violence, the declaration that love does no harm is instructive and potentially redemptive. These couples face two problems: the abuse *in* the relationship and the hostile cultural context that does violence *to* the relationship. These problems make it difficult to turn to the outside for help and many only compound one's vulnerability and suffering. One of our challenges is to shatter the myth that intimate violence does not take place in same-sex relationships, breaking the cycle of violence that keeps us confined to the old way of living. Another is to listen to LGBT survivors of violence, and welcome their anger and support their empowerment. We need to engage in a critique of socially and religiously sanctioned homophobia that fuels such abuse. We offer hope when we reconstruct our theologies so that they truly honor all peoples, our LGBT selves included, and insist that each and every creature, human and non-human, deserves to be treated with respect and live in safety.

Romans 13:9-14 employs two cross-dressing images to emphasize love as the fulfilling of the law. We are told to "put on" the armor of light and to "put on" the Lord Jesus Christ, discarding the uncomely attire of our separate egocentric desires in favor of a communal peace with justice. Love (*agape*) not only overcomes such things, it seeks to avoid them in the first place. It not only stops violence, love keeps it from reigniting. *Agape* is that quality of love that initiates and reaffirms relationship, especially when it has been or is about to be broken. The individual who awakens and breaks through the "night" of the "drama triangle" lives "honorably as in the day" of new possibilities for relationship (13:13). (The "drama triangle" is a social script in which an individual is continually either a victim, persecutor or rescuer.)

Because individualistic self-concern is often self-destructive, cross-dressing with the light of Jesus teaches us to love ourselves as the basis for loving others and thus becoming whole. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu once wrote about the situation in his own country, "All South Africans were less whole than we would have been without apartheid. Those who were privileged lost out as they became more uncaring ... and therefore less human ... The victims often ended up internalizing the definition the top dogs had of them" [*No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 196-197].



What injustice have I committed against another for which I need to ask God's forgiveness as well as that of the person upon whom I committed the injustice? What injustice have I experienced for which I need to lift my voice to God and some other trusted person?

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A complementary process for avoiding the practice of vengeance is presented in **Matthew 18:15-20**. From our perspective, the text provides a precise set of regulations for "outing" the more powerful members of oppressed groups who regularly misuse their power to hurt their own group — such as closeted LGBT preachers or politicians who argue for the rejection of openly LGBT people. The process is presented in three parts: confrontation with words in private (18:15); negotiation with possibly a small committee visitation or registered letter (18:16); and adjudication as a last resort public outing (18:17). Far beyond the simplistic idea of "turning the other cheek" (5:39), believers are encouraged — in fact, called on — to work through their disagreements without resorting to destructive retaliation. Matthew is the only gospel to use the word "church" and highlights the role that community of believers in helping restore broken relationships. In fact, the practice of reconciliation among believers suggests a context of worship — "I am there among them" (18:20). Too much emphasis should not be placed on the act of exclusion prescribed in 18:17. This clearly illustrates a borderline case for the writer of Matthew. The individual who is to be regarded as "a Gentile and a tax collector" represents someone who refuses to be in community and rejects the counsel of others. It is through the power of solidarity with others, however, even just two or three others, that we achieve peace with justice (Matthew 18:19-20).

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Our God, in whom we live and move and have our being,  
may we remember our identity with all  
with whom we share your womb, your breath and life.  
May we be your liberating people, not only for ourselves but for everyone.  
We thank you for the opportunity to live in this challenging era,  
and for the inspiration to meet our challenges.  
Blessed be! Amen.

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## 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 19), Year A

### Remember, Once You Were Oppressed

All God's people are called to challenge the status quo of oppression - even if it means examining our own oppressive ways in the world.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Exodus 14:19-31 & Psalm 114 or Genesis 50:15-21 & Psalm 103:\(1-7\), 8-13; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



“God is compassionate toward those who are oppressed and violated. Yet, God forgives all people even those who have hurt us. Yes, we ought to forgive others; yet, premature forgiveness can be a problem in some instances.” Linda Thomas



“When forgiveness is offered too quickly, the offending party is denied the opportunity to do the hard work and truly repent.” Marvin Ellison





“An authentic way to assure ourselves that we are doing God’s will is to live peacefully and gracefully, finding ways to share life’s necessities with others and leaving ultimate judgments to God Herself.” Virginia Ramey Mollenkott



“To the degree that we are the oppressors, eager to profit from the labor of others, God throws us into panic and leaves us spiritually dead on the seashore.” Michael Joseph Brown

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### What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

Today's Bible passages remind us of God's power as well as God's commitments. **Exodus 14:19-31** is the story of the crossing of the Red Sea (literally "the sea of reeds"). Although the entire Exodus story is foundational for Israel's identity, the miraculous crossing of the sea is, arguably, its most pivotal moment. Whether the crossing was as dramatic as Cecil B. DeMille's film, *The Ten Commandments*, or something less cinematic, the event displays God's power, but more importantly, God's commitment to act on behalf of the oppressed.

In the passage, we see the oppressed surging toward liberation. Here, the Hebrews are constantly aided by a God who "has our back" (Exodus 14:19). One can only imagine the pride that accompanied the Egyptian attempt to keep the Hebrews "enslaved" to their society. Yet, we should be careful not to make the easy and potentially misleading move to identify with the Hebrews — making their story our story. In truth, even in our marginalized state as same-gender loving persons, we have more in common with the Egyptians than we do the Hebrews. In a world of those who have-too-much and those who have-not-enough, we are not in a position to identify clearly and openly with the Hebrews when too often we possess the "wealth" of the Egyptians.

If anything, the crossing of the Red Sea is a cautionary tale to all, especially the powerful, that God does not sanction any state of affairs in which the status quo means unrelenting oppression. To the degree that we are the oppressors, eager to profit from the labor of others, God throws *us* into panic (Exodus 14:24) and leaves *us* spiritually dead on the seashore (Exodus 14:30). The theologian John Cobb and David Griffin once proclaimed eloquently, "God, far from being the Sanctioner of the Status Quo, is the source of some of the chaos in the world" [*Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976) 60]. The incident at the Red Sea challenges us whenever we assume that "might makes right" — **Psalms 114** elaborates poetically on this crossing and the events that folled as an expression of God's power.



In what sense might affluent people owe a debt to those who have no way of earning the good basics of life? How might those LGBT people who are "out and proud" be of assistance to those whose circumstances do not permit such freedom?

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The cautionary tale of the crossing furnishes us with a conversation partner for today's gospel lesson. **Matthew 18:21-35** encompasses a parable that is itself a cautionary tale for all who hear it. The parable (verse 23-35), which only appears in Matthew, ends with the ominous declaration, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (18:35).

The story of the crossing and the parable of the slave share some essential characteristics. First, they both highlight God's compassion for those in distress. For example, in the parable, the ruler had compassion for the first slave, of course, but the selfish actions of that slave toward the other slave highlight a concern for all those who are distressed. Second, both demonstrate God's willingness to act in a disruptive manner to undermine any unjust status quo.

In the parable, the debts were legally (and some would say ethically) two separate matters. What binds them together is the ruler's originally unspoken expectation that the experience of forgiveness would have meant a change in behavior on the part of the first slave (verses 32-33). When that slave (now restored to a secure social position) used it to enforce his claim against another slave (who also begged for mercy), he illustrated how seductive the power of the status quo can be. The first slave's liberation from indebtedness did not mean the liberation of others. In short, maybe we need to be more thoughtful when it comes to the practice of forgiveness. That is, perhaps the ruler moved too quickly with the offer of forgiveness.

Marie Fortune, a pastor and anti-violence advocate, tells the story of visiting a prison in order to speak with a group of men incarcerated for child sexual abuse. When she was about to depart after their session, she asked what they wanted her to tell people in the church, and the men replied, "Tell them not to forgive us so quickly." When forgiveness is offered too soon, the offending party is denied the opportunity to do their work and really repent and turn around, totally transforming their thinking and behavior so that they no longer put others at risk. As we see from the parable, this is hard, hard work. We might ask ourselves: was the slave forgiven too early and too easily? Perhaps forgiveness, if it comes at all, comes at the end of a process, not at its beginning. Too often, the burden is misplaced. The offender let off the hook and the victim/survivor told to "get over it" and forgive, meaning forget the offense. All too often, this does a grave injustice, adding insult to injury. Yes, in making new beginnings possible, forgiveness is a remarkable moral power. Yet, like all power, it can be used for good or ill. In other words, we must handle forgiveness with great care and discretion. It can be offered prematurely.

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When might we as individuals or as part of the church participated in a premature forgiveness process? Equally important, when forgiveness comes to us how readily are we to share it with others who need forgiveness as well?

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The parable in Matthew emphasizes that those who have been forgiven must live lives that reflect the experience of forgiveness. Forgiveness in this sense is a matter of justice. Thus, practices of social interaction that maintain the dominance of the forgiven over the unforgiving, or that liberate some to the detriment of others, are to be renounced. According to the parable, such dominance is immoral and inconsistent with the divine character. Again, the message of the parable shatters the hubris of those who believe they have a special relationship with God (that their sins are worthy of forgiveness while those of others are not) and act in a manner that mistakenly enforces that belief (that I will condemn you despite my own need for forgiveness).

The parable connects to **Exodus 14** in that all of us who profit from unjust systems of power must work tirelessly in our own contexts, humbled by the privileges we have been given, and in eagerness to share those privileges with those who have been denied them. This is why the apostle Paul's words in **Romans 12:1-12** are also both practical and humbling. Paul begins, "Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions" (verse 1). Such a call for hospitality envisions a community of diverse individuals who put aside the corrosive human practice of judging one another and instead engage in authentic interaction on the basis of fundamental equality. This passage insists that believers must not quarrel with one another over how we live our lives because the only judge is God, to whom we are all accountable.

Such quarrels are the opposite of the staged events many LGBT people of faith experience in so-called forums on sexual orientation sponsored by churches and organizations. Too often, they are simply opportunities for quarreling over opinions. People speaking, often hollering, at each other rather than affirming their difference as difference, seeking to be community nevertheless. Paul makes it clear that final judgment — the judgment over the ultimate value of a person's life — belongs to God. Human beings, even those in the church, should never assume a divine prerogative. To assume this prerogative for ourselves is idolatry, passing judgment on others as if they were our servants instead of God's servants (verse 4). Paul makes this point earlier in the letter as well (see Romans 2:1-16).

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**Prayerfully Out in Scripture**



Save me, O God,  
from the temptation to be less than fully human,  
less than the child of God You created me to be.

