



Trinity Sunday, First Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

OUT AND LOUD

After such a powerful rush of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday, in this week's texts the Spirit is out and loud in the voice of wisdom, that is Woman Wisdom, and in the promises of Jesus.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"In our work for justice not only must we must look for wisdom and the Spirit in non-traditional places, we've got to create ways and places for her to break loose in our communities." -Mona West



"I find myself submerged at the moment in social justice work surrounding the trans- gender community because of the firing of Steve Stanton, the city manager of Largo, Florida. He was fired when he announced his decision to transition to become a woman. I have a natural pull to address that as I consider communities where the Spirit is mediated and made manifest through the works of justice." - David Wynn



"When we encounter God as Wisdom, Woman Wisdom, the ancient patriarchal dog- ma of Trinity is challenged. When we encounter Woman Wisdom we are trans- formed." -Irene Monroe

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Just as bold as Pentecost's rushing wind in Acts 2, "wisdom," or "Woman Wisdom" (as translated from her Hebrew name *Hochma*), takes to the streets with a loud voice in the book of Proverbs. Most of the book is an edited version of various collections of proverbs. Woman Wisdom's speech in **Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31**, however, is part of a group of instructions and wisdom poems found in chapters 1-9.

The setting of the book of Proverbs is the patriarchal family in which the father instructs the son, passing on the wisdom of the sages encapsulated in the form of proverbs. *Hochma* represents wisdom, which has broken loose from this traditional setting of court and family. Instead she can be found in public spaces such as the street and the city gates. Her knowledge is relational, not based on the memorization of a fixed body of knowledge.

Woman Wisdom's presence at creation, her delight in humanity and God's delight in her evoke strong connections with the Spirit. In fact many scholars have understood *hochma* to be a female personification of God's creative and saving actions in the world.

The delight that Wisdom finds in humanity is picked up in **Psalms 8**, a hymn of praise extolling the majesty of God as creator. In this psalm human beings are celebrated as part of God's good creation, crowned with glory and honor.



How has what you "know" about God and God's reign of love and justice come out of relationships with others? How do you see this relational "wisdom" in the faith of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people? Where are the places you find wisdom in addition to traditional structures?

In the New Testament, Jesus is identified with the *hochma* (*sophia* in Greek) of God. In 1 Corinthians 1:24, Paul calls Christ the wisdom (*sophia*) of God. The connection is also especially present in the gospel of John. Like *hochma*, Jesus exists with God from the beginning of creation (John 1:1-5). He speaks in the same fashion as *hochma*: with a loud voice to the masses (John 7:28, 37) and in long discourses (chapters 14-17). The passage assigned in the lectionary for today, **John 16:12-15**, is part of what is often called Jesus' farewell discourse found in John 14:1-17:26. Jesus is preparing his disciples for his physical departure, but promises the comfort and guidance of the Wisdom/Spirit of God. The loud and clear voice of the Spirit will continue in the community of faith, and, like *hochma* in Proverbs, "will guide in all truth" (16:13).

In his letter to the Romans, Paul wants to present his understanding of a life of faith to a

congregation he has not met yet. After stating the theme of his letter in 1:16-17 ("The righteous will live by faith") he goes on in **Romans 5:1-5** to claim that the Spirit will sustain believers who have been reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ. This particular section of Paul's letter lifts up the theme of hope. Even in the midst of suffering, the Spirit engenders hope in the person of faith, reminding all who suffer of God's love so freely given.



How is suffering a place where we glean wisdom and a clearer understanding of God? What are signs of hope in your community of faith as people have struggled with the inclusion of LGBT people in the church?

Often the "historical mediation" of the Spirit is lost when coupled with the Trinitarian concept of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit." One reason for this is the devaluation of the female identity of Spirit in a traditionally patriarchal construct of "Father and Son." But like *hochma*, the Spirit speaks with a loud voice in these passages for today. Elizabeth Johnson has indicated that the Spirit manifests in history anytime a "community resists its own destruction or works for its own renewal; when structural changes serve the liberation of oppressed peoples; when law subverts sexism, racism, poverty and militarism ... wherever diversity is sustained in *koinonia*; wherever justice and peace and freedom gain a transformative foothold" (*She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, p. 126).



In what ways might this female image of the Spirit challenge or enlarge traditional understandings of the Trinity? How might the Spirit — and its theological shift of gender — offer comfort to LGBT people? In the Spirit, how is God calling your faith community to be in ministry, particularly with transgender people?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Holy One,
God, Spirit, Jesus, Wisdom, Hochma, Sophia,
breathe on us, comfort us, teach us.
Give us your wisdom
born of relationships of justice, courage and compassion.
Empower us to boldly live your wisdom
in a world not yet ready
for the fullness of your liberation and loving.
Amen.

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

THE POWER OF OUR TOUCH

Touching across barriers of difference and misunderstanding through acts of compassion reveal the glory of God in our midst.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[1 Kings 17:8-16, \(17-24\) & Psalm 146](#) or [1 Kings 17:17-24 & Psalm 30; Galatians 1:11-24; Luke 7:11-17](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"Touch, holy touch, Jesus' touch extends to those society says 'don't touch.' Go ahead, sisters and brothers, touch with the Jesus touch." -Irene Monroe



"In this week's lectionary texts I am always struck by Elijah and Jesus' willingness to set aside their place of privilege to enter into the experience of those who are marginalized. They are willing to become vulnerable for the vulnerable." -David Wynn



"Our experience needs to be a vital source of authority just as important as Scripture or the tradition of the church." -Mona West

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Widows figure prominently in the passages for this Sunday. In ancient Israel a woman's worth was measured by her procreative ability. She was valued as an unmarried virgin in her father's household, or a child-producing wife in her husband's household. Therefore widows were considered worthless by patriarchal Israel's standards and often found themselves on the margins of society. The only way a widow might have worth was if she had sons, a continued reinforcement of a patriarchal system that valued a woman by the men who defined her.

Because of their marginal status, special laws were created in Israel to care for and protect widows who were poor. These laws were often ignored, however, as evidenced by the indictment of prophets such as Amos (2:6-7).

In **1 Kings 17:8-24** the story of Elijah's encounter with the widow of Zarephath begins a cycle of stories about the prophet Elijah found in 1 Kings 17 through 2 Kings 10. Elijah has just announced to the ruler Ahab that there will be a famine in the land. God then provides food for Elijah through a raven, then the widow.

When Elijah approaches the widow for some food, initially she denies him because her food supply has run out and, as is often the case, the poor are the first to be affected by natural disasters such as famine (or as was the case in New Orleans with Hurricane Katrina). Elijah admonishes the widow not to be afraid, and through her offer of hospitality a miracle occurs in the form of an unlimited jar of meal and jug of oil.



What are some ways lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people's worth are measured in a heterosexist society? How do LGBT people find themselves on the margins of society, the church, as a result of these attitudes? What are some specific acts of hospitality your congregation might perform toward LGBT people and what miracles might result?

Just as the widow escapes one danger — hunger — she is faced with another. She faces the death of her only son. The prophet brings the child back to life through his powerful touch and because of this experience the woman encounters the word of God through the prophet Elijah.

In similar fashion, Jesus encounters the widow of Nain in **Luke 7:11-17**. Women figure prominently in Luke's gospel and widows appear more in Luke than any other part of the New Testament. Often Luke will pair stories with male and female characters such as this one, the

raising of a widow's only son, with the raising of Jarius' only daughter (8:40-56). Like the story in 1 Kings, it is Jesus' touch that brings the son back to life. And in similar fashion, the people respond to Jesus' actions in the same way the widow does to Elijah's actions: God is made known in the action, and Jesus and Elijah are proclaimed God's prophets.

The Torah, Jewish teaching, forbade contact with dead bodies. In both stories Jesus and Elijah risk becoming ritually unclean by coming in contact with a dead body. In both stories Jesus and Elijah touch across the boundaries of clean and unclean so that life will be restored. Often, and especially with regard to AIDS, LGBT people are regarded as "untouchables" by communities who are afraid of difference and who operate from the misinformation that homosexuality and gender variance are "sicknesses." The stories from 1 Kings and Luke provide powerful examples of healing touch based on compassion, not purity.



Can you identify ways in which your congregation is engaged in a healing touch that transcends prejudice? What might a "transgressive act of compassion" look like for you?

The stories of the widows of Zarephath and Nain, as well as Paul's statements in **Galatians 1:11-24**, emphasize the importance of direct experience of the saving and restorative power of God in one's journey of faith. For Paul this happened through his direct experience of Jesus on the Damascus Road (Acts 9), which he alludes to in Galatians: "I did not receive it [the Gospel] from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:12).

LGBT people can take encouragement from these passages to trust our experiences of the saving and restorative power of God. These experiences become the source of our authority as we speak out and touch others for the sake of the gospel.

The psalms assigned for this Sunday underscore the themes of justice for the widow and the orphan (Psalm 146) and healing (Psalm 30). **Psalm 146** is a hymn praising God who sets the prisoner free, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those who are bowed down, watches over the stranger and upholds the orphan and widow. **Psalm 30** is a hymn of thanksgiving for healing from an illness. The congregation is invited to join in this song thanking God for hearing the cries of the psalmist and responding with healing. Both of these psalms lift up the importance of public testimony about specific acts of liberation and healing in the form of praise and thanksgiving.



Who are the "widows and orphans" in your community? What acts of liberation and healing are happening within your congregation?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



God of all,
stir our collective Spirit so that we know
the freedom and wholeness
that comes when we can truly
see and touch
the divine
within each other. Amen.

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

REAL POWER

When marginalized people exercise their power they are often first sexualized, then demonized. Jesus taught that real power can be found in radical acts of inclusion and hospitality.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[1 Kings 21:1-10, \(11-14\), 15-21a & Psalm 5:1-8 or 2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15 & Psalm 32; Galatians, 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"If you want to know how a spiritual community understands God, you need only know who is welcomed unconditionally and who is offered power." -David Wynn



"In this season following Pentecost, the Spirit continues to call the church to a radical inclusion and hospitality that transcends any notion of compulsory behavior (such as heterosexuality or celibacy) which would make God's love and grace conditional." -Mona West



"The ways in which wickedness is often sexualized — and in particular with regard to women, LGBT people and people of color — is its own wickedness. Look again. See God's goodness in women, LGBT people and people of color. See God's goodness, yes, in sex. Amen?" -Irene Monroe

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The texts for this week are full of the names and stories of women in the Bible: Jezebel in the Kings text, Bathsheba (implied) in the Samuel text, the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus' feet with her tears — as well as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza and Susanna — in the Luke text. These stories invite us to take a look at power dynamics in the biblical narrative and our communities.

In **1 Kings 21:1-10, (11-14), 15-21**, Jezebel and Ahab abuse their royal power, which results in the innocent death of Naboth, and, in **2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15**, David is confronted by the prophet Nathan for his abuse of royal power, which has resulted in the innocent death of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah. Of all the characters in these stories, it is Jezebel who is most vilified in subsequent biblical narrative and interpretation. In Western culture, the name "Jezebel" denotes "evil woman." This evil has been sexualized, but in the biblical narrative itself, Jezebel's abuse of power is not connected to her sexuality, but her religious zeal and political ambition. True, in 2 Kings 9 she will "paint her eyes and adorn her head" to confront her enemies, but this is a sign of her royal power and not sexual seduction.

While Jezebel's (and Ahab's) actions were clearly a sign of abuse of political power, the ways in which wickedness is often sexualized — and in particular with regard to women; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people; and people of color — must be noted as we work with these texts. Often when marginalized people exercise their power appropriately they are sexually demonized by those whose positions of "power over" are threatened.



Who has the power within your congregation — formally and informally? How is that power offered? What is your congregation's relationship to power?

In **Luke 7:36-8:3**, the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus' feet with her tears is sexually demonized. She is called "a woman of the city" (meaning prostitute), a "sinner." Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza points out that most prostitutes in the cities of the New Testament world were impoverished and forced into this type of livelihood as a result of their marginal status in a patriarchal society. She claims that "all categories of sinners were in one way or another marginal people who were badly paid and often abused" (*In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 128).

Yet this "woman of the city" is the one who offers radical hospitality to Jesus in the story — and it's not even her house! She crashes the dinner party because she believes she has a place at the table. Her empowered, embodied action makes the host nervous. Simon, a caricature of

respectable religiosity, is upstaged by this woman, "a sinner" whose name we do not even know.

Stories like this one from the gospel of Luke resonate for LGBT people in the month of June as many will gather for pride celebrations. These celebrations have their historical roots in what is called the Stonewall Rebellion. On June 28, 1969, drag queens, "women of the city" and most of them people of color, resisted arrest and continued harassment by New York City police at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village.

In this letter to the churches in Galatia, Paul is refuting those who have come preaching a different gospel. A gospel which claimed that there were compulsory behaviors associated with becoming Christian, namely the circumcision of Gentile converts. In **Galatians 2:15-21**, he claims that whether Jew or Gentile, all have been justified by God's grace in Jesus Christ. In these days following Pentecost, the Spirit continues to call the church to a radical inclusion and hospitality that transcends any notion of compulsory behavior (as heterosexuality and celibacy) which would make God's love and grace conditional.

With the psalmist we say, "Lead us, O God, in your righteousness, and make your way clear" (**Psalm 5:8**), "Instruct us in your way and make your way clear" (**Psalm 32:8**).



In what ways does your congregation wrestle with inclusion? How does your congregation relate inclusion to hospitality? What is your congregation's culture around Eucharist, the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion? Who gets invited to the table? Does your congregation use inclusive language for God and people?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



O Sacred Power,
empowering all who are powerless
and overpowered
by all the forces rising up
to take control of the universe
by taking control of us,
give us the means to change our status
and forgive us our triumphal traits,
for we know
that Yours is the glory
and power forever and ever.
Amen

WomanWitness: A Feminist Lectionary and Psalter: Part Two by Miriam Therese Winter.
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12th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 7), Year C

LOOKING FOR GOD IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

Often we expect to find God in a dramatic show of power, or, more subtly, in what we believe to be the correct definition of "equality." God is always surprising us, showing up in ways we least expect.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[1 Kings 19:1-4, \(5-7\), 8-15a & Psalm 42-43 or Isaiah 65:1-9 & Psalm 22:19-28; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"I've always thought the 'equality' described in Galatians 3:23-29 meant a 'dissolving' of our differences. What I realize now is that true equality in Christ means 'unity in our diversity.'" Mona West



"Being baptized into the Body of Christ does not mean we are homogeneous. We become polarized when we try to homogenize." Irene Monroe



"Why is it that we so fear the different and mysterious when all of creation is a vibrant display of the Creator's meanderings? With all of the diversity surrounding us, as Virginia Ramey Mollenkott would say, 'We can only assume that it is God's preference.'" -David Wynn

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The text from Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia has been one of the most widely used in discussions of inclusivity in the life of the Christian church. **Galatians 3:23-29** is thought by many scholars to be part of a baptismal ritual from the early church which Paul quotes. Interpretations of this ritual vary. For some it describes equality through the dissolution of divisions of the human race that will be realized in God's distant future. For others it describes a goal that all baptized Christians must work toward in the present.