Save me, O God,  
from the temptation to view my sexuality as a curse,  
rather than as a precious Gift with which You have blessed me.

Save me, O God,  
from those who seek to heal what does not need healing,  
who seek to futher wound me by making me think I am a mistake,  
rather than made in Your image.

Save me, O God,  
from easy and simplistic theology, which seems to offer security  
but really offers shackles and blinds the soul  
from knowing You in all Your complexity, beauty, and wonder.

Save me, O God,  
from everything and everyone that would distract me or  
dissuade me from living into Your calling on my life.

Amen.

("Midnight Prayer" by Darrell Grizzle. Used by permission. [See blog.](#))

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## 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 20), Year A

### Choosing to Live, Choosing to Live Justly

What is the challenge to live authentically? What difference should God's goodness to us make in how we forgive and act in the world?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Exodus 16:2-15 & Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45 or Jonah 3:10-4:11 & Psalm 145:1-8; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



“The struggle of Paul in Philippians is a familiar one to people on the margins of society. LGBT people know how challenging a life of witness can be. We often cast it as a burden or suffering, but is it not possible to also see it as an incredible opportunity instead?” Shonda Jones



“While we are often faced by how we are excluded, the parable for today challenges us to be aware of how we also want to be ‘one-up,’ even when those opportunities are rare.” Bridgette Young



“Unfortunately, the parable highlights our inability at times to see beyond our own personal concerns. Any act of inclusion is going to disgruntle some who believe they are deserving of more.” Michael Joseph Brown

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

It's a troubling thought, but have you ever thought about committing suicide? Many people have at some point in their lives. For many it is as a consequence of battling a terminal (or even horribly debilitating) illness. As one AIDS sufferer once commented, “When they tell you that you are going to die, and the only question is whether it is sooner or later, then what is the purpose of living?” For others suicidal thoughts are a consequence of a complex mixture of depression, loneliness and often mental illness. For yet another group, suicide appears to be an option to alleviate the suffering of just being one's self. Statistics vary, but the Centers for Disease Control's 1993 report held that LGBT teens were four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts.

Many biblical scholars believe that in **Philippians 1:21-30** Paul is wrestling with the idea himself. He tells his readers, “For to me, living is Christ, and dying is gain” (verse 21). He continues, “I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better, but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you” (verses 23-24). Why would the apostle even entertain such an idea?

It was not such an odd notion in the world of Paul's time, especially if the death was connected to a noble cause. In this case, the death was generally considered by others as an instance of martyrdom. Probably the most famous suicide from the ancient world was that of Socrates. Charged with disrespect for the established religious traditions and corrupting the young by challenging them to think differently, the Greek philosopher was condemned to take his own life by a jury of 501 Athenian citizens. For his part, Socrates considered it preferable to die than to live inauthentically.

Being LGBT in mixed, or worse, unknown company is difficult. The threat of violence and alienation looms large in such situations. Although many courageous LGBT persons confront the challenge head-on, for others it is a far more difficult task, especially in the church. Although more and more spaces are open to us at work, school and other social arenas, hard work still needs to be done. Individuals in the LGBT community, most particularly those of color, often wrestle with the authentic and courageous act of embracing publicly their identities and the equally understandable act of avoiding “outing” themselves in situations where they may be confronted with homophobic responses.

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What stories do you know about those who suffer for not being fully themselves?

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Something somewhat similar is going on in this passage from Paul. Imprisoned for preaching the Gospel of Christ, criticized by others in the church, and suffering physically in the process, one can understand how even the now famous apostle might entertain the benefits of “being with Christ.” The authenticity of Paul as an apostle and a human being was at stake. As we said, many in the LGBT community understand the apostle’s struggle all too well. Living authentically, being who you are without shame or apology, is a blessing and burden at the same time.

We see this, too, in the apostle’s comments. Although he would gladly give up the awesome responsibility of being an apostle, he also realizes that his contribution goes far beyond his own well-being. He then instructs his readers to adopt the same attitude. “Only live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ,” says the apostle (verse 27). The Greek verb used here is somewhat obscured by the translation. *Politeuesthe* directs the readers to live their lives as citizens “in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Living out our faith is never a private matter. It is eminently public. To be who we are involves in some way being put on public display.

Yet, Paul says, “For [God] has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well — since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have” (1:29-30). Although we should avoid encouraging individuals to suffer, especially those in a community who have known persecution all too well, the apostle’s words offer us an alternative to the common social script that tells us that we suffer because there is something wrong with us. Suffering is a common experience of those who stand for truth in our world. Living our lives as citizens is a call to be beacons to others. Rather than characterizing it only in the negative as “suffering,” let us see it as an awesome opportunity.

Recently, Michael Joseph Brown had a conversation with a musician at a youth camp. After finding out that he attended a well-known liberal arts college with a superb music department, Michael asked him, “So what made you decide to attend that school?” Expecting the former student to cite the department’s reputation, ranking by evaluators like *U.S. News*, or some similar criterion for making such an important decision, the young man told him, “I was so moved when I heard John Timble (not his real name) sing on a recording made by the college choir that I wanted to be just like him.” We say it so often, but it is true nevertheless. We have no idea who our witness influences. John Timble never met this young man, but through his gift he had a profound influence upon his life.

In sum, even as Paul shares his own internal dialogue with the Philippian church about his contemplation on life and death, he concludes that “to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you” (verse 24). Paul was quite aware that his life was an inspiration and a model for those who, like him, were feeling pressured to be inauthentic in their living. If you ever have considered suicide, yet you are reading this, there was something that convinced you that “to remain in the flesh is more necessary . . .” even when you could not articulate why.

We can be at our lowest point, yet our lives are valuable to someone else. Not only are we unaware of how our individual lives influence those we've never met; if we stay stuck in a place of believing our lives are no longer valuable, we deny others the positive influence of our very being in the world. Understanding this doesn't have to be a burden. Living a life "worthy of the Gospel of Christ" is not about perfection. It's about bringing the best of what we have to become all God has created us to be. Each day it's different — some better, some worse — but each day brings with it an opportunity to inspire even in the smallest way.



Does God call us to be superheroes? Does God expect us to accomplish the nearly impossible? Or, does God call us to be exactly who we are, allowing who we are to be used by God for things great and small?

If Paul is wrestling with a reason for continuing in the sometimes arduous task of discipleship, the parable in **Matthew 20:1-16** addresses the question of reward. The workers in the parable, day laborers, were among the poorest people in the ancient world. The story begins with a landowner hiring a group of laborers to work in his vineyard for "the usual daily wage" (verse 2). He then hires four additional groups of workers, agreeing to pay them nothing in particular. At the end of the day, the landowner has all the workers paid the same amount, the usual daily wage. Matthew 20:10 says, "Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received the usual daily wage." They grumbled. Such an act violated their sense of fairness. Of course, those who work harder should get paid more. This is just commonsense reasoning.

Yet, the landowner reminds them that they received exactly what they agreed to — the usual daily wage (verse 13). The problem is not really the wage, but the landowner's generosity. He asks, "Are you envious because I am generous?" (verse 15). Frankly, they are. Although they had agreed to work for the usual daily wage, once they saw others who had not worked as long or as hard as they had, the wage suddenly became insufficient. In an all-too-human way, the workers want to impose their own standard of equitable distribution on the landowner.

Of course, we could make an easy identification of LGBT people with those who began to work later in the day. In many ways, this would be understandable. The struggle for civil rights by people of color and women has its roots in the early history of the United States. Historically, our LGBT struggle was formally initiated much later. We should be sensitive to the complaints of African Americans, as well as others, who feel like their labors have paved the way for us without receiving a greater payment for their efforts. LGBT individuals are not trying to usurp the hard work of women or persons of color. Instead of making this a contest of who has worked longer, we maintain that we share the struggle against heterosexism with *its* patriarchy, racial prejudice, social marginalization and exclusion. In truth, if it had not been for the suffragist (later feminist) and civil rights movements, the opportunity for a movement among LGBT persons may never have happened.

At the same time, within the LGBT community, the corrosive tendency may arise to play the role

of the early workers as well. As the movement grows and becomes more inclusive, some within our ranks may think that they too deserve greater payment — whether recognition, rights, acclaim or status — than those who have come into our ranks only recently. No matter how open we believe we are, our human measure of what is fair or just usually applies primarily to our own cause, and secondarily to “them” (whoever they may be). This parable is so powerful because it defies human logic and stands the notion of what is fair on its head. It reminds us that we cannot create God in our own image, nor can we be the judges of God’s generosity. It reminds us that the work of inclusion is not a matter of who has worked longer because we all receive the reward — payment and reward are the same word in Greek — for which we are co-workers.



How can we promote the various movements for social justice as part of a singular movement of God?

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Since this parable is about the operations of the “kingdom of heaven,” the story highlights how human beings attempt to make inclusion in the community their decision rather than God’s decision. The landowner is not seeking to disadvantage the first group of workers. No worker in this parable receives less than needed. Rather the landowner wants to care for those who did not have the opportunity to earn an entire day’s pay. Unfortunately, the parable highlights our inability at times to see beyond our own personal concerns.

Any act of inclusion is going to disgruntle some who believe they are deserving of more. The most famous example in the United States may be the failed push for Affirmative Action. This week’s parable, distinctive to Matthew’s gospel, highlights the idea that God operates in a radically generous and inclusive manner. The church, God’s community, is to be a place where this generosity and inclusion are lived out.



How does inclusion challenge us, even when we claim it is the very thing we desire?

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**Prayerfully Out in Scripture**



Amazing, giving and good God,  
No matter the troubles, no matter the tests,  
Keep us close to you.  
Help us choose you.  
You give us breath, hope and life.  
Make us grateful and generous.  
Make us partners in your work  
of compassion, inclusion and justice.  
Amen.

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## 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 21), Year A

### Is God Among Us or Not?

Led into the wilderness without water or hope, God's people ask, "Is God among us or not?" God answers with an emphatic "Yes!" — accompanied by communal tales of God's deliverance, provision and faithfulness.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Exodus 17:1-7 & Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16 or Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 & Psalm 25:1-9;\(Philippians 2:1-13 and Matthew 21:23-32 not part of this week's conversation\)](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"The presence of God may be hard to discern at times, but abides with us nevertheless." Michael Joseph Brown



"Perilous times make us question God's presence, but even with our impatience God nourishes us." Shonda Jones



"Rather than praying to God for help out of distress, unbelief and as a last-ditch effort to survive, the psalmist petitions God for help through expressions of trust in God's goodness." Bridgette Young

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

“Is God among us or not?” This provocative question weaves itself through today’s readings. In **Exodus 17:1-7** we encounter a familiar scene. The Israelites begin to quarrel and complain that Moses has led them on a death march. They ask: “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” (verse 3). For his part, Moses appears frustrated at their impatience. Yet, God miraculously provides water from a rock.

More significant than the provision of water is the means by which God provides. The same staff used to strip God’s enemies in Egypt of drinking water (see Exodus 7:17), now provides water for God’s covenant people (verses 5-6). By having the elders as witnesses, the community is shamed for its forgetfulness. Just as God had the power to take away drinking water, the same God has the power to provide it.

Water and its potential to sustain or destroy life is a potent theme in Exodus. From baby Moses’ rescue from the river, to the Israelites crossing of the Red Sea, to the Israelites thirst for water in this chapter, water imagery is present throughout the narrative. How do they know that God is among them? Because God continues to use elements such as water, which can give or take life, as a tool for life-giving acts on the way to the Promised Land.



Name some events in the life of your community that had the potential to be devastating but in the end, was helpful or even encouraging.

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The LGBT community, in many respects, can relate to the question of, “Is God among us or not?” Experiences of exile, lack of care and hopelessness are common among socially degraded people. Why is it when we take the first step toward freedom and self-actualization such as through coming out, nurturing stable family systems, and cultivating healthy relationships do we still find ourselves in peril? Exodus 17:1 reminds us that the Israelites’ immediate context is not the Promised Land. It is merely a stage — a stop along the journey — on the way to complete fulfillment of what **Psalms 78:4** calls the glorious deeds of God and God’s might and wonders. We must be especially careful, however, that we don’t mistake the journey checkpoints as the conclusion to our faithful journey and struggle.



What are some life-giving and life-taking aspects of your particular community’s situation?

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**Psalm 78:1-4; 12-16** is an instructive, historical psalm. It reminds readers that the Israelites are not God's people by word only. They are God's people because they can recount a story of God's faithful care, goodness, provision and protection throughout their journey from exile to promise. Similarly, the LGBT community and other historically marginalized groups are a part of a journey — a struggle — in which, for sure, many of us did not willingly enlist. Yet, we have an opportunity to exercise both a collective, faithful memory of our past experiences with God and each other as well as expressing our future hope for God's continued presence and activity.



In what ways does your community share and honor its stories of struggle and hope?

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**Psalm 25:1-9**, therefore, stands as a challenge to the Israelites' distrust and forgetfulness in Exodus 17. Rather than praying to God for help out of distress, unbelief, and as a last-ditch effort to survive, the psalmist petitions God for help through expressions of trust in God's goodness. "From of old" (verse 6) God has been merciful and loving. The proper response to, "Is God among us or not?" is an emphatic, "Yes," accompanied by communal tales of God's deliverance, provision and faithfulness. Faithful prayers for help, guidance, and endurance should not be fueled by our own consumer appetites. Rather, our prayers and petitions should be grounded in our Christian history of faith found both in stories of the Bible and the stories of our contemporary faith communities. We are a people in which God *is* among us. How do we know? Because our stories, our histories, our faithful ancestors tell us so.

As Jesus is teaching in **Matthew 21:23-32**, his authority to do so is challenged by the chief priests and elders of the people. Since authority is the ability to influence the behavior of others, Jesus' refusal to provide any additional proof for the legitimacy of his authority appears to be based on the fact that, like John the Baptist, he had credibility with the people. Whenever we LGBT people of faith work within and outside the church's established power structure, we find our authority to do so challenged. Crafty opponents will always attempt to undermine our work, denying its validity "from heaven" and saying, "We do not know." Jesus reminds us in the parable that it is those who do the will of God, even reluctantly (possibly because of bad past experiences), who will enter the realm of God.

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**Prayerfully Out in Scripture**



Patient God, in our times of distress we wonder about your presence.  
While others may continue to question your commitment to us,  
as well as our commitment to you,  
nourish us with your life-sustaining presence.  
Help us join the ancient psalmist's cry that you are here. Amen.

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## 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 22), Year A

### Called to Remember Who and Whose We Are

While the Bible is filled with examples of a loving God who accepts us as we are, this week's readings remind us that the Gospel is not always "touchy-feely." Part of God's love for creation involves holding us and our communities accountable for just and righteous behaviors.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20 & Psalm 19 or Isaiah 5:1-7 & Psalm 80:7-15; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"False prophets are all around us. Some preach scorn and hatred towards those in the transgender community because we resist conforming to their personal standards. Instead, listen to the new standard: 'Love one another as I have loved you.'" Sarah Carpenter-Vascik



"The intent of God's law is not to oppress but to provide community instruction on how to reside peacefully in a world that belongs to God and is leased to everybody equally." Deborah Appler



Could Paul's celebration of his own heritage also inspire hope among those whose identity has been repeatedly cursed? Greg Carey

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

Thunder, lightening, the smoking mountain of Sinai, and the loud sounding of the shophar, the ram's horn, after the giving of the Ten Commandments in **Exodus 20** exclaims God's sovereignty. Add to the that dramatic revelation, God's song about a wayward vineyard (Israel) in **Isaiah 5** which is echoed in **Psalms 19 and 80**, or the judgment bestowed on the tenants (the religious leaders) who defy God's authority in **Matthew 2**. Even Paul's labor in **Philippians 3** to reach the goal of heaven -- that only comes by the grace of God and not Paul's own work -- exclaims God's sovereignty. All these texts coalesce to make it quite clear that God alone has dominion and that certain behaviors are required by us to be in God's favor and part of God's realm.

Our fear of being judgmental may cause us to be uncomfortable with such texts and to water them down. But it is clear: God reminds us that the entire world belongs to God and that we are tenants for only a period of time.

Chief Seattle of the Suquamish tribe understood this concept. The Chief declared in a 1848 speech: "This we know; the earth does not belong to [humankind]; [humankind] belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites our family. All things are connected" [See Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy. Justice, Sustainability and Peace* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2005), 1]. As people of faith, we rationally know that God owns the earth and everything on it, but still we want a deed to part of it! The law is considered by ancient Israel and contemporary Judaism to be a gift that instructs the community how to reside peacefully in a world that belongs to God and is leased to everybody equally.



What situations or experiences have reminded you that God is in charge? How did or do you deal with this?

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The Decalogue (**Exodus 20:2-27; Deuteronomy 5:5-21**) is given to the people with the strong message that these are not commands to be dismissed at whim. The God of Israel is sacred, the only God, and should be treated with the utmost respect. Everyone is required to set a day apart

(Sabbath) to honor God's holiness and to remember whose we are. Further, the commandments forbidding disrespect for elders, murder, adultery, theft, lying, and coveting promote an atmosphere of justice and right behavior that lead to a peaceful community. The law provides order and reminds us the God did not create a capricious covenant with God's people. Jesus sums up the law in his commandments to love one another as we love ourselves, and love God with all of our heart, soul and mind. God gives this law with all authority — so much so that the people are afraid not to follow them. Yet it takes so little time for them to forget!

By the time Isaiah of Jerusalem, an 8th century prophet, begins his work, the leadership in Jerusalem has become corrupt and the people along with them. Israel's relationship starts off strong as portrayed in God's love song sung to Israel, the vineyard (**Isaiah 5**). The author compares the choices made by the people of Judah with a vineyard that was planted with choice grapevines in the hope that the yield would also be of high quality. When the vines matured, they produced only wild grapes, (understood at the time to mean putrid fruit or literally "stinking things") wholly unsuitable for winemaking. The love song turns sour when God's people break covenant and do not practice justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedekah*) in the land. Some within the community are well cared for and have much while others struggle to survive — an obvious result of violation of God's law. Justice and righteousness had been expected. Yet now, we see in verse 7, people will be punished with bloodshed (*mishpah*). Now people cry out (*tse'aqah*). Even within today's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities where justice and righteousness are central, some have greater power than others and each of us must deal with issues within our own communities.



Where are the injustices within the LGBT communities? Do some tend to "own" the group more than others? How can we become more focused on our covenant responsibilities?

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**Psalms 19** and **Psalms 80:7-15** both remember God's saving acts in Egypt and celebrate God's law given to the people as a gift. **Psalms 19** reaffirms the perfection of God's law and how vital it is to keep them, emphasizing the great reward to those who live by them. Knowing the limits of humankind, both of these psalms look for mercy for breaking God's law. Drawing on the vineyard image of Isaiah 5 the psalmist cries out: "Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted" (Psalm 80:14-15).

The parable of the wicked tenants in **Matthew 21** continues the theme of judgment and begins with a summary of Isaiah 5. As this story reveals, even the people who call themselves God's people occasionally kill God's messengers. Members of the LGBT communities and their allies hardly need the reminder. The church's rejection of unfamiliar voices not only does violence to those it rejects, it comes at great cost to the church itself. Yet we should be cautious with this



parable. Might it not do harm to our own souls as well? Whenever we long to witness the parable's fulfillment in the demise of closed and oppressive communities, we tinge our own souls with violent desire.



Instead of offering ourselves to be abused, as do the messengers in the parable, and instead of wishing to see the vineyard's tenants meet their doom, how might we look for new ways to bear witness?

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We also must be willing to accept that this allegory can sometimes be applied to the LGBT and allied communities where power struggles and bickering can occur. We sometimes forget that God plants us and places us in the hands of those God hopes will help us to grow and bear the fruits of the covenant relationship – that is justice and righteous for all people. Sometimes when fruit from our work is produced, we (like the tenants) become greedy. Jesus reminds us that we are called to serve and have been given responsibility to produce fruits and share them and not horde glory, power and wealth. Jesus says: “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to people who produce the fruits of the kingdom” (verse 43).



When do we risk “killing” God’s messengers because we loathe to share power?

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Ah, but Paul proclaims in **Philippians 3** that righteousness comes through faith and not the law, so we do not have to live by the Decalogue, do we? Before we throw the law out, we need to examine how Paul prefaces his argument. Paul, whose letters are so often invoked against LGBT people, celebrates his identity in Philippians 3:4b-14. Yet perhaps we may claim his insight for ourselves. Born the right way, he's lived the right way. As far as the law is concerned, he's blameless. This runs directly counter to how many people imagine Paul as a man broken by the law's demands and awaiting deliverance. Could it also inspire hope among those whose identity has been repeatedly cursed? May they celebrate the way they were born, celebrate the integrity of their lives, celebrate their identity publicly?