The promise of radical equality in this Galatians passage resonates with many groups of people who have been marginalized because of their race or ethnicity, social status or gender identity. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have resonated with this passage, claiming that the dissolution of the binary notion of "male" and "female" affirms the loving of all people, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Participation in the realm of God is not based on any of these.

While this passage from Galatians has been encouraging to so many for the above reasons, it is also important to read and interpret it with a "hermeneutic of suspicion" — asking tough questions of the text. Radical inclusivity must not result in radical invisibility. As baptized Christians strive for equality for all people in response to the gospel of Jesus Christ, we must recognize the "particular identities" of all God's children. To be baptized into the body of Christ does not mean that we are a homogeneous people. In our work for equality we must see the face of God in various people, in various ways.



How does your congregation embody diversity?
How does your meeting space encourage a culture of unity? How do you cultivate within your congregation an experience of the many faces, voices and expressions of God?

All of the psalms for this week — Psalm 42-43; 22:19-28 — deal with the question of the nearness and presence of God. **Psalm 42-43** asks, "Where is your God?" while **Psalm 22:19** requests, "O God, do not be far away." Our texts from **1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a** and **Isaiah**

65:1-9 answer these questions in essentially the same way. God is not always found in a great show of power (see also Isaiah 64:1-5, to which 65:1-9 is a response). God does not show up in ways we expect or even demand. Instead God is ready to be sought out by those who will simply ask the question, "Where are you?" and are open to the ways God will answer that question.

The story of the Gerasene demoniac in **Luke 8:26-39** attests that God shows up in acts of healing. The response of the townspeople to Jesus' restoration of the man indicates that sometimes the transforming presence of God can make us uncomfortable. In all these texts we are invited to look for and experience the presence of God not in sameness, but diversity; not in great shows of power, but in honest seeking; not in actions that fit into our comfort zone, but in acts of transformation.



How might your congregation answer the question, "Where is God?" How does your congregation declare its experiences of God? What is the most radical experience of God your congregation has had?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Great Spirit,
May we know you as you truly are
in all of your wonder and mystery.
May we be transformed by your vastness.
Amen.

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Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 8), Year C

BOLDLY FOLLOWING WHERE OTHERS HAVE GONE BEFORE

Our faith walk includes claiming the memories and methods of our mentors, of those who have gone before us who have proved God is faithful even in the most difficult situations.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 & Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20](#) or [1 Kings 19:15-16 & Psalm 16](#) (not included in this unit of *Out In Scripture*); [Galatians 5:1, 13-25](#); [Luke 9:51-62](#)



WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"Trying to be straight was a yoke of slavery from which Christ set me free!"
Judith Hoch Wray



"How refreshing to be anchored again in texts that remind us of our first liberation! And how important to remember to hang all our interpretations of Scripture on the call to love our neighbor as ourselves!" Joseph Tolton



"I love that we know what Christ says to those who call condemnation down on us." Rich McCarty

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

In **2 Kings 2**, we are drawn to the depth of friendship between Elijah and Elisha. Especially for people who have had to create new family, we celebrate the model provided by Elisha and his "father" Elijah. The definition of family is changed in the love that we show for one another in the families we create.

We are reminded of stories from our own community in the context of the fight for marriage equality: for example, the story of a woman who was denied the possibility of being present at the time of the death of her companion of 35 years because neither the family nor the hospital recognized the integrity of their relationship. This text calls us to the deep connection and transference of spirit at the hour of departing, and of how sacred that moment can be. We fight for more than legal rights; we fight for spiritual inheritance.

Psalms 77 reminds us that in the midst of the very real experience of not getting an answer from God, we are called to the power of recollection. Connecting this text with the 2 Kings text, we recall how one generation (Elijah) parted the waters and then the next generation (Elisha) did also. We are encouraged not to be afraid of waters we must go through. The chaos of one's life will flee in the presence of God. We celebrate the power of a sense of history, reminding us of what God has done in and for and through those who have gone before us. Cross-generational friendships are so critical to the real success of our movement.



Who are the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of faith who have gone before us, who have parted the waters, from whom we want to learn and whose mantle we are called to assume on behalf of the next generation?

Galatians 5:1, 13-25 brings memories of both treasures and traumas. Paul begins (and ends)

with this wonderful proclamation of grace. Yet, as soon as many people hear the word "flesh" (verse 16), they default into a legalistic and punitive theology. We are reminded that "flesh" was Paul's shorthand for the lower, carnal mind — a life driven by fear rather than love. Galatians 5:14 clearly reminds us that the fulfillment of the law is to love your neighbor as yourself. When all else is hung on this anchor, we hear it more responsibly both for ourselves and for others. It is not freedom just to follow every sexual urge, or to fly off the handle at every offense or to be controlled by strong drink or drugs. That does not mean that we should ignore every offense, or deny our sexuality or never have a drink. Free, embodied people consult deeply with their bodies as they relate to other bodies, with the God who is embodied in Christ.



What has been your experience of moving from a punitive theology where God aims a lightning bolt ready to strike people down to a theology that teaches responsible choices, governed by the spirit of God inside of us?

Boldly following Jesus, we hear **Luke 9:51-62** call us to a different way of responding to those who disagree with us or do not preach the gospel in the way that we think they should. What would happen if the LGBT community and our allies were as motivated to "save" those who persecute us? Those who use the "Christian faith" to condemn others are most in need of "being saved" from the hell they create for themselves.

Boldly following Jesus also may mean finally, fully coming out about our faith and our sexual and relational lives. In Luke 9:57-62 we imagine hearing reasons for not being "out:" "What will my family think?" "After my father is dead, then I can come out." These reasons echo the response of many to following Jesus: "Lord, first let me go and ..." (Luke 9:60). How many closeted gay pastors and church leaders similarly insist they will come out once they retire!? So many reasons keep us and our allies from responding to God's call to us, to walk in integrity, to be all that we have been created to be.



What is it that keeps us from following Christ's radical call to personal and ecclesiastical integrity?

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PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



We call to mind your deeds, O God,
and the faithful acts of those who have gone before us.
Fill us with the courage
to maintain deep friendships,
to forgive those who would condemn us,
to embrace freedom with responsibility,
to walk boldly in integrity in the bodies you have given us,
In the name of the Embodied One, Jesus the Christ.
Amen.

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14th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 9), Year C

OUT OF SILENCE AND INTO MINISTRY

Jesus Christ continues to call us out of silence, out of timidity, into bold ministry.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[2 Kings 5:1-14 & Psalm 30 or Isaiah 66:10-14, 19-21 & Psalm 66: 1-9 \(not included in this unit of *Out In Scripture*\); Galatians 6:\(1-6\), 7-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"When called upon to exercise the gifts we are given, we put on all this 'humility' and discount our- selves, rather than minister- ing with the gifts God is calling us to use." -Joseph Tolton



"Those who are not caring for these strange Christians (the 70 sent out by Jesus and the LGBT community today) are like those who did the same thing in Sodom, refusing hospitality to the strangers." Judith Hoch Wray



"I remember the first time I took a step out of the pit of despair of a closeted life and into the open. I remember going out dancing with friends — the lights, and music and joy! In the spirit of those who were celebrating life and celebrating it with others, God was there!" -Rich McCarty

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Like the ruler in **2 Kings 5:1-14**, we are called to exercise the gifts we are given. Like Naaman, we are challenged to let go of our need for the big and splashy ways that God may work so that we may act on the one little thing that God is calling us to do. For example, while we might want to change the laws of the land, we may be asked to begin by improving our relationships with our own partners.



What difference does deeply believing that you are worthy of being called by God make in how you live your life? What little things might God be calling you to do, in contrast to the big splashy thing?

Psalms 30 came out of the psalmist's very real experiences. We remember the times and places in our lives when things were really difficult, as if we were "in a pit" (verse 3) — and what it felt like to come out of that place. God is now present and pleased with genuine laughter and joy. A lot of dancing goes on in God's presence!

We also heard the prayer that God turns our mourning into dancing (verse 5), to bring people through and out into this sense of joy. While some individuals may experience this, the freedom to be joyfully out is still not available to the whole LGBT community and especially to LGBT communities of color. We hear a call to believe the promise of God beyond the pit, and to not be silent! Remember, the call to "not be silent" is for God's sake, for God's integrity and not just for our sake. To "come out" spiritually and socially is a holy cause, worthy of great action and great celebration.

Galatians 6:1-16 challenges us about our willingness to cultivate the self-restraint, courage and fortitude necessary to be a gentle presence to those who transgress against us. O, the weariness of the work! The same conversation over and over! Yet we are charged not to be weary in well-

doing, to work for the good of all, even those who think of themselves as our enemies. We do not have the luxury of reading this text as if it pointing at "them." We have to read the text as if it is pointing to "us."



What is it like to reconcile with someone who transgresses you and to restore that one in a spirit of gentleness? How does power or relative lack of power (social and ecclesiastical) affect such interactions?

In **Luke 10:1-11, 16-20**, the lectionary presents two movements: (1) the sending out of 70 followers of Jesus with notes about ministry and hospitality and (2) the report of the 70 when they return from their mission. Unfortunately, the lectionary skips over the comments about Sodom in Luke 10:12-15. This omission compounds ignorance about Sodom. Few recognize that Jesus, having named inhospitality, calls attention to the comparable sin of Sodom. Who were the Sodomites? They were persons who refused hospitality to strangers, persons who wanted to use and abuse those angels whom God had sent (See Genesis 17 – 19). So Jesus says, "If you don't get the hospitality right, it will be worse for you than for Sodom, who didn't get the hospitality right."

To the LGBT community and our allies: we, too, are sent out by Jesus to minister and to proclaim that the reign of God has come near. We are responsible for our actions, not for the acts of hospitality or of inhospitality we receive.

How ironic that the King James' translation of the Bible has often been used to interpret "sodomy" to speak against homosexuality instead of inhospitality. It is especially ironic since King James' gay lover, George Villiers, the duke of Buckingham, is entombed near him in Westminster Abby! [See Mel White's *Religion Gone Bad: The Hidden Dangers of the Christian Right*, p. 136-137.] We have an opportunity to move beyond that prime example of King James' own homophobia when we read the entire section, Luke 10:1-20, and include a discussion of inhospitality as the sin of Sodom. Do not allow the lectionary to silence justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people one more time.

Neither can we be silent about the call to accountability. Jesus proclaims that a time of reckoning is coming. This is a wake-up call for Christians sitting in churches thinking it is OK to mistreat people. There will be a day when we all will have to answer for our actions. As Paul says in Galatians, "We do reap what we sow!"



Where are the places of greatest hospitality and inhospitality for LGBT people? In what ways do you — and your own community, whether the church or LGBT community — refuse or offer hospitality to God's people?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Holy and Loving God,
you call us in moments of grandeur and in ordinary time.
You call us forth from the pit of despair
and send us back to those living in its shadows
to announce your grace, mercy and truth.
Infuse us with the gifts of faith, hope and love
so that we might trust you in times of trouble.
Keep the vision of your coming reign before us.
May we live in communion with you
and with all those who bear your image.
This we pray in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

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

FREEDOM IS NOT FAR OFF!

God's word begins in and works through our bodies so we can stand in our integrity to minister to others.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Deuteronomy 30:9-14 & Psalm 25:1-10 or Amos 7:7-17 & Psalm 82 \(not included in this unit of *Out In Scripture*\); Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"We get to be the message-bearers of light to others! We invite lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and others into a legacy that is not closed off, but is open for all." - Rich McCarty



"Sometimes we carry the work on our own backs and forget that, ultimately, God is working through us. When we remember that truth, we can lean on God's mercy and not depend on our own strength." -Joseph Tolton



"When we know that God's word is near, even in our own bodies, then we can boldly stand in our own integrity and minister to others without fear and without shame." -Judith Hoch Wray

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Deuteronomy 30:9-14. What a profoundly important word to our wounded community! For some, especially in the African-American lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, the thought of freedom is so far "beyond the sea" (verse 13) that it cannot be conceived. This text speaks encouragement to keep on proclaiming that good word of freedom. It is near to us, in our hearts, in our mouth (verse 14). It is attainable. The prophetic word to that deeply wounded, deeply closeted community is this: Your freedom is not far off. It is not hopeless. That to which we are being called is not distant.

Surely this word is a healing balm for our community. The work of God is not in what they have been doing to us, but in loving God and neighbor and self. And that is very near!

Psalms 25:1-10 reminds us to trust in God and not think we have to do everything ourselves. Many LGBT people feel alone and some feel they don't have access to their spiritual heritage, because of the way the church has treated us. How empowering to remember, "Oh, yes, this is not about me, but about God and what God is doing!"

The prayer, "Do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies triumph over me" (verse 2) calls us to not be ashamed of who we are or of the spiritual journey we are on. Perhaps this is not only an external challenge, but also an internal concern. We are reminded not to let our own shame and fears triumph over us. Sometimes our greatest enemy is our own fear.



Share a personal story about a time when putting your trust in God led to peace and a new path for your life.

In reading **Colossians 1:1-14**, we considered the similarities between that small, strange (dare we say "queer"?) collection of believers in a frequently hostile society and our own strange collection of faith-filled LGBT people in community. What power is available to us if we can receive the blessings this writer wants to pass on to that struggling first-century Christian community! We have a share in the inheritance of the saints in light! We have been rescued from

the power of the shadows and transferred into the reign of God! This is all for us, not just for someone else.

This encouragement fills us with the desire to have our community writing letters to one another. Those epistles, encouraging one another in the grace that is ours in the midst of these struggles, will be so important to our legacy. Generations later, those who follow us can understand the process we went through.



What would you write in a letter to an LGBT community in another city or state to encourage them in the struggle and to remind them of their spiritual inheritance that will sustain them?

The story of the Good Samaritan, **Luke 10:25-37**, resonates deeply with LGBT concerns. The priest and the Levite could not touch blood or a dead body without becoming unclean and thereby being prevented from going into the holy place. Jesus' story suggests to us that touching one who is wounded is in itself an act of holiness. To go into the brokenness of a person and to touch them is to go into the Holy of Holies. While some people want to run from LGBT people and call them unclean or abominations, we care for one another. We know that kind of righteousness.

Recognizing the holiness of touching the one who has been wounded, we also receive God's charge to focus on those afflicted with HIV/AIDS. Yet, while some HIV/AIDS patients have received adequate attention and treatment, HIV/AIDS remains under-recognized in many communities of color, particularly for women of color. We cannot let it fall off of our radar screen just because it is not affecting the white male communities in the same numbers as before.

Connecting with the message of Deuteronomy 30, we are reminded that the opportunity to live out the law is near to you — in these wounded people. In this ministry to fragile bodies we experience the joy of fulfilling of the law.

We also note that the person who was despised (the Samaritan) acted like a neighbor. Many in the LGBT community frequently reach out to minister to gay and non-gay alike. We are being a neighbor! Remember to own that as a gift we can offer even when we are despised.

Remember that Jesus answered the question, "Who is my neighbor?" (verse 29), with a story and another question (verse 36) in : "Who acted like a neighbor?" We are also challenged to look outward to see where God's church is at work, celebrating acts of kindness wherever we find them, even by those who may not be part of the visible church.



Who are the wounded ones we are avoiding in our community?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Gracious God, our Mother and Father,
we cherish the closeness of your presence.
As we embrace Emmanuel, God who is with us,
we pray that we will act as neighbor to one another.
Manifest yourself in our bodies.
Manifest yourself in our communion with each other.
Manifest the power of Pentecostal inclusion in your church.
This we pray in the name of all that is good. Amen.

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16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 11), Year C

WELCOMING THE GOSPEL IN THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD

Explore the Gospel through hospitality, maintaining the priority of relationship with God and each other.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Genesis 18:1-10a & Psalm 15 or Amos 8:1-12 & Psalm 52 \(not included in this unit of *Out In Scripture*\); Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"The affirmation of the pre-eminence of Christ provides an essential paradigm for biblical interpretation. Scripture rises as Living Word only as it is filtered through the pre-eminence of Christ." -Joseph Tolton



"Workaholism, a disease of the church, is anti-gospel. How easy it is to burn out people because they are wanting to do good, wanting to serve others and just not taking the time to slow down to be in relationship with Jesus and with other persons." -Judith Hoch Wray



"Allowing the Gospel to unfold in my life means not alien-ating my spirituality from my sexuality; it includes letting the Word and Wisdom unfold in a great sexual experience." Rich McCarty

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

In **Genesis 18:1-10a**, we are struck by the hospitality of the house of Sarah and Abraham. We know what is coming next (in Genesis 19) — the violent inhospitality of Sodom. Yet here we have an awesome example in Sarah and Abraham to imitate, using the best of our gifts to welcome people into our homes. And as we extend that hospitality we put ourselves in a place to hear the good news. Over and over, the church has failed to extend hospitality to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community — and the gospel has been lost! Whether or not the strangers are angels, the expectation of extending hospitality to the stranger is not to be dismissed lightly.

The failure of welcome has not only been toward the LGBT community. Both ideological inhospitality among Christian denominations and lack of interfaith hospitality rank high in the list of ways we sabotage the hearing and proclaiming of the good news of God's love.



What good news might we miss because we fail to entertain strangers in our midst graciously?

Rich McCarty reflects: "After listening to **Psalms 15**, I have an image of a great assembly hall. Everyone is there. LGBT persons are there as well as those who set themselves up as our enemy even though they are our neighbor — people who have wounded us economically by firing us from our jobs and who have slandered us in a multitude of ways. We are looking each other right in the eyes. Then I hear someone asking the question, 'O God, who may abide in your holy place?' The answer comes. 'Who shall dwell with God? Those who walk blamelessly ... (long pause), and do what is right ... (long pause) and speak truth from their heart ... (long pause).'
Who is welcome? Everyone hears the answer. Everyone who has slandered us and hurt us is renewed and able to walk blamelessly with us. Everyone who has been unable to speak truth from their heart is freed and able to do what is right."

In our conversation, we writers shared tough and troubling experiences with the promise in Psalm 15:4 that those "who stand by their oath even to their own hurt" shall abide in God's sanctuary. We honor those who speak boldly their own truth about gender identity and/or sexual orientation, and who remain in their integrity even to their own hurt. We also grieve the way some have used this claim to bind people in the oath of marriage and, in the process, to wound

the soul of the one so bound and his or her partner.



What is it like to stand by your oath even to your own hurt? Consider both positive and negative examples.

Colossians 1:15-28. First things first! The Christological acclamation establishes that which is pre-eminent: the firstborn of all creation, before all things, the head, the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, first place. Christ is first! Then all else finds its rightful place: In Christ all the fullness (Greek: *pleroma*) was pleased to dwell. Idolatry raises its ugly head as people and institutions want to set themselves up as the firstborn, the incarnate Word and Wisdom of God and thereby claim the right to dominate and oppress others.

After establishing the solid foundation in Christ, the hearer of that Word can no longer be stuck in the intellectual process. Ministry consists of unfolding the meaning of Christ the foundation. We hear, in Colossians 1:24-28, the call to embody that unfolding or unveiling of the gospel in our body-selves. How am I relating to other bodies, to other selves? How am I opening my tent to show hospitality to strangers? The unfolding of the Gospel is not about proselytizing or telling others what to do. The Gospel unfolds as it comes to life in you and me.



Name some of the ways you want the Gospel to be revealed and expressed in your own life. What will happen to the church when we talk about the glory of this mystery, Christ in you, in our body-selves — even in sexual intimacy?

Luke 10:38-42 invites us, along with Jesus, into the home of sisters Martha and Mary. What does it mean to invite God and those made in the image of God into our homes and provide hospitality? On the other hand, do we know how to rest? For those of us in leadership positions, busy doing what Martha is doing, we hear the call to tend to our personal relationship with God. How we need the balance between work and resting in the presence of God. Maybe we need to call each other Martha from time to time — just to call each other back to that essential disciple-relationship with Jesus.

Mary's choice — relationship and intimate discipleship — will not be taken away from her. In a time of rapidly shifting political climates, even knowing that people's hard work can literally disappear in a moment, those times of intimate community cannot be taken away.

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Call us again, O God, to the ministry of hospitality.
You who have taken us in,
 give us the grace to extend that same welcome to others,
 and grant us the wisdom to come back again and again
 to refresh ourselves in your presence.
May your reign come in us and among us.
Amen.

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17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 12), Year C

DEMANDING FAITHFULNESS

God's call to faithfulness invites us to hold even God to the same standard.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Hosea 1:2-10 and Psalm 85](#) or [Genesis 18:20-32 and Psalm 138](#); [Colossians 2:6-15, \(16-19\)](#); [Luke 11:1-13](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"These readings show us that a critical and questioning faith is not only acceptable, but is vital for a biblically based religious life with integrity. Here the Bible affirms the grace-infused abilities of human hearts and minds and asserts a crucial charge to Christians to prayerful discernment about religious values and truth claims." Helene Tallon Russell



"Faith refuses to settle for anything less than promises kept, justice for everyone and a God who deserves our trust." Charles W. Allen



"The Bible invites us to push beyond words — even its own words — to find a God gracious beyond human imagining." -Marti J. Steussy

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The Bible, our churches and our own lives can present us with images of a God who seems angry, vindictive, abusive or simply aloof. We have been told by some simply to accept these images without question. Taken together, however, this week's lessons encourage us to question these images, to hold God's messengers, and even God, to the same standard of faithfulness to which God holds us. Helene Russell suggests that the good news for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians is that the Bible itself is a complex wealth of traditions that begs us to engage in critical and questioning conversations with it, with each other and with God.

In **Luke 11:1-13**, Jesus teaches us to insist prayerfully on what we need from God until we get it. In response to the request for Jesus to teach the disciples how to pray, he suggests praying for both the state of the world ("your kingdom come," verse 2) and our own needs (daily bread, forgiveness, safety from times of trial). Although the text asserts that "everyone who asks receives" (verse 10), Marti Steussy notes, the story of the friends at midnight acknowledges, as does **Psalms 85**, that sometimes when we're knocking, the door seems slow to open. But we must not let God's seeming aloofness keep us from insisting on what we most need.



When you pray, do you pray for that which is life-giving and spirit-enhancing? Do you insist on it?

Charles Allen suggests that **Colossians 2:6-15** shows us how our common life in the Body of Christ entitles us to question any ruler or authority that might condemn us or put us down: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy or empty deceit, according to human tradition" (verse 8). The writer tells us to remain faithful to what we've been taught, but, Marti Steussy points out, it also assumes that true teaching is freeing, not imprisoning. With any teaching we should ask: Do we experience fullness and life, feel rooted and built up and established? True faith is not miserly but abundant!

Helene Russell notes an apparent opposition between human reason and divine wisdom in the Colossians reading. But a closer look reveals that the author is opposing a particular philosophy that is teaching tenants that are not compatible with the exuberant grace and bodily incarnation that are central to Christianity.



How do you discern between mere human wisdom and Wisdom that is also grounded in faith, in Christ? Is there a difference? If there is a difference, how would you characterize the

difference?

Genesis 18:20-32 shows us a God who invites the forefather of our faith, Abraham, to insist on God's faithfulness. Still, for LGBT folk, Charles Allen remarks, this passage is a prelude to one of the most fearsome texts of terror. Whatever Sodom's sin may be (gang rape? neglecting the poor? — Genesis never explicitly tells us), one wonders why God would need to find even one "righteous" person in the city — to say nothing of 10 — to refrain from destroying it. But it may be part of the passage's function to get us to ask precisely that question.

As Marti Steussy observes, God actually seems to invite the questioning ("Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" Genesis 18:17). Abraham keeps posing the question, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (verse 25). And each time God accepts Abraham's proposed modification to God's plans, thus implicitly granting that the previous plan fell short of true justice. Helene Russell wonders if God is encouraging us to think critically about the norms of justice and judgment and not merely accept decisions and norms on so-called divine authority.



Have you ever argued with God? Could you consider this discourse prayer?

Hosea 1:2-10 is a shocking passage by any standard. God tells Hosea to enter a situation that violates all conventional family values! Worse yet, God's own behavior violates Israel's codes of behavior, in that the metaphor assigns God two wives (Israel, here meaning the northern kingdom in which Hosea prophesies, and Judah) who are sisters (in violation of Leviticus 18:18). Beyond that, we see God enacting the pattern of a domestic abuser, angrily disowning the family and then just as abruptly announcing that all will be fine.

Marti Steussy points out: We are supposed to be shocked by this reading. While we usually hear Scripture read in a kind of holy monotone, the ancient prophets were street-corner preachers who used every trick they could think of to get people's attention. God's words here would likely have been preached in a bitter, angry voice that underscored the horror of what was taking place. The point was to shock the audience into feeling God's pain: "Can't you people see? God feels like a betrayed partner! God's so frustrated God thinks about disowning God's own children!" But it is dangerous language, portraying God as a human too scarred to deal with other people as they are.

Eventually God's covenantal love (*hesed*) seems to win out (Hosea 11:8-9), but Charles Allen insists that we must not use that later passage to "rescue" this one. It really is not OK to get violent with your partner no matter how deeply you feel betrayed. Maybe a modern retelling, a Midrash, is in order: imagine Abraham responding to God. "I know your hurt runs as deep as a betrayed lover, but don't your love and your power to heal run even deeper?"

Psalms 138 celebrates God's faithfulness, but even this festive psalm ends by admonishing God to remain faithful.



Do we always need to "rescue" a passage from the Bible? How do we respond honestly to a portrayal of God that seems far beneath Israel's God of covenantal love?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Holy One,
you have filled us with your love and your passion for justice,
and you call us to settle for nothing less.
Give us the courage to call even you
to be who you have shown yourself to be in your common life with us,
in the name of your embodied Wisdom and life-giving Spirit.
Amen.

WomanWitness: A Feminist Lectionary and Psalter: Part Two by Miriam Therese Winter.
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18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 13), Year C

RICH IN GOD

In our Western, postmodern world of wireless e-mail, worldwide Internet, million-dollar condos, aggressive warfare and hectic schedules, do we put so much value in our stuff and personal agendas that we miss the things that really matter?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23 and Psalm 49:1-12 or Hosea 11:1-11 \(not covered in this week's conversation\) and Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"Jesus' message in the gospel lesson is as clear as it is challenging for us: One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." -Lori McPherson



"There are a host of things that we allow to distract us from a deeper relationship with God. Admitting to ourselves and others that truth is difficult, but necessary." Elcindor Johnson

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

“Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them” (**Psalm 107:4**). This passage unfortunately reflects the spiritual reality of the lives of many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Many experience life in a spiritual wasteland, cut off from faith communities they serve and love. The violence of being labeled “abominable” is unbearable for many and the fervor that was once directed toward service to God and others is directed toward other lesser gods. Some become addicted to vices we are all aware of like drugs, alcohol and sex. But many turn to the more respectable “vices” of career, wealth and image that, although less destructive to the body, are no less destructive to the soul. All vices are pursued in order to feel good or at least feel better. For many LGBT people who have been uprooted from the anchor of faith and told they are denied access to God because of who they are — it is understandable that they might seek out other ways to fill that void.

This is the dilemma that Jesus speaks to in the parable of the rich fool in **Luke 12:13-21**. The word “fool” sounds rather harsh, but it is directed at those who purposely and willingly turn away from God, not those who are driven away by the cruelty of others. Nevertheless, the point Jesus makes is the same for all — richness toward God is the only type of wealth that ultimately matters. Seeking out comfort in anything but God is futile whether that thing is a bottle or a bank account. Jesus’ warning here is not against wealth per se, but against the false security that wealth and possessions can breed. “One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15b). We could replace money and possessions with anything we use to seek identity and comfort in rather than God. The same futility is still present.



What are the things you see people in your community attempting to find meaning and comfort in besides God? Why do you think they are drawn to those things in particular?

The readings for today remind us of the seriousness of God’s call on our lives. The reading from **Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14** makes the often-repeated reminder that “all is vanity” — in the end, anything short of God simply will not satisfy the longing that we have for wholeness in our lives. “Vanity” means something is empty or valueless — translated from the Hebrew word *hebel*, literally as “breath” or “vapor.” The writer of Ecclesiastes tells us again and again that all is vanity.