Yet there is more, for Paul looks beyond his given identity to his calling in Christ. Who he is to become is grounded in who he has been. Rooted in the gift of his identity, he pursues the way of Christ. Still more awaits him. For those who belong to Christ, identity marks a beginning to celebrate, not an end in itself.

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**Prayerfully Out in Scripture**



*Slowly, prayerfully read the following psalm through twice. Pause often and let the text soak in. Close your time in prayer and in silent reflection.*

*The precepts of God are right,  
    rejoicing the heart;  
The commandment of God is clear,  
    enlightening the eyes. . .  
Keep back your servant also from the insolent;  
    Do not let them have dominion over me.  
Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.  
Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
    be acceptable to you,  
    O God, my rock and my redeemer.*

Psalm 19:8, 13-14 from *The New Century Psalter* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1999) 50.

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## 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 23), Year A

### Maintaining Street Credibility

Moses appeals to God's reputation and how it will look to the world should God zap the people God rescued from Egypt. While there might be brief satisfaction in annihilating the Hebrew people, such revenge would lower God's street cred, God's credibility.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Exodus 32:1-14 & Psalm 106:1-6 or Isaiah 25:1-9 & Psalm 23;](#)  
[Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"The Bible passages this week emphasize how the way we behave as individuals and as the community of faith impacts how all of Christianity is perceived in the world. Our actions impact God's reputation." Deborah Appler



"Our celebration finds itself in the way of Jesus, who passionately invites all persons to the banquet." Greg Carey



“Life contains many responsibilities, the most important of which is to prepare ourselves for a place in heaven. To oppress and to marginalize others may well work against that preparation.” Sarah Carpenter-Vascik

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

In **Exodus 32: 1-14**, Aaron is one lucky religious leader! Chosen by God to work with Moses, it is through his lineage that all priests will serve Israel as intercessors for all generations. Aaron was with Moses and witnessed firsthand God's strength and sovereignty in the face of Pharaoh's cruelty. He knew he was in the presence of the one true God. Yet Aaron was weak: all too willing to succumb to the will of the Hebrews who, in the wilderness, are impatient with Moses' absence while Moses receives the Torah on Sinai (Horeb in Psalm 106).

Instead of reassuring the people in the faithfulness of God, Aaron collects their jewelry, melts it and molds it into a golden calf (the cult animal of the Canaanite god Baal, worshipped on the eve of early winter rains so vital to the region's crops). Aaron builds an altar, offers sacrifice to the idol, and leads the people in a huge bash in honor of their creation. God, looking down at these unfaithful and impatient people, seethes and threatens to kill the whole lot of them with the exception of Moses. God would save Moses to lead a whole new people. Sounds reasonable!

Moses, who has little to gain by what he does next, begs God to reconsider. He appeals to God's reputation and how it will look to the world should God zap the people God rescued from Egypt. Although there might be brief satisfaction in annihilating the Hebrew people, such revenge would lower God's street cred, God's credibility.

God understands reputation and cares very much about maintaining a good one (see Exodus 20:7, 24). Using God's name in vain or for disreputable purposes is punishable by death. Moses' intercession strikes a chord and God relents and allows the people to live and to move toward the Promised Land. For better or worse, having a good reputation goes a long way toward making positive changes in the community and moving toward the Promised Land.

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Who are some of the big “names” within the LGBT communities and how have their reputations in the community helped or hindered positive change for sexual equality? Who are the people who intercede between the LGBT communities and the larger world and how are they effective?

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**Psalm 106** is usually thought of as a community lament for covenant renewal. This psalm serves as a confession for national sin, recounts the golden calf incident and sets up a contrast between a forgiving God and a rebellious people. The people forgot God’s great works and reputation and sinned: “They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt, wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea” (verses 20-22).

**Psalm 23** is a song of confidence by a worshiper who gives thanks for deliverance from human enemies. It can be read as a celebration of the intimate relationship between the psalmist and God. *Adonai* is my shepherd who makes me lie down in green pastures, leads me beside quiet waters and restores my soul “for God’s name sake.” God wants all of us to know how loved and cared for we are. When we are in the presence of our enemies, God will cover us with so much oil that everyone will know that we are anointed and chosen by God and that we have chosen God.

God is not only concerned about God’s own street credibility. In **Isaiah 25:1-9**, while celebrating God’s future destruction of the unjust and unfaithful city, the prophet lauds God’s refuge for the poor and needy who now sing God’s glory. God provides a banquet for those once outcast replete with the finest of foods. Yet there is more! God not only wipes away the tears shed by the oppressed, God wipes away the disgrace of the people who have been shamed by their oppressors (verse 8).



When have we felt shamed by the dominant culture for living and loving as God has created us? The prophet Isaiah promises a world where we will not be shamed for who we are!

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The importance of a good reputation is emphasized in **Philippians 4:1-19**. The word on the street is that Euodia and Syntyche, leaders of two separate household churches in Philippi, are jeopardizing the new Christian movement by their feud. Who wants to join a group that is so vitriolic? Paul appeals for a new reputation based on joy in Christ: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone” (verses 4-5a). In other words, act

like Christ would have you act. The Greek term translated as “gentleness” can also mean “seemly,” “courteous,” “kind” or “yielding.” All of these translations indicate a loving spirit, especially such a spirit that should result from a relationship with Christ (like the one between the psalmist and God in Psalm 23) where all needs are met: “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (verse 6). The feuding church is ruining Christ and his movement’s reputation in such a way that it is difficult to tell the difference between those who are and are not following Christ.

**Philippians 4:1-9** combines a call to reconciliation with an exhortation to hope. It seems odd that Paul should tell the church in Philippi that they should rejoice and live beyond anxiety. After all, can we really choose to rejoice? Do we have control over our anxiety? Paul does not base his exhortation in our own ability to feel joyful and calm. He grounds it in the very nature of God, who is the God of peace. Paul's spirituality is not about "the power of positive thinking." It is the testimony of a prisoner who opens his spirit to the presence of God.



When in your oppression have you let go and opened up to the presence of God?

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In **Matthew 22:1-14**, it must have been difficult for the groom who is the ruler’s son, as well as for the ruler when guests who are invited to the wedding refuse the initial invitation and then kill the servants when they bring a second one. Such behavior by friends and family is embarrassing enough, but from one’s subjects it is downright damaging to the ruler’s reputation for hospitality. As a result of their refusal to attend, troops are sent to destroy these insubordinate subjects and their property. The ruler then sends the remaining servants to invite anyone on the street who would like to come to the wedding, “good or bad.” The room becomes packed with revelers and the ruler’s reputation is saved. Yet somehow one guest is able to slip into the celebration without wearing the proper wedding garment, an indication again of rudeness that is directed to the ruler and the royal family. The guest is jettisoned out of the door into the place where “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Many are called to participate in this realm but choose to refuse it in spite of God’s just and righteous reputation. For example, when loving people from the LGBT communities are rejected by the mainline churches and declared as unloved by God and Christ, God’s reputation is marred, God’s invitation to “all people” thwarted.



How has the church hurt or helped God’s reputation as a loving and just God, particularly regarding the acceptance of the LGBT communities?

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This parable envisions a community that lives in celebration – and it passes judgment on communities that fail to prepare for the wedding feast. How ought communities oppressed by

poverty, decay, neglect and discrimination respond to such a message? Once again, manufactured joy gets us nowhere. Empty positive self-talk convinces only for awhile. Our celebration must find itself in the way of Jesus, who passionately invites all persons to the banquet. That passion to include "as many as you can find" reveals God's desire for our inclusion and celebration.

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*God of Moses, Miriam and Aaron,  
of Euodia and Syntyche,  
Help us live lives of justice and love that are worthy of your great name.  
When we are anxious, remind us of the manna you provided  
for your people in the midst of the desert.  
When we begin to create golden calves, remind us that it is you  
who brings down pharaohs and others filled  
with hate for the oppressed.  
You alone are our God, none other.  
As people of your name, help us bring you honor. Amen.*

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## 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 24), Year A

### God's Awesome Holiness

God's holiness emanates throughout all of today's Bible readings encouraging us to recognize that power and protection God brings to those who seek justice.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Exodus 33: 12-23 & Psalm 99 or Isaiah 45:1-7 & Psalm 96: 1-9  
10-13; 1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10; Matthew 22: 15-22](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



“Evidence of the strength, justice and power of God is all around us. How much do we keep this in mind as we go through each day?” Sarah Carpenter-Vascik



“It is important to remember that just because God's glory is hidden at times to protect us, God is always present!” Deborah Appler



“What is left over for Caesar when one gives God what is God's?” Greg Carey



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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

In both **Exodus 33:12-23** and **1 Thessalonians 1:1-10** there is a tension between the glory of God and the community's ability to sustain that vision. Even though, like Moses and the persecuted in Thessalonica, there are moments that we bask in the warmth and glow of this holiness, yet such moments of singular revelation require the struggles of daily faithfulness. Exodus envisions a moment in which a community is reluctant to continue its new path. The new way is so startling that the community cannot bear its full revelation!



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Are there moments in GLBT life when the fullness of what God holds for us is too much for us to sustain?

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In **1 Thessalonians**, Paul celebrates the faithful courage of a community that has embraced such a new vision. He uses strong language to name their faithfulness. Yet even that singular vision moment requires maintenance. Paul writes to keep in touch with the Thessalonians -- to keep the vision alive: "Just as you are doing: do so more and more" (1 Thessalonians 4:1).

In **Exodus 33:12-23**, God is still miffed about the people's creation of a golden calf and, subsequently, chooses not to travel in their midst for fear that further provocation will lead to a smiting. The Holy One will enter the Tent of Meeting to speak with Moses, yet only after a cloud envelopes the tent and keeps their conversations private. The imposed distance between God and the Hebrew people does not sit well with Moses and, once more as in last week's reading, Moses intercedes. He argues that if God isn't willing to be present to the people, there is no point in sending them to the Promised Land.

Although God makes it clear that what happens to this stiff-necked people is in God's hands alone: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and show mercy on whom I will show mercy" (verse 19), God relents as a favor to Moses who loves these people. Moses is given a special viewing of God's glory when God lifts Moses and places him safely on a rock, hides his eyes with a hand to shield him from seeing God's face, and passes by Moses in all glory.

God is not trying to hide from Moses. On the contrary, God is offering Moses a chance to get a larger taste of God's Holiness and power. It is an intimate gesture that leaves Moses with a face that shines so bright it too must be covered (see Exodus 34). God protects Moses from the fullness of God's holiness even though it is something beautiful and awesome. Some things are too overwhelming to experience or can inadvertently hurt us even though they are beautiful. For example, in our community, radiating the glory of our relationships has proven in some contexts deadly. We have had to decide when and where it is safe to be honest about whom we love and let our love shine in all of its glory.



When have you felt a need to hide the glory of your relationship in order to preserve your safety? When is it, or isn't it appropriate to so?

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Behind the shield that God raises to protect Moses is intense glory. It is important to remember that just because the glory is hidden at times to protect us does not mean that God is not present! God is with us in all of our struggles against injustice and blesses the holiness of our relationships even when the Church does not.

**Isaiah 45:1-7** is directed to a people in exile who look forward to a return to Jerusalem — to be back home. God's holiness and protection shines in the form of God's servant Cyrus, the new ruler of Persia. Cyrus has opened the door for the exiles to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the Holy Temple. Verses 1-7 represent part of an oracle of celebration for the enthronement of this anointed ruler whose right hand God has grasped as a symbol of approval.



When have you felt exiled from home or from places that are holy for you? How will God pave the way for your return to this holy place?

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Again God's glory is made known, though this time through the actions of a ruler who levels the mountains, strips oppressive rulers of their robes, breaks the doors of bronze and the bars of iron that restrict freedom. The prophet, like Moses in Exodus 33, recognizes that glory is sometimes hidden: "I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places" (verse 3). God is present even when we don't see God. Isaiah reminds us, like all of the texts for this week, that God alone is glorious.

**Psalms 99 and Psalm 96:1-9, (10-13)** are enthronement psalms that celebrate God's holy and quaking presence on the mountain surrounded by cherubim and people seated at the foot stool. "Let them praise your great and awesome name" (Psalm 99:5). The need to praise God is because of God's holiness is emphasized: "Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised" (Psalm 96:4). God speaks to the people in a pillar of a cloud that protected them from being overwhelmed and harmed by seeing the fullness of God's glory. These psalms highlight that God is powerful and just, and is here for all of us, but expects us to live by the law, which is holy.



When have you felt protected from the fullness of God's glory?

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Paul, Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy send the letter of 1 Thessalonians to this chosen faith community that has suffered greatly at the hands of persecutors. In **1 Thessalonians 1:1-10**,

because of their joyful spirit in the midst of injustice and, because this community imitates the disciples and Jesus Christ, God's holiness shines through Thessalonica and throughout and beyond Macedonia. Like Thessalonica, GLBT communities have often been persecuted. This letter serves to remind us that how we deal with persecution impacts our relationship with the Holy. When faced with oppression, hospitality is affirmed (verse 9) and set forth as an example. Yet, responding to hate with holiness and hospitality is very difficult to do.



When was a time that you met hate with holiness? How did or did such behavior impact the situation?

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The question in **Matthew 22: 15-22** is one of glory -- Caesar's versus God's. What belongs to Caesar? Everything? Then what is left over for Caesar when one gives God what is God's? Jesus was placed in the middle of a contrived situation, involving the payment of a tax required of all citizens by the Roman government. The Pharisees and Herodians, non-Jews from Idumea, attempt to set Jesus up as a traitor to Rome by asking if it was a breach of Jewish law to pay taxes to the Emperor. Jesus skillfully tosses the problem back in the laps of the two sides of the issue, avoiding the trap. Caesar's honor and holiness that is represented on his coins hold no real power in Jesus' eyes so it can be paid. Yet Caesar's glory is apparent everywhere -- materialism, patriotism and conformism. Where is the vision of God's glory?

Caesar's realm, a worldly and oppressive one, does not represent God's kin-dom — one based on justice and righteousness for all people. Jesus' kin-dom shines bright with the holiness of those who live holy lives.



Who are those who embody God's radiant glory?  
When have you embodied the Holy?

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*Holy God,  
You pass before us with such brightness.  
You alone are God and Holy is your name.  
May a spark of your great Holiness ignite us  
that we might shine your love over the depths of injustice.  
Give us strength and power to do your work and  
the assurance that you remain with us bathing us in your great Light.*

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## 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 25), Year A

### Remembering the Past for the Future

The work and labor of God's people who came before us continue in us and onward into future generations. The joy is in working and living as part of a loving community.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Deuteronomy 34: 1-12 & Psalm 90: 1-6, 13-17 or Leviticus 19: 1-2, 15-18 & Psalm 1; 1Thessalonians 2: 1-8; Matthew 22: 34-46](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"Both passages in Deuteronomy and 1 Thessalonians nourish a hero complex. They celebrate singular male leadership while neglecting struggles of the larger community. Helpfully, Paul's image of a nurse nurturing children undermines vain heroic aspirations." Greg Carey



"God has said God will grant us what we ask for, provided we observe God's law. In today's world as in ancient times, it can be difficult to be obedient." Deborah Appler



"In many ways, we in the transgender community are all like Paul, persecuted for who we are and for how we live our lives. Having been confronted with the threat of physical violence, my faith saw me safely through it." Sarah Carpenter-Vascik

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

Both **Deuteronomy 34:1-12** and **1 Thessalonians 2:1-8** recall past moments in the history of their movements. Moses never enters the Promised Land himself, but God does allow him to survey the land from a high point. Deuteronomy says Moses died, but later Jewish tradition suggests that he merely departed into the heavenly realm, passing leadership to a new generation. Whatever Joshua's accomplishments, Moses is ever the greater prophet in blessed memory. "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses" (Deuteronomy 34:10).

In today's epistle reading from 1 Thessalonians, Paul has not died, yet his itinerant ministry has required him to leave the Thessalonians for new mission fields. One characteristic sign of Paul's ministry involves his commitment to maintain ties with the churches he has founded. Anxious to know how the disciples in Thessalonica are faring, Paul has already sent Timothy to check in on them (1 Thessalonians 3:1-3). In **1 Thessalonians 2:1-8**, Paul recalls the quality of his ministry among them. Never flattering, never greedy, placing the ministry among the Thessalonians above his own status, Paul lived among them like a nurse caring for children. In reminding the Thessalonians of his ministry, Paul seeks to strengthen their ongoing relationship.



Liberation movements occasionally need to recall their early moments. In our LGBT communities, who were the first heroes who claimed their place among communities of faith? Who stood alongside them as allies? How did these heroes embody their faithfulness, and how did they live out compassion among persons excluded from the blessings of the church?

From time to time, liberation movements benefit from telling and re-telling their stories. On the other hand, both Deuteronomy 34:1-12 and 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 pose a danger for liberating practice. Both texts can nourish an inflated image of the hero, celebrating singular (male) leadership while neglecting the struggles of the larger community. Helpfully, 1 Thessalonians hints toward another way of recalling the past. Paul's image of a nurse nurturing children undermines vain heroic aspirations. Such nursing was often the task of slaves. It required caring for the infant, with no reasonable hope of personal gain or reward. Beverly Roberts Gaventa has noted the surprising fact that Paul describes his ministry in maternal (rather than paternal) terms when he refers to the process of nurturing congregations [see her *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007)]. Just as he recalls his own ministry, Paul celebrates that faithful response among the Thessalonians themselves (1 Thessalonians 1:6-10).

The passages from Deuteronomy, 1 Thessalonians and **Psalms 90** all remind us that movement toward the Promised Land will always be a journey. Paul, Moses, Miriam, the Marys and other people of righteousness who have gone before, paved the way for future generations of faith. Their struggles and our present labors for God's justice on this earth might not be complete and we might not experience all of its fruits in our life time. Such work, however, opens doorways for those yet to come: "Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children" (Psalm 90:16).



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In recalling the heroes of our faith, what images might we employ to emphasize communal initiatives rather than singular heroes? What signs of hope for justice do we witness in the leaders from the younger generations?

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The gospel narratives include many passages that feature "tests" against Jesus. These are not disinterested theological conversations, but very public disputations. **Matthew 22:34-46** relates two such moments. Jesus' response to the question of the "great commandment" is not novel; we find it in other ancient Jewish traditions (see **Leviticus 19:18** and Deuteronomy 6:5). Often Christians emphasize Jesus' uniqueness – neglecting his solidarity with broader Jewish wisdom and the practices of the communities that supported and followed him. Jesus' summary of the law complements love for God with love grounded in community. Loving God is not a matter of individual virtuousness rather it grows together with love among neighbors.

Moments of public conflict have the unfortunate effect of reducing themselves to matters of individual status. People who speak out for justice often face public charges, finding themselves in the position of self-defense. They may learn from Jesus' example, delivering what may sound like snappy sound bites when necessary (Matthew 22:45). However, such moments bring with them their own temptations.



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How can activists for liberation defend themselves while maintaining their grounding in the communities that call us forth?

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Matthew's gospel does not quite offer an answer to that question. It does, however, insist that Jesus' ministry leads not to heroic singularity but to community. The people of Jesus experience Christ's continuing presence among them (**Matthew 18:20; 28:20**).

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**Prayerfully Out in Scripture**



Prayer for Leadership (On Election Day and Other Times)  
by Joan D. Chittister, OSB

Give us, O God,  
leaders whose hearts are large enough  
to match the breadth of our own souls  
and give us souls strong enough  
to follow leaders of vision and wisdom.

In seeking a leader,  
let us seek more than development  
for ourselves —  
though development we hope for —  
more than security for our own land —  
though security we need —  
more than satisfaction for our wants —  
though many things we desire.

Give us the hearts to choose  
the leader who will work with other  
leaders to bring safety  
to the whole world.

Give us leaders  
who lead this nation to virtue  
without seeking to impose our kind of virtue  
on the virtue of others.

Give us a government  
that provides for the advancement  
of this country  
without taking resources from others  
to achieve it.

Give us insight enough ourselves  
to choose as leaders those who can tell  
strength from power,  
growth from greed,  
leadership from dominance,  
and real greatness from the trappings  
of grandiosity.

We trust you, Great God,  
to open our hearts to learn from those  
to whom you speak in different tongues  
and to respect the life and words  
of those to whom you entrusted



the good of other parts of this globe.

We beg you, Great God,  
give us the vision as a people  
to know where global leadership truly lies,  
to pursue it diligently,  
to require it to protect human rights  
for everyone everywhere.

We ask these things, Great God,  
with minds open to your word  
and hearts that trust in your eternal care.  
Amen.

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## All Saints Day, Year A

### Turning Tears of Pain to Joy

The Bible passages for All Saints Day force us to think about what it means to suffer as members of Christ's community. At the same time they call us to envision the eschatological community of pure joy that will prevail!