Psalm 49:1-12 reminds us again that all of our material wealth will simply pass along to those left behind when we die — we can’t take it with us. The psalmist starkly reminds us we all will face that moment of physical death. What, then, in that moment, will be the significance of all of the stuff we have accumulated? Will it be the “vapor” that Ecclesiastes has told us about? Or will we have already decided to put our treasure in God and God alone?



As LGBT people of faith, how much does our culture encourage us to invest our time and energy in things that are vanity — a “vapor?” How should we respond to these prevailing pressures within our own spheres of influence?

For many LGBT folks, our image of God is burdened with the baggage of unkindness from those who claim to represent God. This is a common hallmark of our spiritual journeys. Those that find a way back to faith and faith communities often do so through arduous effort and carrying the spiritual scars of their past. Even so, we must still reckon with the call of Christ. The persistent message of Jesus is threefold: (1) that the coming of God’s dominion is imminent, (2) that the decision to be made is of the utmost seriousness and (3) that God’s call upon our lives is radical. And so whether it is a gentle nudging or a tremble-inducing wake-up call, God’s love is the source and richness toward God is the goal.

The world is full of many things that distract us from maturing in our spiritual lives. Some we are driven to by the cruelty and shunning of others. Some we are drawn to because our own particular passions and insecurities. In all cases, God’s love is present and inexhaustible. In the end, richness toward God is the only thing that will satisfy.

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Holy One, who satisfies our souls with good things,
Empower us to set our minds on you,
not on things only of the earth.
Fill any emptiness and fear with your grace.
Give us the courage to set aside that which perishes,
and to live in freedom —
speaking truth,
offering bread, shelter and comfort to others,
trusting in you, our Freedom, our Truth, our Bread.
In the name of Jesus, giver all good gifts,
Amen.

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Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 14), Year C **HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS**

Find a comforting, secure home in a heart faithful to God —
manifested in liberating action.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 1:1,10-20 and Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23 or Genesis 15:1-6 and
Psalm 33:12-22 \(not included in this week's conversation\);
Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16; Luke 12:32-40](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"We live in the midst of hurting people and each of us possesses some degree of power to provide assistance." Elcindor Johnson



"A very wise person once said, 'We are willing to settle for just-as-much perfection in life as will get us by.'" Lori McPherson

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Housing has been a hot commodity over the past few years. Not only have we seen the average price of homes rising we have also seen the average size of homes increasing. An article in the March 2007 issue of *Sojourners* magazine noted that the average size of the single-family home has more than doubled since 1950. The article quotes architect and writer Sarah Susanka's belief that the growth in the size of housing is a misdirected search for meaning. "We are searching for a sense of home, but we haven't developed a language to help define the qualities we seek," Susanka said. Her point is relevant to today's lectionary passages. Jesus summed it up succinctly: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (**Luke 12:34**).



What do people in your community treasure? Why do you think that is so?

The things we center our lives around are good indicators of what gives us comfort and meaning. For some it is a physical home and the material goods with which we fill it. For others, it is their children. For some it is civic and social involvement. Another popular choice is religion. Religious practice might seem to be the best of all places to put our trust but it too has the potential to become little more than empty rituals (**Psalms 50:7-8**).

Our reading from **Isaiah 1** provides vivid examples of God's attitude toward rituals that are disconnected from the deeper spiritual realities they signify. We gravitate toward the tangible because we ourselves are tangible. Material things comfort us because we are partly material beings. But **Hebrews 11** reminds us that what genuinely pleases God is faith (trust in God). In King James language, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (verse 1). The "substance" of faith is the manner in which we live our lives. Our actions often betray our words, but they always portray our hearts. What we are passionate about, what we give our attention to, what we strive for is the undeniable "evidence" of where our hearts lie.

As lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, it is important to keep this in mind when reading **Isaiah 1**. In this chapter we find words of caution given to the Southern Kingdom of Judah via the example of Sodom and Gomorrah. Far too many of us are familiar with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and how the story has been used to condemn LGBT folks. Isaiah 1, however, corrects the distortion in the common usage of this story. Isaiah sends a warning to Judah because the nation is displaying character traits that are similar to those that brought destruction upon Sodom and Gomorrah.

What are these character traits? It is useful to remember the axiom that when a passage of Scripture says not to do something it is because people in the writer's community were doing that very thing. The reverse is also true. In Isaiah 1:16-17, the prophet tells the people to "cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." Ostensibly, the people were guilty of neglecting to do these very things and thus were behaving in the same manner as Sodom and Gomorrah. It is worth noting that there is no mention of sexual misconduct here. In fact, the interpretation of Sodom and Gomorrah's wrongdoing as being of a sexual nature did not occur until hundreds of years later. Sodom, Gomorrah and Judah were guilty of neglecting the most vulnerable among them — the foreigner,

the oppressed, the widow, the orphan.



Who are the vulnerable people in your community?
Are they being cared for?

When our actions as individuals, as a community and as a nation put greater distress on the most vulnerable among us, we show that our hearts have found a home in something other than God. LGBT people can attest to the disheartening and disillusioning experience of being branded as “abominable” and cut off from families and faith communities. However, LGBT people, like others who have been ostracized from communities of faith, are also sometimes guilty of turning their own pain on those who are even more vulnerable within their communities rather than surrendering their pain to God’s redemptive power. We must remember that it is the redemptive power of God that enables us to work toward liberation for ourselves and other oppressed people. May we all find a comforting and secure home in a heart faithful to God manifested in liberating action.



What kind of “home” does God provide for LGBT people? What kind of “home” are people of faith, all people of faith, called to offer those who suffer from injustice, violence and disregard?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Holy One,
Open our eyes to see those who are hurting in our own community;
Open our hearts to seek out the ways
to be conduits of redemptive love
in the lives of those around us.
Be our home,
Open your doors wide and, in your grace and justice,
receive all your children.
Amen.

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

JESUS: A UNITER AND A DIVIDER

Jesus reminds us that peace, God's distinctive peace, is not always welcome and is often met with violent resistance

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Jeremiah 23:23-29 and Psalm 82 or Isaiah 5:1-7 and Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19 \(not included in this week's conversation\); Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"Our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender forerunners encourage us — just like the author of Hebrews — to 'run with perseverance the race that is set before us,' no matter who we are. Can we claim our place today, or one day, to be part of that 'cloud of witnesses' for those who will come after us?" -Lori McPherson



"As difficult as it may be to admit, LGBT people in the United States live in conditions of freedoms that most of our brothers and sisters around the world cannot fathom." -Elcindor Johnson

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Our readings for this day remind us that there are some things worth dividing over. Indeed, Jesus reminds us in **Luke 12:49-53** that a part of his mission is one of judgment and division. In the passage, Jesus borrows the image of fire (verse 49), itself a symbol of judgment, to make this point. This division can even enter into families where members will turn against each other. In a related passage, Jesus uses even stronger imagery. “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). It is important to note that despite the strong imagery of these passages, Jesus never resorted to violence against others and he never encouraged his followers to resort to violence.

But this passage begs the question of why Jesus would want to use such violent imagery when he was peaceable. One reason is to remind us that a life as a follower of Christ will inevitably lead to conflict. Jesus is certainly the “Prince of Peace,” but that is far different from peace at any cost. The peace that Jesus sought to bring is first and foremost a peace with God. Such a peace will lead to peace among humanity, but we must remember the direction in which godly peace flows. It flows first from a life lived in communion and obedience to God and then outward to the world around us. What Jesus is reminding us is that such a peace is not always welcome and is often met with violent resistance. Jesus’ words are cautionary for those who take a life of discipleship too lightly.



How does the image of Jesus bringing “fire” and the “sword” challenge or connect with your own image of Jesus? How are such images comforting and disturbing to those in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community?

To get a vivid picture of this we can look at **Hebrews 11:29-12:2**. The writer runs through a list of ancestors in faith. It should be noted that this is a difficult passage because some of the references are to incidents of violence and destruction. Even so, we also see in the list those who were tortured, imprisoned and killed for their faithfulness. Others “went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented.” The “world was not worthy” of these saints (verse 37). It is often difficult for us to relate to passages such as this because of the relative religious freedom we enjoy.



Who are the “witnesses” that have inspired you and your congregation? Did they bring division or reconciliation? What price did they pay for their faith?

Even we in the LGBT community have remarkable freedom to worship as we see fit despite being cut off from larger faith communities. It is important for us to recognize that despite our difficulties, we have the ability to live our lives with a level of openness and security that many LGBT people in other parts of the world can’t even imagine. Even when denied many of the same rights our fellow citizens enjoy, there are LGBT people around the world who would

accept the level of freedom we have without complaint.

The point is not to accept what we have, but to recognize that as we advocate for our equality we should not be surprised when we meet resistance. Our encounter with God affirms our full humanity and it is from that place that we must speak out. As we speak from this place, we will meet resistance from those unwilling to hear God's voice as it relates to us. We also must not be so concerned with our own rights that we neglect to advocate for others around the world who live in fear and oppression. "Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" (**Psalms 82:3-4**).



What is your prayer for LGBT people who suffer outside of our own country? In what ways may God be calling you or your congregation to work for LGBT justice and equality beyond your local community?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



God of justice,
we have communed with you
and heard the word of love:
We are known and accepted.
Empower us to live out our charge
to spread that word unashamedly and fearlessly.
Give us strength when we confront the reality
that spreading the word of your love and peace
does not always create a peaceable and loving reaction in those we speak to.
"Is not my word like fire, says God,
and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (Jeremiah 23:29).

Let us then
"lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely"
to run the path that Jesus and
our ancestors in faith have blazed before us.
So be it! Amen.

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

RESTORERS OF THE STREETS

God's people are about the renewal of community. This renewal is not simply a matter of gentrification or beautification, but of communities transformed in God's justice, equality and compassion.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 58:9b-14 and Psalm 103:1-8 or Jeremiah 1:4-10 and Psalm 71:1-6 \(not included in this week's conversation\); Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"True faith is not just about personal piety, but it is also a matter of caring for those in need." -Elcindor Johnson



"Anything short of God simply will not satisfy the longing that we have for wholeness in our lives." -Lori McPherson

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

This week, we are confronted again with God's demand of care for those in need and for personal piety as the basis for a life pleasing to God. In **Isaiah 58:9b-14**, the command to Israel was that they must both offer food to the hungry and refrain from trampling on the Sabbath. Today, Christians do not adhere to the Sabbath as such, but the principle of setting aside a regular time dedicated to God's worship and fellowship with others is certainly as applicable to us as it was to Israel. This is probably truer for us in our digitally linked, but interpersonally disconnected society. When we practice both care for others and commitment to regular spiritual practice the promise is that we will be called "repairers of the breach and restorers of streets to live in" (verse 12).

Many of us work very hard to secure as safe a living situation as our income can afford. We often strive to move to neighborhoods that are "safe." This is not a bad thing, especially when we are concerned about the welfare of our loved ones and the educational opportunities for our children. Even in the tiniest of neighborhoods there are hurting people who may not be in financial need, but are impoverished nonetheless. And just because some have been able to "escape" less desirable streets, we are called to not be preoccupied with our own interests and pursuing our own affairs (verse 13).

The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community has often been "restorers of streets to live in" in urban areas across the country. "Follow the gays" is a cliché real estate axiom. Even so, it is only when we combine care for others and care for our own personal spiritual growth that we approach a life pleasing to God and create the type of restoration that God desires.



What streets in your community are in need of restoration? How do we go about that restoration in a way that is consistent with God's character?

God is working on the side of those who are oppressed. We see that clearly exemplified in the life of Jesus. One such story is the gospel reading for today (**Luke 13:10-17**). Jesus heals a woman who is disabled on the Sabbath, and that raises the ire of the religious leaders: "How dare Jesus work on the Sabbath." Jesus answered them with the observation that these very religious leaders untie their oxen or donkeys and lead them to water on the Sabbath yet they would deny this woman being loosed of her ailment on that same day (verse 15).

Jesus' words told the truth and the leaders were shamed. In this act we see that caring for the needs of others is actually an integral part of our worship and spiritual growth. Service is a form of worship. Even in the midst of our worship services there are opportunities to minister to the needs of others. And when we minister to the needs of others outside of our church buildings we are creating new sacred spaces.

In many ways, LGBT people of faith have been creating sacred spaces throughout our history.

Community centers and health clinics are just a couple of examples. Even the purposely nondescript bars that open in hostile communities are places where isolated people gather to socialize and realize that they are not alone.



Is there a situation in your community where you could create a new sacred space by ministering to someone's needs?

The God who shakes the earth's foundations and the one who is a "consuming fire" (**Hebrews 12:29**) is the very one who also "works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed" (**Psalms 103:6**). The One who was revealed in mighty acts to Moses and the people of Israel is the same One who is "merciful, gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Psalm 103:6).

This is the God who forgives, heals, redeems and satisfies. But God's renewing is not like a spa where we go to get pampered. We are to work to make sure that our own pleasure does not become the focus of our lives. We are to be "repairers of the breach and restorers of streets to live in." Indeed, the promise of God is that if we practice God's priorities we will in fact find delight beyond measure.

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Grant, O God,
that your holy and life-giving Spirit
may so move every human heart
and especially the hearts of the people of this land,
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, Amen.

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Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 17), Year C **MUTUAL LOVE TRANSFORMS**

Our addictions to power, privilege and social standing are overturned by the power of mutual love — the power of God with us.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Jeremiah 2:4-13 & Psalm 81:1, 10-16 or Sirach 10:12-18 & Psalm 112; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"These readings inspire us to feel confidence in God's love for us. But they also remind us that we don't truly know God's ways, especially when it comes to others. The best approach is to trust that God will tell us where we stand." Helene Tallon Russell



"In these passages, we hear complaints, warnings, celebrations and wise bits of advice as people are already upheld and challenged by a love that will never desert us." -Charles W. Allen



"God has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you' (Hebrews 13:5). Paste that on your mirror." -Marti J. Steussy

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

"The beginning of pride is sin," says **Sirach 10:13**, and that is what Christians often say too. But Marti Steussy asks, "Is pride always a bad thing?" Those of us who are labeled "defective" often draw strength from lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender pride celebrations. These are occasions when we give to one another the place of honor ("Friend, move up higher") in a wider culture that would keep us, at best, in "the lowest place" (**Luke 14:10**).