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Revelation 7:9-17, Psalm 34:1-10, 22, 1 John 3:1-3, Matthew 5:1-12](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



“Those who seek to live faithful to God’s creation and calling must be prepared to contend in a world that does not know us because it did not know God.”  
Elcindor Johnson



“God has said God will grant us what we ask for, provided we observe God’s law. In today’s world as in ancient times, it can be difficult to be obedient.” Sarah Carpenter-Vascik



“While there is intense suffering in this world, we have to choose our battles carefully lest we needlessly become martyred. Finding a balance between apathy and martyrdom is the challenge.” Deborah Appler

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

The readings for today look at members of the church, people from all nations who prepare and await the realm of God and who seek to reassure us that the Lamb of God will be like a shepherd and will care for all who believe. In reading portions of Revelation as today's reading, one can easily and perhaps advisedly forget that this book is replete with images of violence and warfare. That can be particularly troublesome given the challenges we face around the world today. And although these images ought to be wrestled with and critiqued vigorously, this particular passage (**Revelation 7:9-17**) offers us such a powerful eschatological vision (a vision of the end of time) that we can be forgiven for relishing it with minimal attention given to elements of the larger context of Revelation.

In the passage, we see a multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language “standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands” (verse 9). They are victorious but this conquest is paradoxical in that they are presumably the slain from just a few verses before (Revelation 6:9-11). There they cried out for justice and now they cry out in worship. Now tears of pain have turned to tears of joy.



The LGBT communities continue to cry out in the pain of unjust persecution. How would you envision a world in which these tears would turn into tears of joy? What would victory look like?

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From time to time, liberation movements benefit from telling and re-telling their stories. On the other hand, both Deuteronomy 34:1-12 and 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 pose a danger for liberating practice. Both texts can nourish an inflated image of the hero, celebrating singular (male) leadership while neglecting the struggles of the larger community. Helpfully, 1 Thessalonians hints toward another way of recalling the past. Paul's image of a nurse nurturing children undermines vain heroic aspirations. Such nursing was often the task of slaves. It required caring for the infant, with no reasonable hope of personal gain or reward. Beverly Roberts Gaventa has

noted the surprising fact that Paul describes his ministry in maternal (rather than paternal) terms when he refers to the process of nurturing congregations [see her *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007)]. Just as he recalls his own ministry, Paul celebrates that faithful response among the Thessalonians themselves (1 Thessalonians 1:6-10).

Martyrdom is not a particularly cheery topic and is largely foreign to Christians in the United States. Nevertheless, it is a very real aspect of life for many of our brothers and sisters globally. The persecution and exile of Iraqi Christians after the overthrowing of Saddam Hussein or the devastation wrought on the people of southern Sudan are current examples. Unfortunately, our world is still marred by the persecution and even execution of minority populations whether they are united by religion, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. But it is often in these communities that we find saints.

Many Christians have a very limited view of who is considered a saint. Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount that not everyone who calls him Lord will enter the realm of heaven, but only those who do the will of God. It is in persecuted communities that we often see God's will displayed most vividly. Among these people we find the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers (**Matthew 5:1-12**). Jesus tells us that God has not forgotten these persecuted ones. Theirs is the realm of heaven.

The blessedness promised in the Beatitudes is not only eschatological. "O taste and see that God is good; happy are those who take refuge in God" (**Psalms 34:8**, *The New Testament and Psalms: an Inclusive Version*). Those who are experiencing injustice cry out to God and our readings for today remind us that God hears and is near to those who suffer.



Describe an instance where you observed saintly behavior within the LGBT communities and their allies or in a community that was not ostensibly Christian. How do you think God views these persons when they live in ways congruent with God's will?

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We must be careful, however, not to glorify suffering or treat it as a calling, per se. The suffering of the saints is not something to be aspired to, but rather it is the likely result of a life lived faithfully as God has created and called us to be. For our self-protection, we must choose when and when not to bleed. One of the blessings afforded by ideals like the separation of church and state is that we have been largely protected from some of the worst types of oppression. This governing philosophy and those like it open up a greater possibility for the faithful to live honestly and openly without persecution. The LGBT communities in the United States and other Western nations enjoy a relative freedom that many of our brothers and sisters around the world can hardly imagine. We ought to rejoice at such political advancements and work for their non-violent promulgation around the world in order that the suffering spoken of in Scripture might be minimized.



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In what ways do we glorify suffering instead of working to minimize it? What is or isn't the intrinsic value in suffering? Is deliverance from suffering, whether realized or hoped for a justification for suffering itself?

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As we work to minimize suffering, we should also recognize that the testimony we have from Scripture is that the faithful, while diverse and numerous, are not a majority. If we seek to be faithful to God's creation and to God's calling, we must be prepared to contend in a world that does not know us because it did not know God.

**1 John 3**, written around 90-100 CE during a time when there were deep problems in the church, provides a word of hope to those who suffer: "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when Jesus Christ is revealed, we will be like Christ, for we will see Christ as Christ is" (verse 2, *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version*).

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit  
may so move every human heart,  
that barriers which divide us may crumble,  
suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease;  
that our divisions being healed,  
we may live in justice and peace;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Adapted from "Prayer for Social Justice," The Book of Common Prayer.

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## 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 26), Year A

### Authentic Leaders, Discerning People

Who speaks for God? How do we discern God's authentic message when faced with — or tempted to — condemnation, greed, status and corrupted notions of power? This week's passages grant us important clues for responding to such significant questions.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Micah 3:5-12 & Psalm 43 or Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25 & Psalm 78:1-7 \(not included in this conversation\); 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13; Matthew 23:1-12](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"We are constantly reminded that in spite of injustice and deceit, God has been and continues to be our refuge, our help and our hope. As people on the margins, oppression is real. And the Good News is just as real, so is God's love." Vernice Thorn



"My heart is struck by these readings with new compassion for those who 'abhor justice' and are unaware of the burdens they place on others or themselves. I am challenged anew to remember that fear underlies all corruption, greed and condemnation of others." Jacki Belile



“Sign of authentic leadership is whether it seeks to dominate or to nurture.” Greg Carey

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

In an age bombarded with messengers that claim to speak for God, how do we discern messages that are truly life-giving? With the ancient psalmist and the prophet in **Micah 3:5-12**, we cry out against the self-interest, greed and fear which corrupt leaders' motives and rob social relationships of authentic justice.

**Psalm 43** bears witness to the staying power of individuals and communities who cry out for deliverance from unjust condemnation. Praying for truth and light to guide her (lest she be deceived), the psalmist proclaims her place at the altar of God. She seeks refuge in God. She does so in the face of injustices which might tempt her to stay downcast while she struggles for deliverance. Such authentic staying power can only come from the experiences which connect us to our true worth in God's eyes: worship, community and prayer. Far from being a retreat from action in the world, this psalm reminds us of the tragic costs when any are systematically displaced, diminished or neglected in God's house and in God's world.

Today's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities bear the unique burdens of widespread demonization – isolation and condemnation from those who claim to speak for God. In the third chapter of the book of **Micah**, the prophet cries out against those leaders who proclaim divine national blessing while robbing and displacing their citizens and neighbors. Their greed – for material gain, popularity, shallow sources of security – clouds their judgment and confuses the abundance gained at others' expense with the true peace of God. Micah knows “the sun will go down on the (false) prophets” whose moral bearings are so confused (verse 6).

Those who think they lean on God have instead lost their way and selfishly accumulated false gain. Those who would build God's Zion do so with “blood” and “wrong” (Micah 3:10). Are they tempted to an “ends justify the means” mentality about their institutions? The text provides clues for God's alternatives: justice, equity and genuine service which are not perverted by self-interest. Filled with a different Spirit, with justice and courage, Micah dares to speak the truth about the consequences of such injustice and inequity: the impending loss of revelation from God and the ruin of their community.

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How is the Body of Christ blessed by the gifts of the LGBT communities when they live together in authenticity and radical reliance on God in the face of condemning messages? When and where might we, like Micah, demand authentically justice-oriented leadership in church and society? Are we modeling what we're demanding?

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Perhaps **1 Thessalonians 2:9-13** reminds us to ask whether authentic leadership seeks to dominate or to nurture. Paul's gender-specific "father" imagery (verse 11) about his church-planting role calls to mind our tradition's entrenched notions of leadership as domination. Yet, he speaks of urging, encouraging and pleading with a church family that faces discouragement, self-doubt and fear.

Elsewhere in 1 Thessalonians, Paul compares himself to a nurse and to a dependent child (1 Thessalonians 2:7). We are reminded, too, that he is not alone in the labors of the Gospel – and neither are we. Paul reminds the Thessalonians of "our labor" and says "we give thanks" (verse 13). As Paul stakes out his authority to proceed with the letter's encouragements and admonishments, he does so not by appeal to office, fear or divine entitlement, but to service, relationship and a devoted life. Perhaps this is why the Thessalonians accepted what they had heard as authentically "God's" Word and not simply a form of "human" communication. (verse 13). Yet the community must continue to discern both the nature of their own suffering and their responses to God's word.

Like the verses that follow the 1 Thessalonians passage, the gospel in **Matthew 23:1-12** has also been misused as support for anti-Semitism. When we look faithfully and closely at the social context of the passage, we acknowledge that Jesus' critique of the religious leaders of his day is not a Christian critique of Jews. We see in this passage an enduring challenge to demand for all leaders to be authentic and accountable for their just or unjust actions.

We also remember that *we* are all leaders in some way. The call to authenticity here includes practicing what we preach, purifying our hearts' motives for public ministry, and living in relationships of mutuality. When we do these things, we place ourselves in a humble place, remembering that Jesus said "You are all students" (verse 8). Such is the path that avoids imposing our own burdens and needs upon others for whom we are responsible. Such is the path to inhabiting Moses' seat (whatever the leadership role to which we've been called) as if we are on the holy ground of the burning bush. There, we listen anew to the Liberator's call to be agents of justice-making and need not be anything more or less than ourselves.



In what situations are you called to be a leader? What difference does thinking of yourself as a "student" make when you discern or seek to state God's will and way? How and when do you know to speak or act for God's justice?

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We live in a day when “All are Welcome” signs are posted outside so many churches. Too often, however, the signs are only marketing gimmicks when churches do not truly offer God’s hospitality. There is such a contrast between the open invitation and the congregation or denomination’s claims in its ordination position or its work for justice. Where is the authenticity in such self-promotion? We live in a day when leaders of both church and society may clamor for their own acceptance, status, material gain and popularity, and do or say whatever will gain them such security. Believers who do so cloud their discernment of God’s revelation and risk communal ruin. Authentic lives, staying power and justice go hand-in-hand.

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*O God, so many voices would command our allegiance.*

*Self-help voices, nationalistic voices,  
voices of domination and voices of resentment —  
they all claim, "Thus says God."*

*Yet, you are the God of the prophets:*

*Amos and Isaiah, Elizabeth and Anna,*

*Nathan and Elijah, the daughters of Philip and the women of Corinth.*

*Grant us the grace to hear all those voices with responsive ears.*

*Grant us the wisdom to discern true voices from shallow ones,  
from self-serving ones, from deceptive ones.*

*Grant us the grace and wisdom to heed the voices that point us  
toward your way and your community.*

*In Christ's name — but for our sakes and the sake the world — we pray. Amen.*

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## 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 27), Year A

### Faithful, Unsettling Questions

These texts raise unsettling questions. The passages affirm blessing for insiders – good news for those lucky enough to already be "inside." Keep awake, however, as Jesus says. Watch out for how these texts may lead us to use insider-power to name others as outsiders and keep them there!

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25 & Psalm 78:1-7 or Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-16 or Amos 5:18-24 & Psalm 70 \(not included in this conversation\); 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"In the face of human suffering instigated in God's name, we reject all notions of a God who asks for or uses fear in keeping covenant or inaugurating the new age." Jacki Belile



"For Matthew, the sorting out of the wise from the foolish, the sheep from the goats, the wheat from the chaff, always comes as a surprise." Greg Carey



“How do we put away the gods that give us the illusion of safety – those of tradition, privilege and power? How do we move, in spite of our limitations and uncertainty, to serving God with faithfulness?” Vernice Thorn

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

Joshua 24 is a scary text! The passage makes us wonder: Why don't we remember the faithfulness of God? (After all, God is always present.) Which God do we really serve? Do we really believe there is enough? Enough land. Enough faith. Enough room. Enough oil. Enough hope. If there is enough, why do we live in disbelief of God's lavish providence? We have seen the costs of such disbelief and commitments made in fear. We have seen genocide, religious war, slavery-born economies and the scape-goating of others as the “abominations” of the world.

These are indeed scary and humbling texts. They invite us to reexamine the things “our ancestors have told us.” The book of Joshua is revisionist history, a retelling of the settlement of the land from the perspective of those who have already experienced its loss.

In **Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25**, Joshua presides over a rededication that equates God's protection with their past military conquests. This historian sketches a backdrop against which tolerance, syncretism and religious-racial mixing will be held up to condemn the people as violations of covenant faithfulness. Today's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are painfully aware that the “faithfulness” admonished here relies on judgment, separation and even elimination of the others. Sadly, countless preachers and religious folk have chimed in with their own zealous glee to the tune of this jealous God.

“We will not hide them from our children,” the psalmist says of God's glorious deeds in **Psalms 78:1-7**. The psalmist urges a hope-producing recital of God's deeds we have heard and known. What counts, though, as evidence of God? What bears witness to God's faithfulness when we find ourselves in displacement, exile or persecution? Clearly, our connection to the tradition – to the saints and heroes who came before us gathered at significant life-forming places as Shechem, Thessalonica, even Stonewall. Our faithfulness depends, in some way, upon passing on these faith stories of our deliverance to generations yet to come.



What are the significant people and places in our past that remind us of God's liberation and justice?

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Today's texts, however, invite a distinctive question: In this passing on, will we hide the grotesque deeds that have been done in God's name? Bear witness to them? Take responsibility for them? Perhaps it is a greater faithfulness – a watchful, repentant faithfulness – to choose against hiding our sins from our children?

Today, we are still called to be witnesses, against (eventually for) ourselves. LGBT communities are a journeying people, not perfect and yet daring to speak out for God's radical welcome. We desire not only safety and peace, but genuine faithfulness and partnership in God's everlasting covenant. We take our place with ancestors of old, daring to bring our whole stories – choosing to say “yes” to the liberating God who affirms and rescues. Yet we can't stop there. As people of all races, religions, gender identities and abilities, we bear witness that the “sayings of old” have too often confused God's protection with the victories of human violence. Exclusivism has over and over again proven to be a false god, a false security, born only of our age-old fears. We must be ever watchful and aware of this.



What are the ways tradition and the past have been used to preserve inequality and injustice?

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“Watch; keep awake!” The tale of the virgins who have oil, and those who don't, keeps us guessing whether we are “in or out” in **Matthew 25:1-13**. Matthew's gospel typically leaves the question of inclusion unsettled. The passage challenges everyone and here it even challenges the Jesus' disciples! Later in this same chapter, in a similar way, we ponder whether we will be found as “sheep or goats?”

Matthew's story nevertheless calls us to self-examination. We are called in this day to challenge the very idea of rigid categories of dualism, and to reveal the harm they have done to us. The transgender communities, in particular, have borne the cost of our addiction to dualistic and simplistic gender categories. We rightly resist Matthew's discrimination between the insiders and the outsiders, but will we conserve the “oil” which will prepare us to choose otherwise? How will we choose to prepare while we wait for complete understanding and justice?



When, if ever, is division and separation a faithful response?  
What is God's call today regarding “insiders” and “outsiders?”

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**1 Thessalonians 4:13-18** is often misunderstood exactly along the insider/outsider lines of triumphalism and exclusivity we see in Joshua and Matthew. Yet Paul addresses believers who are afraid that they have missed out. Paul articulates a different kind of hope, born in God's

goodness proven in Jesus Christ. Rather than serving the triumphalists' agenda, this pastoral word admonishes us to look to Jesus' life for a pattern of resurrection lived – however partially – in the here and now.

As witnesses, we're indeed called to be watchful and to be ready – to keep our oil burning. How else will we be prepared to recognize the face of God in those who look different and who live and love differently than we do? We need to be ready at a second's notice to demonstrate justice and hospitality toward all of God's people in the here and the now. Such humble, open readiness, such "oil" is sustained neither by arrogant certainty that we are "in," nor by paralyzing fear that we are destined to be "out." It is sustained by a mysterious hope that God's goodness is proven, faithful and trustworthy. The criteria for recognizing this covenantal goodness can be found in the good news of a repentance unperturbed by judgment and exclusion.

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*Gracious and loving God,  
We are witnesses to a long journey, to suffering and to faithlessness.  
It is so hard to wait for changes in our lives and in the world.  
It's difficult to wait for open doors, for equality, for peace.  
During our time of waiting, help us to be watchful and faithful.  
And when we grow weary, quiet our minds and hearts.  
Assure us of your constant presence, O God, and cloak us in your  
boundless love.  
Grant us peace and courage to meet the challenges of this day. Amen.*

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## 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 28), Year A

### Doing Justice while Suffering Injustice

These passages challenge us to be agents of God's justice even while injustice seeks to enslave us.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Judges 4:1-7 & Psalm 123 or Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18 & Psalm 90:1-8 \(9-11\), 12 \(not included in this week's conversation\); 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"The Bible passages for today remind us that peace, justice and equality are God's intention for our lives. They also call us to engage in working toward that end. Real hope is fuel for positive action." Kathi Martin



"While traditional readings of these passages encourage us to use what we have to build the realm of God even when we are short changed, reading from the underside helps us see the benefits in resisting these dynamics of oppression." Randall C. Bailey



“Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are not called to submit to what normative heterosexual society defines for us, but are called to continue the struggle for justice – fearless in the face of homophobia in the church and broader society.” Michael Carden

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

The Bible passages for this week have a “traditional reading” which follows the narrators. The story of Deborah, in **Judges 4:1-7**, is lifted up as the story of a woman leader in ancient Israel. **Psalms 123** begins as an individual lament and ends as a communal lament with statements of assurance that God is a deliverer of those in trouble. This psalm also uses the female imagery for the divine human relation as like a “maid [looking to] the hand of her mistress” (verse 2b). The epistle reading encourages the people of Thessalonica to be vigilant for God’s salvation in Jesus and to encourage and support each other. **Matthew 25:14-30** is known as the parable of the talents, where three slaves are given five, two and one talent respectively. The slaves with the five and two talents double them while the slave with the one talent buries it and gives it back to the master. Being called lazy, the slave with one talent is thrown out while the other two are rewarded with an invitation to a banquet. The overarching message of these four readings is to use what one has rather than being caught in fear. We are called to follow the will of God as a deliverer, even if one is not from the group valued by the society.



Who are the leaders, the Deborah’s, in your community. How do you and others respond to them when they offer advice for addressing community concerns and call for justice?

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One could look at these passages and affirm that God is a God of salvation and hope in times of trouble who commissions Deborah’s to rise up to save their nations. This could be seen as a message to LGBT and other oppressed people. Just as Deborah, a woman in a patriarchal society, was commissioned by God to save her people, so may we be called to leadership even when we are from a group often ostracized by the dominant society.

One could also affirm that just as the followers of the Way in **Thessalonians 5:1-11** — who were oppressed and not of the ruling classes — should hold to the faith that God is with them, LGBT people hold on and stay “in the light”(verse 5). Similarly, LGBT and other oppressed



groups — who are not given their fair share or who are short changed by the system, “given only one talent” — should not bury their gifts, but make the best of their situation and help build the realm of God.



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How have you felt in situations when you were asked to help build an organization or lead an effort which was not LGBT-friendly, but which could have some benefit to your community? What have you learned from that situation?

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There is an ironic twist to many of these texts, especially as they are engaged by people living in situations of extreme oppression. First, one can note that in the book of Judges the men in leadership are all flawed. Interestingly the reading for today from Judges ends in verse 7, with Deborah delivering the message of God to Barak. The lectionary passage omits his response that he will only go to war if she accompanies him. Yet, by including this passage we witness a role reversal. As the story unfolds Deborah and Jael come across as “better men than the men in the narrative” — besting the men at their own jobs.

Similarly, in the parable the talents, you can see how the realm of God cannot function without the work of slaves and their raising the funds for it to succeed. One wonders whether LGBT and other oppressed people are welcomed into congregations which are dying to bring in the resources of LGBT people to enhance the church, even though they are still negatively labeled in homophobic sermons. Another way of looking at these texts, however, could be to see God as aiding us in building the realm of God and encouraging us not being stifled by fear.

One troubling aspect of Psalm 123 and Matthew’s parable is the depiction of God as a slave master who either oppresses the slaves or flourishes from their labor. Although we know that slavery was integral to the societies of ancient Israel and the early church, one has to wonder whether the adoption of this imagery is helpful today.