Pride seems more of a problem for those who already enjoy privilege. And when we hear some of this week's lessons speaking of God enthroning the lowly in place of established rulers (**Sirach 10:14**), we may feel justice is finally being served. But Charles Allen points out that turning the tables, or changing places, can't be the last word. If we do not pay attention to the systemic ways some of us are placed on the margins, we remain addicted to a system that always demeans someone. We also hear about a power that undoes this addictive cycle with the celebration of mutual love, which we have come to believe is the very nature of God. When status-seeking gives way to mutuality, we find even more reason to "Say with confidence, 'God is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?'" (**Hebrews 13:6**).



Is "pride" a bad word for you? Can we have pride in ourselves without demeaning somebody else? What language would you use to celebrate the immeasurable goodness, in God's eyes, of you being you and nobody else?

Luke 14:7-14 looks at first like a piece of homespun wisdom (see similar advice in **Proverbs 25:6-7**): avoid embarrassment by letting your host seat you; invite the poor to dinner and earn brownie points at the resurrection. Marti Steussy asks if there is more here than that. Is it trying to imagine a society where people are valued for more than what favors they can return? The answer, Charles Allen suggests, lies in the way this passage fits into the entire pattern of Luke's gospel and the shape of Jesus' ministry: we "gain" our lives by letting them go into God's common life, and our "reward" is a risen life freed from addictions to power, privilege or status, not something we can deposit in a bank account or hang on our walls.



Whom do you invite to your gatherings — people who can promise you a good time? What might you gain from spending time with people who don't even pique your interest?

Helene Russell finds the outlines for such a common life, a life of mutuality, in **Hebrews 13**. The

writer envisions a community where strangers and prisoners are welcomed and remembered, whose members are not just willing but glad to share whatever they have. While some might read "honoring the marriage bed" as a put-down of same-gender marriage (Hebrews 13:4), Marti Steussy suggests that this admonition is about the community acknowledging and providing a supporting framework for intimate relationships. Mutual love includes respecting appropriate boundaries where intimacy is involved. Charles Allen regards this practice of mutual love as nothing less than practicing the presence of God. The foundation for this practice is God's promise, "I will never leave you or forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).



Does God's promise not to leave us ring true for you? Are there moments when you wonder about that? When have you felt God's presence? When have you felt God's absence — and what kept you going?

God may promise not to abandon us, but **Jeremiah 2:4-13** portrays God's dismay at being abandoned by God's people. God appears as the vexed survivor of a failed marriage to Israel and an about-to-fail marriage to Judah. God asks in verse 5, "Just what did I do wrong?"

In this and surrounding passages the gender of God's spouse keeps shifting between feminine and masculine! Following Kathleen O'Connor's lead in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Abingdon Press, 2003, p. 1059), Charles Allen notes that Jeremiah may be using the unfaithful female figure to shame male readers. It's a dangerous move that can perpetuate patriarchy and spousal abuse. But whatever the rhetorical purpose and its risks, if God's spouse keeps switching genders that does *not* make God look very heterosexual!

Helene Russell sees a connection between Israel's rejection of God, the fountain of living water (verse 13) and the "haughtiness" that the other texts denounce. God's people reject God, not for another god, but for no god, period (verse 11)! They reject living water, Marti Steussy observes, in favor of digging leaky pits.



When those you love ignore how you feel, how do you respond? Can you name your own pain and anger? Can you keep the door open to reconciliation?

Psalms 81 images God, perplexingly, as both a breast-feeding mother and a punishing warrior. Marti Steussy asks, "Why can't we imagine God loving us without God having to hate someone else?" Like Jeremiah, the psalmist depicts God as longing for Israel to let God be the caregiver and protector. But protection is understood as violence toward outsiders. "What can anyone do to me?" (Hebrews 13:6) becomes, in effect, "Here's what God will do to them."

Psalms 112 comes closer to the mood of "What can anyone do to me?" The psalmist takes delight

in enemies' perishing, but it seems to be their own anger that causes them to pine away (verse 10). For the most part, although this psalm is paired with **Sirach's** warnings against pride, it is in fact its own pride celebration from which God's people can draw encouragement. But again, celebrations like these can be addictive and oppressive if they are not shaped by the mutual love of God's common life.

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Gracious One,
you meet us,
hold us and challenge us in our life together with others;
transfigure our relationships so that mutual love may continue
until we find ourselves welcomed into the highest place
you have reserved for all your children,
through your Word and Spirit.
Amen.

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Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 18), Year C **CHOOSE LIFE - THE COSTLY CHOICE**

God calls each of us to come out as God's faithful and life-affirming people, regardless of the cost.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Jeremiah 18:1-11 & Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18 or Deuteronomy 30:15-20 & Psalm 1; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"Underneath the daunting admonitions of this week's lessons we hear a summons to choose whatever is life-giving, even if our choices are controversial." -Charles W. Allen



"The Bible sees life — this-worldly, embodied human life — as a good thing, a gift from God. Choose to enhance that life for yourself and others." -Marti J. Steussy



"God invites us into an inclusive community of love and commitment. In this new community the codes for relating to each other are turned upside down, and the means of intimacy are transfigured." Helene Tallon Russell

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Anyone who has come out as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender knows how costly that can be. Friends and family may ask, "How can you do this to us? How can you be so selfish? How can you turn your back on the life we'd all hoped for?"

People who came out as followers of Jesus often got the same reaction. They were accused of despising, even hating their friends and family. Jesus seems to confirm everybody's worst suspicions: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" (**Luke 14:26**). We suspect this is a case of hyperbole, an attention-getting overstatement. But hyperbole or not, it doesn't blunt the harsh reality that if we are to be true to the life we were meant to have, if we are to choose life (**Deuteronomy 30:19**), people who can't deal with it, even those we love, are likely to call us hateful. Coming out is costly. It's going against the grain, and we shouldn't be surprised at the degree of resistance we encounter.



What has it cost you to be honest about who you are and who you were meant to be?

We may wonder, after reading **Jeremiah 18:1-11**, if some of the resistance we encounter will come from God if we dare to choose the only life we know how to choose. We see a God whose promises look conditional: whatever God may have promised us can be taken back if God doesn't like our response (verses 9-10). We hear echoes of blaming 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina on alternative family values. But the governing metaphor here, Charles Allen points out, is of a potter who does *not* give up when the clay doesn't hold its shape. Instead of discarding it, the potter comes up with a new shape "as seemed good" (verses 3-4). This is how Jeremiah comes to see the hand of God intimately involved in the events of his day. Even though Jeremiah uses the potter metaphor to warn that God is "shaping evil" against God's people (verse 11), the original metaphor tells us that God is still at work, even in these disastrous events, finding a new shape for God's people "as seems good."

The portions of **Psalms 139** echo this sense of God's intimate, inescapable involvement in shaping each of our lives, with perhaps some ambivalence on the psalmist's part. Marti Steussy also detects hints of a protest of innocence, perhaps against accusations of blasphemy: "God, *you*

know me." In any case, we are each of us "fearfully and wonderfully made" (verse 14). Helene Russell believes that both the potter metaphor and the psalmist convey that God has melded God's lot so intimately with us that our being affects God's being.



How might God be shaping your life? If you do not turn out "as expected," can you detect the goodness in the shape your life actually takes?

Like Jeremiah, **Deuteronomy 30:15-20** and **Psalms 1** warn of dire consequences if we do not follow God's laws. Again, those of us who practice alternative family values have heard passages like these quoted against us more than we care to remember. But Charles Allen responds that, if we accept the later rabbinic and Christian consensus that "the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13:8), then we can delight in the law and can agree that to love another is to choose life, and that not to love at all is to choose death.

Marti Steussy observes that this chapter from Deuteronomy was likely added to the main body of the book after the fall of Jerusalem and is actually a summons to a new beginning on the part of God's people. Helene Russell understands "choose life" as a choice about our very identities, whether we and our descendants will ourselves become a blessing or a curse to others, or to one another.



How can the life you choose become a blessing, not just for you but for those around you? Are your choices shaped by what your life is telling you about your love for another?

Philemon 1-21 is a controversial letter, to say the least. Since the time of Chrysostom in the 4th century it has been cited in defense of the institution of slavery, but Helene Russell, Marti Steussy nor Charles Allen find no endorsement of slavery at all. Some recent scholars question whether Onesimus was ever a slave to begin with. The letter does not say that he belonged to Philemon, and Paul's request that Philemon receive Onesimus back "no longer as a slave but more than a slave" (verse 6) is ambiguous. "As" might indicate a virtual condition, not an actual one, and the same verse seems to indicate that Onesimus and Philemon are brothers not just spiritually but "in the flesh." (See Allen Callahan's introduction and commentary in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003], pp. 2147-2150.)

In any case, even if Onesimus was a slave (as most commentaries still conclude), Paul considers him "no longer as a slave but more than a slave (verse 16)," and he is not referring to his spiritual status alone but also to his physical status. Just as noteworthy is Paul's decision to appeal to love, to persuasion, rather than to assert his authority. Paul's tone is intimate, reflecting a vision of an alternative family, and an alternative social structure, to prevailing norms, and he is calling Philemon to come out as one of those alternative family members.



What draws you to keep listening to the Bible enough to read "Out in Scripture"? Are you drawn by a sense of duty or by love and persuasion, or is it a bit of all the above?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Speak to us, O God,
through our loves and through our lives;
give us courage to choose what brings life
to us and others around us,
even when many deride us.
Form us into communities founded on love, not duty.
Amen.

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

AN EXTRAVAGANT GOD

God is more welcoming than we can imagine, not less.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 & Psalm 14 or Exodus 32:7-14 & Psalm 51:1-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"Jeremiah says God will destroy. Moses protests against divine destruction. Which prophet do we stand with?" -Marti J. Steussy



"These readings rebuke judgment upon others as unworthy of God's extravagant love and show that with God anything is possible. With God, a person can always return or be returned to the flock, to the good path that leads to blessing and life." -Helene Tallon Russell



"God loves outrageously. So can we!" -Charles W. Allen

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Some of our lessons suggest that God is far more loving than we can imagine. But in other lessons, especially **Exodus 32:7-14**, God looks far less loving, even less just, than we can imagine! Hearing these lessons read together is a challenge for any listener.

Luke 15:1-10 offers two parables that speak of the extravagance of God's love. Both the shepherd with the lost sheep and the woman with the lost coin resort to outrageous, even impractical measures to find them. Once they do find them, they put on celebrations that seem excessive. That, Jesus claims, is how God responds to repentant sinners (verses 7, 10). The parables themselves, however, do not speak of sinners. The sheep and the coin are lost, but their owners are the ones who lost them. The sheep and the coin are unrepentant. The extravagance of God's love is not contingent on our response. It remains immeasurable.



Have you ever gone to outrageous lengths to find something you had lost? Were you being "irrational"? Or were you responding to something immeasurable? Can you ever gauge the value of another person, or of yourself?

1 Timothy 1:12-17 echoes these parables. While not written by Paul himself (in most scholars' judgment), it is meant to reflect Paul's reaction to his encounter of the risen Christ. Paul (as portrayed) considers himself "foremost" among sinners (verse 15) not just because he failed to keep the law, but because he was "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence" (verse 13). He was guilty of hate crimes. Even though Paul acted out of ignorance, he remains astonished that God through Christ would actively seek him out. God's love for him "overflowed" (verse 14). He finds it to be extravagant, immeasurable — one might call it God's preferential option for God's very opponents. **Psalms 51:1-10** likewise counts on the "abundant mercy" of God (verse 1) to work beyond calculations of just deserts.



How do you respond to those who exclude you, perhaps even violently, out of their own ignorance and self-righteousness? Beyond measures we should enact for the protection of the vulnerable, how do we and our congregations make room for the extravagance of God's love even for those who wish us harm?

Psalms 14 sets a different tone that approaches the despairing tone of **Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28**.

Although the psalm seems to start out as a denunciation of fools who deny God, it quickly becomes a denunciation of everybody: "there is no one who does good" (verse 1). Are any wise? No, everybody has gone astray (verses 2-3). All people, apparently, are fools. Then without explaining why, the psalm begins to mention these evil-doers' victims. They turn out to be God's people, the company of the righteous, the poor whose refuge is in God (verses 4-6). Where did these poor, righteous victims come from? We're not told and are left to infer that maybe the psalmist has been exaggerating.

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 is even more forbidding. Because of the foolishness of God's people, God appears as an implacable force, a wind with no purpose other than to destroy (verse 11). In contrast to last week's reading, God's terrible plan cannot be altered under any circumstances (verse 28). There are exceedingly slight glimmers of compassion (verse 11, "my poor people") and hope (verse 27, "I will not make a full end"), but the overall tone is one of despair.

Jeremiah's reaction to this vision is not included in this selection, but it should be noted, as it forges a link between Jeremiah and Moses in today's alternate readings. In verse 10, Jeremiah dares to say, "God, how utterly you have deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying, 'It shall be well with you,' even while the sword is at the throat." While Jeremiah finds himself powerless to avert impending disaster, he does not hesitate to accuse God of violating God's covenant just as surely as God's people have violated it. It does not change the result, but his protest on behalf of his people is on record.



When disaster seems unavoidable, how do you respond? Is it a waste of time to cry out in protest? To whom do you turn?

The exchange between Moses and God in **Exodus 32:7-14** may be the most troubling passage of all to some. Or it may be the most appealing, depending on one's view of the Bible and of God. Moses lives up to the distinctively Jewish understanding of faithfulness by arguing with God — and winning! God complains to Moses, "Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely" (verse 7), and gets ready to destroy them. But Moses reminds God that these are *God's* people, whom *God* brought up out of the land of Egypt (verse 11). He warns that God's reputation will suffer if God should destroy them now (verse 12), and he reminds God of all the promises made in the past (v. 13). What is the result? God changes God's mind (verse 14). It's a dramatic exchange, to say the very least.

If this story is taken at face value, Moses comes off looking better than God. But perhaps the point of the story is that, since Moses refuses to take God at face value, we can at least refuse to take *stories* of God at face value, even biblical stories, if they present God as less than the extravagantly welcoming God — the God that Moses and Jesus and Paul knew.



When people invoke the name of God to demean you and your relationships, where can you find

strength to stand up to them and say, "That's not so!" Have you been able to do this in the past? Is anything keeping you from doing that now?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Outrageously loving God,
you treasure our company more than we can fathom,
more than we can treasure even ourselves;
Let your love overflow in us and through us,
so that nothing can make us doubt your glad welcome.
Amen.

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Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 20), Year C **SUFFERING DISCERNED**

Where do we stand today with respect to suffering? Are you called to a ministry of healing or prophetic justice or both?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 & Psalm 79:1-9 or Amos 8:4-7 & Psalm 113; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"With whom do we usually identify – those who are wealthy or those who are poor, the powerful or powerless? How do we identify ourselves in light of these Scriptures?" -Jen Glass



"When we proclaim the word of God for today, we must discern the images and questions most appropriate to the place in which we plant our feet." -Greg Carey

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

These are vivid images: A city ruined. Birds plucking dinner from the bodies of God's people. Blood poured out like water around the holy city. No one left, even to bury the victims.

Left with no healing ointment, finding no physicians in the holy places, a mourner longs to weep: "O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears" (Jeremiah 9:1).

These images from **Psalms 79** and the prophet **Jeremiah** grab our attention. They press Israel's misfortune before our eyes, calling us to stop and stare. The Bible does not glide by human suffering. Usually, it names suffering and sits with it, calling us to identify our own relationship to those who suffer. Sometimes our most important choice in biblical interpretation involves deciding who we are — where we are in the passage — and where we stand in relation to the text.



Where is suffering around you? How do you connect with it?

Both psalmist and prophet mourn along with their people — God's people — the Israelites. Facing their society's devastation, the overthrow of its holy city, they call out for divine intervention. Prophet and psalmist identify themselves among the survivors, when survival itself hardly seems a grace. They stand within the people of Israel.

The questions they ask also express their identification with God's suffering people. Their questions challenge God who allows, perhaps causes, Jerusalem's devastation: "How long, O God? Will you be angry forever? Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?" (Psalm 79:5). "Is the God not in Zion?" (Jeremiah 8:19). "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?" (Jeremiah 8:22). These questions seem as prayers of accusation to an almost silent God.



Have you ever accused God of causing human suffering? When, if ever, have you expressed your own anger at God?

In **Amos 8:4-7**, another prophet sees things differently. A Judahite, Amos is preaching to the "other" people of Israel. Standing over against — not with — them, Amos employs other images. He poses other questions. Trampling the needy, corrupting weights and measures, purchasing the poor for silver and the needy for sandals, these images accuse not God but Israel's wealthy. When Amos voices the questions of the people, they do not challenge God, rather, they indict the wealthy. "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?" (Amos 8:5). Amos identifies over against the people.



In what ways do we identify with the prophet Amos? In what ways do we identify with the wealthy?

For today's preachers, teachers or leaders knowing where to stand presents a most pressing challenge. Do we join the voice of the psalmist and Jeremiah, standing alongside the victims of violence and oppression? Do we find ourselves with Amos, condemning the agents of oppression who — pursuing wealth and power — grind the bones of the poor to make their own bread? Or are we the wealthy who pursue privilege ignoring the suffering of others? When we proclaim the word of God for today, we must discern the images and questions most appropriate to the place in which we plant our feet.

As for images drawn from our lives today, options abound: A wounded soldier trying to build a new life or, conversely, an Iraqi with several empty beds in the home. A poor woman who takes her cancer to work every day, a cancer that would have been detected had she received health care. A lonesome college student, trying to find one person she can trust with who she truly is. Standing with these victims requires engaging the myriad ways in which we victimize one another. That's a daunting decision in its own right.

One of the most difficult passages to interpret in the entire Bible, the parable of the dishonest manager (**Luke 16:1-13**), also presses the question of identity. The parable lacks a hero, and it's not entirely clear why Jesus praises the manager. (Long ago one scholar suggested that it looks as if Luke took the notes from four different sermons and tacked them onto the end of Jesus' story.) As the story begins, the manager stands between the rich man and the impoverished tenant farmers. He identifies with the rich man, who provides the manager's meal ticket. The manager is not innocent. Yet when the manager finds his position stripped from him, he has to find a new place to stand. No longer may he give his loyalty to the rich man, who bears him no good will. So he joins the poor, the debtors who have no hope of ever repaying their obligations. Could it be that the manager's wisdom resides in the choice to identify himself among the victims and the powerless? It's all a matter of with whom and how we identify.



With whom do we usually identify – those who are wealthy, those who are poor, the powerful or powerless? How do we identify ourselves in light of these Scriptures?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Holy One,
It is so easy to name the sufferings of life – my pain,
my neighbors' pain, the pain of the world.
Do you see our suffering? Do you feel our pain?
Help us to identify the suffering, to name the pain
and to turn towards you.
We ask you to do miracles – heal the pain and take away suffering,
And yet even if you don't, come to us.
Hear the world cry. Come to us.
Amen.

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

BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING

Can we imagine ourselves truly blessed by God? What difference will that blessing make in how we live our lives?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15 & Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16](#) or [Amos 6:1a, 4-7 & Psalm 146; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"What if we imagined the story of the rich man and Lazarus in a contemporary context and with new characters?" Greg Carey



"If only more lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people heard this message: Love God, call on God, find shelter in God, for God is with us, even when people are still denied welcome in church, even when refused basic human rights, even when tortured and killed for being LGBT. God is our shelter and refuge. We need not have fear." -Jen Glass

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in **Luke 16:19-31** shocks us because its logic is so direct. One person enjoys wealth and pleasure in this life, while another suffers poverty and disease. In the next life they find their fortunes reversed. They have switched roles. Can it be true? Does God really reverse the fortunes of the haves and the have-nots? Is the truth so direct? So stark?

What if we imagined the story in a contemporary context with new characters, one character straight and the other gay? Let us suppose the straight person kept the gay one from church and refused the gay one access to communion, ordination and the blessing of a holy union or marriage. Perhaps the straight character thought the gay one was disordered, evil, unworthy of God's love and salvation. The straight one used the Bible against the gay one and condemned all who were gay. How ironic then that the straight person, upon death would end up in Hades, while the gay one would be carried away by the angels.

We could imagine another switch, not the straight and the gay one, but perhaps the gay and the straight one. Whatever role we privilege, the focus remains how we treat one another. Those of us in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community can certainly vilify certain persons and communities as our "enemies." However, if those "enemies" sat outside our gate wounded and in need of help, we would be just as guilty for walking past them and not caring for them as some others have done in some cases to us. Our lives in Christ, no matter who we are and whom we love, are meant for doing good, for being generous and sharing.



How do we imagine this story played out today?
What role do we play?

In **Jeremiah 32**, the prophet finds himself switching places as well. Notorious in the sight of King Zedekiah as the prophet of Jerusalem's doom, Jeremiah encounters the word of God. Jeremiah is no longer to condemn the holy city; instead, he is to purchase a field. This purchase guarantees the prophet a place in Jerusalem's long-term welfare. That's a switch.

God informs Jeremiah, "The right to possession and redemption is yours" (Jeremiah 32:8). These words, addressed to a bleak situation, may speak to marginalized church communities today. We still need prophets through whom God encourages such communities to claim themselves as "church." Many communities of faith live out of a trunk, renting space from some other organization or church — outside the traditional model of building — yet they are truly church. Many of these faith communities are served by and serve those often marginalized — including the LGBT community. What is God's word to such marginalized churches? God has a place for you. Furthermore, God's redemption is for all people, including the LGBT community. Jen Glass emphasizes, "What has been taken from us in the past, our right to attend churches — our being sent into exile, if you will — it's time we get it back. Our right of possession and redemption is God-given. How may we, like Jeremiah, invest in God's future?"



How important is "place" to a community of faith?
How important has "place" been to the LGBT
community? How might "place" convey a sense of
God's redemption and blessing?

Psalm 91 is among some people's favorite psalms. Many take comfort in it as well. It seems the key here is learning to live in the shelter of God. God is large enough to shelter all of us. God's refuge and fortress is big enough to encompass all of humanity. This psalm doesn't promise God's protection to those who are straight, those who are sinless, or those who lead perfect lives. All who dwell with God will receive God's protection. They need not live in fear. With God there is no fear of the night or the disease of the darkness.

There was no HIV/AIDS pandemic when this psalm was written. However, for the LGBT community who has lived through the early years of AIDS, many have found shelter in God during very hard times and many deaths. God has been a refuge for those who have suffered and survived, and for those who still do suffer and survive as AIDS rages on today. Those who love God will be delivered. The ones who love God are protected. No conditions apply to God's love and protection, only that one love God. Jen Glass expresses a hope that, "If only more LGBT people heard this message: Love God, call on God, find shelter in God, for God is with us, even when people are still denied welcome in church, even when refused basic human rights, even when tortured and killed for being LGBT. God is our shelter and refuge. We need not have fear."



When have you turned to God hoping to find a
shelter and refuge? Have you found comfort?

Do the realities of church hierarchy, patriarchy and slavery set the boundaries of God's favor? **1 Timothy** has been used to reinforce such oppressive systems as expressed in the command to "permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" (1 Timothy 2:12). Yet in this letter we also are reminded that the key to a faithful life is righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness (1 Timothy 6:11). Our lives in Christ transcend the favors of material wealth. On the contrary, what really matters is how we cultivate our souls and how we treat others. As in Psalm 91, no qualifications attend these blessings.



What evidence is there of righteousness, godliness,
faith, love, endurance and gentleness in your own life
and the life of your congregation?

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PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Almighty God,
our lives are in your hands.
We thank you for the gift of our very lives
and for the many blessings you provide.
As you continue to bless us,
may we dwell in the shelter of your abundant love
and may you inspire us and provide us with the strength
to be good, righteous, generous, gentle and godly.
Amen.

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

WHEN ORDINARY IS GOOD ENOUGH

What does God expect from us in tough times? What is enough?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Lamentations 1:1-6 & Lamentations 3:19-26](#) or [Psalm 137](#) or
[Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4 & Psalm 37:1-9; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"The gift of seeing beyond the present, with its very real disorientation and loss, may not seem a wonderful accomplishment. Yet in the face of genuine mourning, such faith proves itself enough." -Greg Carey



"For those of us who find some glimmer of hope in our lives and are able to wait upon God, we are able to dwell in the assurance that great is God's faithfulness." -Jen Glass

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The book of **Lamentations** brings Jerusalem's devastation and desolation directly into our presence. The book brings to voice the longing and grief of God's people. They are people in exile in Babylon away from their beloved Jerusalem. God's people are like a widow who "weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks." She has "no one to comfort her" (Lamentations 1:2). How many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folk echo the sentiments of this lament?

Sometimes when we admit our true selves to the people whom we consider our family and friends, we find that our old ways of being in the world — our connections with others and our dreams for our future — seem shattered. Many of us are exiled from our place of home. The truth about our lives at times proves too much for others to bear. We lose a great deal. During these times, we become deserted and alone; we are outcast, we weep bitterly, we are betrayed, we are in distress and affliction, and there is no one to comfort us. How does one find hope in the midst of such loss?



What are the kinds of devastation and desolation that LGBT people have experienced throughout their history? When and where have we found hope?

Lamentations also promises deliverance — God's steadfast love never ceases; God's mercy never comes to an end; new every morning is God's faithfulness (Lamentations 3:22). The promise is "God is good to those who wait and seek God" (verse 24). For those of us who find some glimmer of hope in our lives and are able to wait upon God, we are able to dwell in the assurance that great is God's faithfulness. The devastation and desolation does not last forever, especially if we are able to erase the old tapes of our unworthiness and devalue by society and truly believe the love of God. When we are able to patiently wait through the tears and distress and find people and communities that positively affirm our lives and loves, then we truly know that God is our portion. God is good to us and God's love and mercy never end. The gift of seeing beyond the present, with its very real disorientation and loss, may not seem a wonderful accomplishment. Yet in the face of genuine mourning, such faith proves itself enough.

Psalms 137 gives voice to full-throated lament, complete with the symptomatic desire for vengeance. It depicts the taunting of Israel's captors along with the very real despair such humiliation evokes. This psalm sometimes has a negative reputation because it envisions infants dashed against the wall. Nevertheless, the psalm offers one of those rare scriptural expressions of honest frustration and grief. The psalmist holds fiercely to the memories of Zion and perhaps the hope of its restoration. Perhaps, given the psalmist's circumstances, this honest memory is enough.

The reading from **2 Timothy** likewise encourages us to wait on God, to be patient through hard times and sorrows. We really have no reason to despair, even when life gets tough, for God has given us power, love and a sound mind. God calls us to holiness, according to God's purposes

and grace. Is it possible to name our sexual orientation as part of God's plan and as grace for our lives? We are not to be ashamed, especially those of us who are LGBT and same-gender-loving people, for we only need to know and love the one who gives us power and love and place our trust in the Holy One. This is Good News we may share with the world, as Paul was compelled to do.



Over time, how has God led you in your understanding of your own sexuality? How might "waiting on God" connect with coming to understanding sexuality as part of God's plan and as grace in your life?

Luke 17:5-10 combines two sayings that are odd enough in their own right, and baffling when taken together. First, Jesus encourages the disciples that even a tiny amount of faith is sufficient to do great things. Then Jesus tells them that — like slaves — they should not expect praise for ordinary acts of faithfulness. What holds these sayings together? Could it simply be that ordinary demonstrations of faithfulness are sufficient in God's sight?



How would you characterize your faith — a big faith or small faith? How would you characterize the faith of your congregation? In what big and small ways are you called to express faith?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Awesome God, may we know you as the one who loves us,
the one who is good to us,
the one whose mercy never ends,
and the one who offers us hope.
Even amidst the devastation and desolation today,
you call us to holiness, grace and trust.
In our distress and affliction,
fill our lives with power and strength —
the kind which only you can provide. Let us not be ashamed
to call upon you
and may you empower us to share the Good News
of how you positively affirm our lives and
how you greatly love us with all those we encounter.
Amen.

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

THRIVING ON THE EDGE

God creates a home in the midst of exile and challenges us to welcome those we are inclined to exile.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 & Psalm 66:1-12 or 2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15 & Psalm 111; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"A recent visit to Arizona, where migrants are dying in the desert, has given new insight into my own passive complicity as an exiler." -Sharon Benton



"Jeremiah speaks to my surviving AIDS for now 20 years, encouraging me to 'Live while I yet live.'" -Mark Lee



"I'm struck by the irony that the very people we choose to marginalize or exclude may, in fact, be messengers from God for us." Ken Pilot

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

In **Jeremiah 29**, the prophet addresses the Judean community in exile following the first fall of Jerusalem in 597 B.C.E. Jeremiah's words do not necessarily provide hope that the exile will end in some future deliverance, but rather encourages them to live fully in the present situation. The image of "exile" may not fully fit the experience of many lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people (or abuse survivors, those who grew up in addicted households or children of war), who have never experienced a safe homeland from which to be exiled. Yet "exile" does speak to a deep longing for a safe, secure "place like home." The challenge Jeremiah places before us is to make a fruitful living as life, in all its complexity and tragedy, keeps on happening. Far from calling the Babylonian exiles to hunker down for the duration, he challenges them to positively engage the community with which they find themselves. The place where "all will yet be well" may not be where we might expect.