One possibility, however, for a liberation reading of the passage is raised by New Testament scholars who tell us that in the original context that the parables were used by Jesus as a critique of the established social order. This opens the possibility of seeing the slave with the one talent as the one who resists oppression in the system and refuses to cooperate with the “harsh task master.” In this way, being thrown out, he is the only one who is now free. By the same token, the absence of a “parable of the slave revolt” in the gospels suggests that a resistant reading of these images might be the best strategy for LGBT and other oppressed groups.

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**Prayerfully Out in Scripture**





*God of justice,  
Thank you for reaching through unjust leaders and systems  
to remind us that justice is still a possibility in our lives.  
Guide us as we follow your lead to build communities  
of peace, equality and justice for all. Amen*

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## Reign of Christ Sunday (Proper 29), Year A

### The Great Reign of God's Justice

The reign of Christ challenges us to offer charity to those who suffer, but also more – to join God in the transformation of systems and societies.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 & Psalm 100 or Psalm 95:1-7a \(not discussed in this conversation\); Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



“God sometimes transcends structures to raise up leaders within oppressive systems and empowers them to both enhance and transform society.” Kathi Martin



“The passages for today declare that the current order of the world is unjust, but the promise is that God's order is just. This promise is manifested through the justice we make in our lives and when unjust structures are overcome.” Michael Carden



“While we hold lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender leaders and other oppressed group leaders accountable for caring for our own communities, we must also not lose sight of broader societal structures of oppression which keep us at the bottom of the ladder. Such structures must change!” Randall C. Bailey

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

This is the last Sunday in the church's liturgical year. It ends with passages stressing the reign of Christ and its implications. **Ezekiel 34** comes from the period of the Exile of God's people Israel and is part of a long discourse on the reign of God. The passage begins in verse 15 with the announcement that God is going to become the shepherd of Israel who tends the sheep in ways that will prosper them. The first part of the speech, however, is an indictment of the Shepherds of Israel. They were charged with fleecing the sheep, as opposed to feeding them and tending them. Yet, the reading emphasizes the reign of God and how God will set things right — bringing the sheep into green pastures and feeding them. After the sheep are secure, God will appoint another administrator to ensure the well being of the sheep. This is a hopeful word to LGBT and other oppressed groups who have been hurt by religious leaders in the past. It is also hopeful that the reign of God will bring to them a time when the resources necessary for a good life will be provided.

**Psalms 100**, often used as a call to worship in many churches, seems to be an outline for a thanksgiving service in the Temple in Jerusalem. In that setting, not only is God presented as the guide and shield for the people, the metaphor of shepherd and sheep continues with worshippers affirming that they are the sheep. The call to make a joyful noise to God is continued in worship today by choirs and congregants.



How have you experienced the transition from a shepherd/leader who was hurtful to the sheep/people and then the coming of a shepherd who fed the sheep and brought you into safe space?

**Ephesians 1:15-23** presents the image of Christ as Ruler and Sovereign, sitting on a throne and having all power and authority over governments, systems and the church. The assurance that God's reign was inaugurated with the resurrection of Jesus gives hope to those who have been oppressed by civil and religious forces.

**Matthew 25:31-46** seems to return to the Ezekiel message of negatively critiquing the religious leaders that did not recognize what Jesus was about and what Jesus desired of the leadership. The ones spoken to in the sheep and goats passage are the disciples. They are the ones who either served the people or who did not. The suggestion for a new reign that addresses the concerns of the people is set into place. The hope is that when everyone feeds the hungry, clothes the naked and visits the jailed, then the world and God's realm will be brought together. Although the world's order is unjust, God's order is presented as supporting the needs of the people at the bottom of the ladder.

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In what ways do you experience the church as a place where the “least of these” are brought to the center especially in regard to LGBT people? Where do you see the hope described in these passages lived out today?

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We believe it is important to look even closer at how hope is described in today’s texts. Both the passages from Ezekiel and Matthew are especially relevant today to works of charity and delivering social services. Although these actions are important, especially in helping people in crisis, such services do not directly address the root systemic causes of why people do not have food, drink, clothes jobs or get access to medical care. Charity alone does not challenge us to seek out the root systemic causes of problems afflicting so many people and addressing them. Perhaps this is why so many churches have food pantries, but do not lobby Congress or other governmental officials or insurance companies to effect legislation which will positively address the alleviation of oppression.

These passages may seem to address only internal problems of leadership. The Ezekiel passage, focusing on the Judean leaders (shepherds) does not also hold accountable their Babylonian captors. Similarly, in characteristic fashion the Matthew passage does not address the Roman occupiers, many of whose policies led to the impoverishment of the people and thus the need to be fed and clothed. Perhaps these problems demonstrate the ways in which LGBT and other oppressed people often expect more and are harsher on our own internal leaders than they are on the controllers of the system. In God’s realm, are we not called to do more than take care of our own? Are we not called to join God in the redemption of systems and societies that are so often the very sources of injustice?

The hope ultimately is that we will build systems which no longer crush and oppress people. May the church be in the leadership of eradicating these social conditions and helping to build societies where all can have access to the resources for life abundant and the recognition that all are precious children of God.

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*God of justice,  
Thank you for reaching through unjust leaders and systems  
to remind us that justice is still a possibility in our lives.  
Guide us as we follow your lead to build communities  
of peace, equality and justice for all. Amen*





## Thanksgiving Day, Year A

### Honest Gratitude

We can be grateful for a God who blesses us only in order to bless all people.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Deuteronomy 8:7-18; Psalm 65; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Luke 17:11-19](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



“Do we belong? Where do we belong? How can LGBT folks be assured that we belong when so many who call themselves Christians exclude and judge us?”  
Helene Tallon Russell



“What makes us get up in the morning if not, at least partly, gratitude? We can’t be forced to give thanks, but at some level we may find gratitude inescapable, no matter how life is going at the moment.” Charles W. Allen



“All of these texts remind me that life is lived in the midst of a complex web of relationships where the motivations of mind and heart are revealed in our actions.” Holly Hearon

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

You guessed it — these lessons all focus on giving thanks. Thanksgiving Day is both a national holiday and a day of religious observance for most churches in the United States. It is a day when both civic and religious leaders exhort us to be thankful. Our own reactions may be decidedly mixed. If we're not thankful already, how will any exhortations help? We may also feel a sense of dread at forced family gatherings. We may even be wondering if it is appropriate to celebrate the beginnings of European colonization. Can we be fully honest about all this and still be genuinely thankful? Or is gratitude one of our fundamental “drives,” something that seems to well up in us even when we have every reason to feel resentful? Can we be fully honest *without* giving thanks?



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How do you react to this holiday? Is it one of your favorites?  
Is it something you dread? Is it a mixture of both? Where do  
you find God on a day like this?

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**Luke 17:11-19** recounts a remarkable story of thanksgiving. Ten “unclean” people are made clean as they follow Jesus’ instructions, and one of them, still an outsider in other ways, remembers to give thanks. Holly Hearon feels obliged to interject: “OK, let’s be clear that this is not a text about healing homosexuals.” It is more about thanksgiving than healing.

Charles Allen and Helene Russell find more of a parallel between LGBT people and this other “good” Samaritan. Samaritans told the story of God’s covenant with God’s people in a way that did not match the story that nourished Jesus and his own people. In the eyes of many, this so-called “lifestyle choice” would have made the Samaritan “unclean” even after his leprosy was healed. And yet Jesus commends this man’s different way of being faithful as filled with the wholeness of God. Like the Samaritan, LGBT Christians also “return and give praise to God” (verse 15) in a faith community that argues over welcoming them. They find themselves commended by God for their own varieties of faithfulness.

The story, according to Holly Hearon, reminds us all that sometimes the best examples of faithfulness may be among those who are least like us, however we describe ourselves. It also reminds us, according to both Helene Russell and Holly Hearon, that God cares equally for those who are grateful and those who are not. Jesus marvels at the Samaritan’s gratitude without condemning the nine who did not return. All were healed. Helene Russell points out that Jesus is also affected by the Samaritan’s reaching out in relationship.

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How do you envision the wholeness toward which all healing aims? Can you be whole if you suppress what makes you different from others? Can you be whole if you suppress what makes others different from you? Can you be whole without being grateful? Where does wholeness ultimately come from?

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**Deuteronomy 8:7-18** is, unfortunately, precisely the sort of passage that inspired Europeans to colonize the world: “Let us thank God for putting us in charge of this wonderful land!” Charles Allen wonders, “How would we hear this text if we invited Native Americans, Palestinians and Israelis to our Thanksgiving table? Is there a way for all of us to celebrate God’s generosity and providence when all of us can tell horror stories of violence done to us in the name of the sacred?” We must also be honest about the author of Deuteronomy’s terrifying agenda: Obey God, exterminate other faiths, and you will prosper; disobey, or practice indifference, and you will fail.

But does prosperity reflect God’s blessing and adversity God’s judgment? Recall Christians who blamed Hurricane Katrina in part on a LGBT festival in New Orleans over that Labor Day weekend. Other biblical writers denied this “prosperity gospel” in the name of the same God who prompted Deuteronomy’s author to write, and so must we. The God who led Israel in its journey from captivity into a new land of promise is the God who will *not* allow us to be satisfied with our own prosperity if it comes at others’ expense. This is the God whose generosity must not be forgotten. On that point, Charles Allen acknowledges, the Deuteronomist is right.

Holly Hearon also insists that there is no prosperity gospel in this passage and that, until everybody knows justice, “we have not yet arrived in the ‘land’.” She observes, furthermore, that those of us in the LGBT community who now have it easier than before can never afford to forget what life was like before Stonewall. Life is still like that for far too many of us. Helene Russell also rejects the prosperity-gospel reading of this text and insists that it is about Israel’s relationship to the God who is with us regardless — in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer.

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Where is God in your life when things go well? Where is God when they don’t go so well? What is the best way to thank God in a world where too many still lack the abundance that God has promised?

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Paul instructs us, in **2 Corinthians 9:6-15**, that God never blesses us for ourselves alone. God gives to us so that we can give to others. *That* is how we best show gratitude! **Psalms 65** seems to see nothing but goodness in God’s creation. God is bringing good out of all things. Even when



we are overwhelmed we can still say, “O you who answer prayer! To you all flesh shall come” (verse 2).

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How often do you share what you have received? Do you find joy in that? How often have you been on the receiving end yourself? Try to imagine a world where all are given what they most need? How can we bring that world closer?

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### **Prayerfully Out in Scripture**



Cheerful giver of all good gifts,  
lead us to that place you have promised,  
where all receive what is most needful,  
and none can help but give thanks;  
awaken us to your life-giving presence  
in all that we undergo. Amen.

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