Despite the rejection of LGBT people by much of the church, where have you found a secure faith community where "all is well"? Or how might you help create such a home-like place?

Both Luke's story of the healing of the lepers in **Luke 17** and the **2 Kings 5** account of Namaan's healing speak to those who experience double stigmas. From the point of view of the Israelites, that Namaan was a foreigner was bad enough, but being afflicted with leprosy made him doubly unfit for the community. The one leper who came back to Jesus was not only a leper, but also a Samaritan, which placed him in a vulnerable position even in the exiled community of lepers. Despite multiple human barriers, God brings healing and restoration.

It might be easy for LGBT readers to identify themselves as the "heroes" of these stories, as people who have suffered various oppressions and received gracious healings. But we need to place ourselves so the text addresses us with challenges as well as comforts. Communities often define themselves in terms of who they are "not"; even oppressed communities set such boundaries for themselves. LGBT communities are no different. Who has not quietly scoffed to their friends at someone who dressed differently ("fashion-challenged"), drawn sharp distinctions based on education ("rednecks" or "snobs"), or dismissed someone whose mannerisms we didn't like ("too femme ... too butch")? Not to mention obvious prejudices of race, age, health or gender!



Who would find themselves unwelcome in our community? Who do we condemn to "exile"?

In these passages, the voice of God comes from unlikely people. Namaan listens first to a slave girl, and later follows the advice of his servants. Jeremiah is locked in conflict with other prophets who are foretelling a short exile and imminent divine deliverance for the people, his lone voice seeming traitorous to his own country. A Samaritan leper shows saving faith. The apostle Paul is himself in prison, yet his gospel is spreading "unchained."



Is God just unpredictable enough that through the very people we are inclined to exile God's word will come to us? Who are the unlikely voices that speak God's word to us?

Each of these stories occurs in an "in-between" place for the primary participants. Jesus meets the lepers on the border of Galilee and Samaria. Jeremiah writes from an as-yet-undestroyed Jerusalem to exiles in Babylon. Namaan is asked to bathe in the foreign — and muddy — Jordan. Paul is chained "like a criminal." In these edge-places, people are freed from their usual conventions to receive God's faithfulness in unexpected and extravagant ways. Even the nine lepers who did not return to Jesus were healed!

Working with this theme of an "in-between place" may help to resolve the tensions inherent in the last verses of the hymn cited in **2 Timothy**. The possibility of a believer denying Christ and being denied by Him could strike terror to a tender conscience. Who is always faithful? We live in between faithfulness and faithlessness. This frightening edge is counterbalanced by the promise that even "if we are faithless, Christ remains faithful."

Christ reconnects the exiles with living community. Jesus sent the healed lepers to "show themselves to their priests" (Luke 17:14) to certify their healing and restoration to the community. (Presumably, the Jewish lepers to a Jewish priest and the Samaritan to a Samaritan priest.) We are unwilling to push the necessity of priestly verification of a person's acceptability for community. However, if the priest is seen as a spokesperson of the welcoming community (rather than a gatekeeper), Jesus' command fits.

There are times when a welcoming community should make public its welcome, to counteract layers of condemnation outcasts may have suffered. Public celebrations such as pride festivals, holy unions and marriages, Coming Out Day and individual coming out or renaming ceremonies all provide opportunities for communities to make their welcome explicit.

When our community is functioning at its welcoming best, how do we restore those who have been outcast and exiled to wholeness?

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PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Our Creator beyond us,
Yet you dwell among us,
We praise you.
We pray for the home of promise
 (which we've never fully known)
 as we work to be your welcome in the world.
Grant us this day abundant life.
And forgive us our exiling
 as we pray for the peace
 to forgive those who exile us.
Lead us out of our need to create boundaries,
 and delight us in the diversity of life!
For you are the Keeper of Community,
 the Source behind our deepest longing,
 and the One who provides an eternal Home.
Amen.

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

LOVING THE LAW AGAIN

Often we think about law as rigid and external — something "bad" people break and "good" people keep. These passages invite a shift from an external perspective of law to an internal one. It is written on our hearts, God-breathed, and transforms us for the work of justice.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Jeremiah 31:27-34 & Psalm 119:97-104](#) or [Genesis 31:22-31 & Psalm 121](#); [2 Timothy 3:14-4:5](#); [Luke 18:1-8](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"God is our God, and we are God's people. These words are good news and a covenant sealed upon our hearts by internalizing God's law." Vanessa Owen



"We can't be afraid to nag God, to let God know of our struggles, even as we continue to believe in God's faithfulness and love for all." -Sara Rosenau



"This Scripture is *our* scrip- ture." -Yvonne Zimmerman

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The book of Jeremiah is about catastrophe and survival, destruction and rebuilding, grief and joy. Jeremiah's prophecy is the reflective outpouring of very troubled times; times not unlike our own. Jeremiah's prophetic purpose is to help people make sense of their tragedy, recover their identities and move toward the future.

In **Jeremiah 31:27-34**, we see an ideological and theological shift in the understanding of being in relationship with the divine. In God's previous covenant with the people of Israel, the law was an external experience. The words of God's law once written on stone tablets needed to be passed on from one generation to the next through teaching and rigorous instruction. In this text Jeremiah is prophesying a new future where *all* people will live in unbroken covenanted relationship with God. God has made this new relationship possible by shifting the religious experience of God's law from an external enterprise to an internal one. God tells Jeremiah, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33). The fundamental theme of the text is that *all* of Israel will live in a restored covenanted relationship with God. And that restoration will include everyone, "from the least to the greatest."

Both **Psalms 119:97-104** and Jeremiah 31:27-34 are speaking to an experience of relating to God in a new way. The Israelites were an exiled and oppressed people who, in these texts, are being promised the gift of hope. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are offered the same promise. God is *our* God, and *we* are God's people, and the pronouncement of this new covenant has been sealed upon our hearts through the internal transformation of divine law. We are claimed and marked as God's children and that claiming can never be undone!



How do you live out being claimed by God and knowing that God's divine law has been written upon your heart? In what ways is God calling you to be a prophet of hope in the midst of the political and religious tensions of our time?

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5 is one of those "zingers" — a passage that is sometimes thrown at LGBT people because we understand scriptures differently than those who perceive it literally or those who refuse to be open to God's work through LGBT people. The Human Rights Campaign's online article, [The Bible and Homosexuality](#), shows how many LGBT people engage passages from the Bible often used against LGBT people. For many, such an LGBT-positive perspective is not consistent with faithful interpretation of Scripture.

However, in the course of our conversation together we realized that, in fact, that Scripture is our

Scripture. LGBT people are not excluded from affirming this Scripture's teaching that "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteous" (verse 16). We are not excluded because this affirmation does not mean that we believe we should robotically "do" everything we might read about in Scripture.

Sometimes, rather, Scripture is useful for showing us precisely what *not* to do, and expresses ways of relating to one another that God would not have us follow. For example, consider "texts of terror," stories of desolation, violence and grief, as those found in Genesis 16:1-6; 21:9-21; Judges 11:29-40; Judges 19:1-30; 2 Samuel 13:1-22. (For more information on texts of terror from a LGBT perspective, see Michael Mazza's article [Texts of Terror, Texts of Hope](#)). The usefulness of Scripture, in other words, is not confined to a single simple interpretation, but requires prayerful, honest and passionate seeking of God's way in passages that are sometimes contradictory, complex or even oppressive.

Many LGBT people and their allies have become accustomed to Scripture used against us as a tool of exclusion. Too often the dominant culture treats being Christian and being gay as mutually exclusive options. Might not attitudes such as this one constitute contemporary manifestations of the "myths" of which Paul warns Timothy? Against those who persecuted the early church for its "transgression" of the Jewish law, Paul exhorts Timothy to continue in faith, even — if not especially — when Scripture is being used against him. LGBT people and their allies here find affirmation that our tenacious hanging on and stubborn insistence that the Bible must surely also be for (and not just against) us turns out to be both God-given knowledge and as well as opportunity for ministry!



What kind of authority does Scripture have for you?
How has Scripture been used as "terror" and how
might it also, even the same texts, be transformative
in your community?

The parable in **Luke 18:1-8** provides a balance to Psalm 119 which speaks of loving and meditating on God's law. Luke asks us to love the law by continuing to demand justice, even when it seems hopeless. Jesus tells a story about a widow who keeps insisting and demanding justice from a powerful judge. The judge "neither feared God nor had respect for people" (verse 2) and yet even he responds to the widow's persistent cry. His response is characterized by his own selfishness. He grants justice so the widow will leave him alone. Yet his actions are also an example of how God uses even corrupt powerful people to do God's good work. The story provides encouragement to people of faith who work tirelessly for peace and justice for all people.

If an unjust judge hears the cry of the oppressed, how much more will God grant justice to God's beloved people when they cry out? This is encouraging to LGBT people and their allies who are crying out to powerful institutions such as our places of employment, our churches and local and national governments. God will answer God's people in their suffering and sorrow, and God will use everyone to do God's justice work. But Jesus asks us to remember to pray, and cry out to God as well. We shouldn't be afraid to persistently call upon God, to voice our grief and

frustration even as we continue to testify to the reign of God on earth.



What is your lament that God needs to hear? What might be an unlikely place where you see God at work for justice in the world?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



God,
even while Scripture is used as a weapon against us,
enlighten us with your Word of Spirit and Truth.
Help us to find your Spirit at work
in the most difficult passages.
Transform us and place your seal upon our hearts,
and may we use your law for love.
Equip us with minds, bodies and hearts
for your work toward the holy reign
of justice, love and peace.
Amen

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30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 25, Year C

I'm Better Than You!

Many people mistake social standing with blessing – or lack of – as a determination of one’s standing with God. The truth is, however, there are no favorites when it comes to God’s divine initiative and righteousness. All people, irrespective of status and class, are part of God’s people.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Joel 2:23-32 and Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“When a person is designated as righteous, it means that she is in right relationship with God. How this relationship is understood may vary somewhat in the New Testament, but in all instances, the writers maintain that God initiates the relationship.” -Michael Joseph Brown



“These texts invite the reader to look beyond a simplistic system of holy debits and credits and really examine what righteousness means.” Bridgette D. Young



“These passages remind us that the only requirement for God’s love and acceptance is that we are open to receive it. We do not serve a God of prohibitions, prerequisites and exclusion.” Shively T.J. Smith

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Today's gospel reading appears easy to understand at first glance. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in **Luke 18:9-14** is a favorite for those who want to chastise others regarding their sense of entitlement. Yet, this parable is about more than who should be humbled and who exalted. Embedded in this story is often overlooked message about being in true relationship with God.

The Pharisee described in the parable could not be any more different than the tax collector. He is a deeply religious individual, who has committed himself to the practices of his faith. We must take into account here that Judaism, unlike some understandings of Christianity, is a religion of loving observance. Performing specific practices expresses the intent of one's heart and faithfulness. In Judaism, three practices were (and are) considered to be of central importance: fasting, almsgiving, and prayer. This is why the Pharisee puts such an emphasis on them: "I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income" (Luke 18:12). Notice that he speaks of fasting and giving while he is praying. For him it makes sense that because he does what is expected in living a faithful life, he considers himself righteous or justified.



What's the function of the Bible in your life? Is it a history of our faith, a guide to how to live and love, or does it mean something else to you?

The idea of righteousness in the New Testament points to a relationship between the individual and God. When a person is designated as righteous, it means that she is in right relationship with God. How this relationship is understood varies somewhat in the New Testament, but in all instances, the writers maintain that God initiates this relationship. The same is true for Judaism. The practices described in this passage then are responses to God's grace *not* a prerequisite for it. In this case, the Pharisee was righteous — in right relationship with God — before doing any of the actions described in the text.



How can we respond to God's grace out of thankfulness and not out of greed, hope of being exalted, or obtaining something in return?

The problem with the Pharisee's prayer comes out in 18:11: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." This prayer sounds similar to others found in rabbinic literature. We should not think, however, that Jews believe they are superior to everyone else. Thanking God for a favorable social position does not necessitate a sense of superiority to others, regarding "others with contempt" (18:9). In truth, Jews believe that favorable circumstances provide the individual with an opportunity to assist those who are less fortunate — blessed to be a blessing. The Pharisee in this passage mistakes his circumstances with a divinely ordained caste system. In his mind, devout people like himself are part of God's "in group," while everyone else is excluded. In other words, the surprising issue

we find in this parable is one of inclusion.

Notice that the Pharisee stands alone when he prays (Luke 18:11). He physically separates himself from the others because he sees himself as better than them. How often have lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people dealt with such self-righteous exclusivity from other believers? The echoes of such exclusion can also be heard in Paul's farewell address in **2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18**. However, we may be a bit more sympathetic to Paul as he recounts his own experiences with hardship, rejection and opposition. Yet, let's not forget that even Paul in the book of Acts identifies himself, "I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees..." (Acts 23:6) while facing his opposition, the religious establishment and other Pharisees.

In 2 Timothy, Paul points out that "the crown of righteousness" is reserved for him because he has fought the good fight and kept the faith. It's easy to point fingers at the one who lifts himself up as "better than" because he is engaging in "good practices." What about those who feel they ultimately deserve a reward, or at least divine acknowledgment, for long-suffering and endurance of being excluded? Are they more or less deserving of God's favor because of their actions? These texts invite the reader to look beyond a simplistic system of holy debits and credits, and really examine what righteousness means as a measure of being in true relationship with God.



What does righteousness mean to you and your community and how does that understanding effect others who are not directly related to or a part of your group? How do those outside your own community express faithfulness to God and righteousness?

The elusive message of today's parable is that all of us are part of God's group. While some may need to be humbled and others exalted, no one is excluded. **Joel 2:23-32** explicitly acknowledges righteousness as a divine initiative that is available to all human beings, irrespective of their class, race, sexual orientation, gender or status. In Joel, God promises not to allow people to be put to shame and includes "all flesh" in God's community (Joel 2:28-29).

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



God, our Advocate,
open us up to the movement of your Spirit.
Allow us to see ourselves
and others that are different from us as part of you and your people.
Help us to grow in the knowledge and awareness
of your divine invitation to live in partnership with you
and help us to throw off
the prejudice, fear, rejection and pain
that separates us from your
unbounded and unconditional love.
O, God, hear our prayer.
Amen.

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All Saints Day, Year C

All Saints Aren't Dead Saints

In our own daily lives and struggles, we have the opportunity to continue the tradition of sainthood. We can love and help not only the oppressed, but also those who oppress and exclude us. True sainthood is a personal daily decision to love in spite of what others say or do to ignore or hurt us.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Daniel 7:1-3; 15-18; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“As believers, we have the opportunity to live as saints by loving, helping and accepting those both on the margins and those who hate, exclude and revile us. We can offer hope that this love is what allows us to see God’s power at work here on earth.” -Shively T.J. Smith



“Jesus equalizes all of humanity by disturbing the comfortable and comforting the disturbed. Sainthood here on earth requires that we overturn self-serving value systems to ensure the divine inheritance is available to all.” -Bridgette D. Young



“Members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community must remember on this day of celebration that there are saints, known and unknown, living and dead, gay and straight, who encourage us in our struggle to affirm our humanity.” -Michael Joseph Brown

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The texts for today may seem unusual for an All Saints Day celebration. These texts remind us that not all saints are dead saints. We are called to live lives of integrity and holiness now, today!



Who are the heroes of faith, the saints, who you remember and admire? How can you model their life in your own day-to-day affairs?

The gospel passage, **Luke 6:20-31**, is Luke's famous Sermon on the Plain, the analogue to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:3-7:29). Yet, there are a couple important differences. First, Jesus directs his words only to disciples. In Matthew, the disciples and the crowd function as the audience. Second, unlike Matthew, Luke's language is raw and direct. Instead of Matthew's nine beatitudes, here we only encounter four. Further, Luke's beatitudes address the causes of social, political and economic oppression: poverty, hunger, sadness and hatred. His series of woes chastise those who believe they can maintain the status quo (Luke 6:24-26).

Luke's sermon is a continuation of Jesus' declaration that he came to bring release and to set others free (4:18-19). This text reminds us that we as disciples must do the same. Sainthood is not something reserved for the spiritually evolved, those who can think and act beyond the sphere of the everyday. No. Sainthood is an everyday matter. It is something experienced by people living on the margins of society. Many of us have no difficulty affirming the poor, the hungry and the sad. The problem arises for us when we get to Luke 6:22: "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you" It disturbs us because far too often we participate in these activities ourselves. We have even made it socially acceptable.



Is there someone you typically exclude or even hate? What are some creative ways in which you can affirm and love them in spite of your differences?

No one in the LGBT community can forget the recent wave of laws meant to protect the sanctity

of marriage. In state after state, hatred was codified as the law of the land. The good news today is that in God's eyes the targets of such hatred are blessed. It reminds us that the oppressed must never become the oppressor. Love must be extended to even those we hate. Help must be extended to all. Although it may be a rare experience, saintliness is something a disciple must enact everyday.

Ephesians 1:11-23 reminds us of the inheritance that comes to us as believers living out our sainthood. It is a cosmic view of redemption. The author prays that we receive "a spirit of wisdom and revelation" so that we may recognize the incredible richness of our inheritance in Christ (*Ephesians 1:17*). This is not the end, however. We are introduced to the idea of our faith in Jesus Christ "marking" us with the seal of the Holy Spirit and identifying us for our spiritual inheritance of God's redemption and power. Members of the LGBT community are so accustomed to being marked by the dominant culture and society to facilitate exclusion. But to read *Ephesians* in concert with the sermon on the plain is to see how living out one's faith marks us in ways that transcend human labels and limitations. Sainthood here on earth requires that we overturn self-serving value systems to ensure the divine inheritance is available to all.

Members of the LGBT community must remember on this day of celebration that there are saints, known and unknown, living and dead, gay and straight, who encourage us in our struggle to affirm our humanity. This inheritance is not just for the few. It is for all of us. **Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18** ties these two texts together when it says: "But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever — forever and ever" (7:18).



What different groups or people share your same values of affirming all humanity? How can you connect with these groups and build alliances rather than discord within your community?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Faithful God, Our True Witness,
Give us the strength and wisdom to live lives
of love, peace and acceptance
in a world fraught with hatred, dissension and exclusion.
Help us to reach out and love
both those who are oppressed and those who oppress.
Guide our journey
that we may live as saints
in remembrance of those saints who have lived before,
those saints who live among us, and those who are to come.
In the name of Jesus, Amen.

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Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 26, Year C

A Vision of Justice

We are reminded that desiring and pursuing justice is not always convenient or conducive to the status quo. Through committing to a just God and by choosing to be unconventional in the present, however, we can move ever closer to a just future.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 1:10-18 & Psalm 32:1-7 or Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4 & Psalm 119:137-144; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A Conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"Jesus continues to show us that he – not those who would oppress and exclude – is the final Word on who belongs in Christian community." -Bridgette D. Young



"Even though the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community and other oppressed groups do not have the luxury of living in a completely nondiscriminatory world, we have the opportunity to be that vision of justice by extending our care, help and support to those outside of our own communities and comfort." -Shively T.J. Smith



"Isaiah makes it clear that what destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah was not homosexuality. What destroyed these two cities was their lack of concern for the oppressed, the orphan and the widow (1:17). The real sodomite is one who does not practice justice." -Michael Joseph Brown

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Luke 19:1-10 is the widely known story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector. Because of its popularity, we often see this story as quaint rather than controversial. There are a number of unusual occurrences in this passage, however. The first is the behavior of Zacchaeus. We are told in the narrative that he is “a chief tax collector and . . . rich” (Luke 19:2).

A person of Zacchaeus’ status would not normally scamper around, climbing trees, to see anyone. In the ordinary course of events, he would have summoned Jesus to his house. That this wealthy man steps outside of the social structures of his day in order to see Jesus, says something about his character. His desire to see Jesus and his stature compels him to run ahead of the crowd and climb a tree (19:4). This inversion of normal power relationships highlights a theme we find throughout Luke: those in power must renounce their ways if they desire to be part of the realm of God.



What are some character traits of Zacchaeus that you can strive to duplicate or strengthen in your own life?

Such a transformation is highlighted in **Isaiah 1:10-18**. The prophet says that God is not pleased by “solemn assemblies” when there is no justice in the land (1:13). Isaiah also invokes the Genesis story of Sodom and Gomorrah (1:10). Here Isaiah makes it clear that what destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah was not homosexuality. What destroyed these two cities was their lack of concern for the oppressed, the orphan and the widow (1:17). The real sodomite is one who does not practice justice.

The second unusual thing in the narrative from Luke is the dialogue that erupts over Jesus’ visit to Zacchaeus’ house and its outcome (Luke 19:7-10). Zacchaeus is a sinner. Why? Because his occupation requires that he interact with non-Jews on a regular basis. In other words, he is ritually impure. The tax collector responds to this criticism by giving away half of his possessions to the poor. Jesus then pronounces that “salvation has come to this house” (19:9). Zacchaeus does what the Isaiah passage commands. It is interesting, though, because earlier Jesus said, “So therefore none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions” (14:33). This discrepancy between what is said and what is actually done runs throughout the Gospel of Luke.

Although we cannot resolve this tension in the narrative, it may help explain what we find in **Habakkuk 1:1-4 and 2:1-4**. This prophet stands in the center of a community of injustice (1:1-4). God’s response to this problem is to have the prophet cast a vision of a just society so that people have a way to measure themselves (2:2-3). As he tells the prophet, “If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay” (2:3).



What is your personal vision of a just society? What is your community’s vision of justice? Are they the

same?

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are often cast as outsiders in their own communities. Like Zacchaeus, what we have to offer is overlooked or rejected because of our status. However, like Zacchaeus we must not be afraid to seek Jesus outside of the traditional social structures and assemblies. While we may not always have the power and influence Zacchaeus wielded, we can duplicate his earnestness to see and hear from God through our willingness to extend ourselves beyond what is expected. We can seek alliances and associations that pursue justice and are concerned about what the Isaiah text emphasizes as important: the care for the oppressed, the orphan and the widow.



Name some ways in which you and your community has been justice-oriented and name ways in which you have not been?

Despite current circumstances of hatred, rejection and degradation, the LGBT community and all groups that are persecuted because of their race, gender, social status and class can choose to pursue a vision of life and justice. Like Zacchaeus, we must decide that we no longer care about what people think and choose to follow our Just God anyway. Like the prophet Isaiah, we must seek the vision of justice and equality, and diligently pursue and mediate on it. Although we may not always accomplish our goal of eliminating discrimination and inequity, through our determination and faith in what is right we can shine a light on the world's evils. We can be a beacon of hope towards a more just future.

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Faithful and Just God,
We thank you for the opportunity to live
as a vision of justice and hope.
Allow our commitment to what is right encourage others to do the same.
Give us the strength to step away from norms
that hurt, degrade and oppress
and guide us in discovering fresh and faithful ways of being in the world.
Help us to be life givers and not life takers.
Help us to build hope and purpose where there is none
and to stay mindful that regardless of our status and circumstance
we can be the catalyst for change in this world.
Amen.

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32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 27, Year C

Change and the One Constant

We experience change, both desirable and undesirable, all through our lives. The good news is that despite all these changes, God is with us. God is working to bring about positive changes in institutions and in individuals. God's love for us is the one constant that we can count on all through and even beyond our lifetime.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

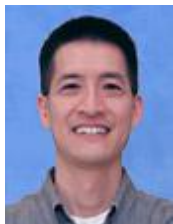
[Haggai 1:15b-2:9 & Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21 or Psalm 98 or Job 19:23-27a & Psalm 17:1-9;](#)
[2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-38](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“How can we hold important memories that ground us without becoming worshipers of a past that cannot be re-entered or re-enacted?” -Alma Crawford



“Our praises of God and to God not only prepare us for God's coming vindication, but also serve to pass on our faith traditions from one generation to the next.” -Tat-Siong Benny Liew



“Let me be careful not to support the ‘unhappy gays’ interpretation of the religious right ... but lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folk still live in a heterosexist culture, and we sometimes internalize and reproduce the oppression against ourselves.” -D. Mark Wilson

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

All the passages of this week converge on two themes. First, God is faithful in God's promise to shake things up to bring about change for the vulnerable (**Haggai 1:15b-2:9**), and to see us through whatever may come our way. Second, those who have experienced God's faithful promise and deeds should be unshakable in their trust (**Job 19:23-27a** and **2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17**). They should be ready to “shake” in praise of God (**Psalms 98** and **Psalms 145:1-5**).



What are the discussions you have heard around marriage equality for LGBT people? How do they reflect feelings and beliefs of faith?

Luke 20:27-38 indicates that Jesus does not shy away from shaking up conventional conceptions and practices of marriage. “Marriage” has long been a difficult and controversial question for LGBT folk. Should we have the legal right to marry? Should we desire the legal right to marry? Whatever else one may say about marriage, our text in Luke clearly indicates that the institution of marriage has had multiple expressions and interpretations within Jewish and Christian traditions. The Sadducees' assumption about Levirate marriage, for example, was normative in their time and place, but it may come across as quite bizarre, or even perverse, to persons of a different time and place.

Perhaps we need not cling to one structure of marriage or a single form of “divinely sanctioned” relationship to be faithful followers of God. In fact, Luke's Jesus points out the instability and the impermanence of marriage and, in contrast, to the constancy of God's never dying love for us (Luke 20:34-38). Married or not, we are challenged by this passage from Luke to manifest God's presence and love — and thus to pursue integrity — in all of our relations.

LGBT persons should also remember that we are not the only persons who have struggled and continue to struggle for the right to marry. Others — whether enslaved Africans or Asian immigrants of the past, or undocumented immigrants of the present — also could not and cannot marry. Remembering this will help us ally with other oppressed groups to challenge *all* structures of oppression.



From your own faith perspective, what are possible links between your attitude about marriage equality for LGBT people and issues of justice and equality for others?

A related but difficult question is how we discern God's work and deal with the changes of and in our own lives. As time moves from the past to the present and into the future, how do we see the changes of time in relation to God and God's works to turn our world right side up? Psalm 145:4 talks about one generation lauding God's works and mighty acts to another. It is not easy, however, to hold onto the faith in resurrection as described in Job 19:23-27a in the midst of all the disintegrations, degenerations and desolations of our contemporary realities. It is also not easy to honor the past without looking back with longing for the "good old days," "the days of former glory" (Haggai 2:3), of the LGBT community in the 1970s before AIDS, or the days of our own youth. Taken together, our lectionary passages today challenge us to the delicate but necessary task to take our stand in the present, while keeping faith with the past, and all the while proclaiming the mystery that in the future we will see God in our flesh (Job 19:26).

One unhelpful response to this experience of changing times, especially when one is victimized or oppressed, may be gleaned from Haggai 1:15b-2:9. Here we see a reversal where those who are oppressed actually repeat the same imperialist ideology used to oppress them. Here we witness the desire and the practice to build for oneself or one's group a house that is not only "greater than the former" but also filled with "the treasure of all nations" (Haggai 2:6-9). Despite or perhaps especially because Haggai was writing to rebuild the Temple and thus to recover from the disruption of the exile, Haggai's text shows the very fine line over which redistributive justice may actually become a form of imperialist looting or plundering. Efforts to rebuild must be on guard against the subtle influence and internalization of oppressive politics.

In the midst of change and loss, we must not let our own pain blind us to the pain of others and our own privileges. Seeing oneself or one's group as "exceptional" and seeing oneself as only victim and the only victim are but two sides of the same coin. Both would be like the "lawless one" who sees oneself as having priority over and above everyone else in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4. LGBT people are not immune from this danger, especially if we see sexuality as the only issue and fail to acknowledge oppression in other terms like race and economics.

As we experience change and seek liberation in our lives, it will be helpful to remember, as Job does, that "my Redeemer lives" (Job 19:25). Regardless of what "former glory" we have lost (Haggai 2:3) or how our "skin has been ... destroyed" (Job 19:26), God is there with us (Haggai 2:4) in God's "steadfast love" (**Psalm 17:7** and **98:3**). God hears our cries (**Psalm 17:1, 6** and **145:18-19**). We will indeed see God in our flesh (Job 19:26), just as we have seen God show up in so many unusual places and times throughout our journey of life.



How does God call you and others who have been oppressed to respond to and challenge those who

oppress? In what ways do you continue the cycle of oppression?

We should not lose sight of how Jesus interacts with the Sadducees in Luke 20:27-38—even when he is at the receiving end of a tricky, exaggerated and hypothetical question. For those of us who feel “enlightened” and lack patience with those who cannot seem to change and move beyond their religious assumptions about “marriage,” Jesus’ example may serve as a reminder that we must keep engaging their questions even when they seem arcane, offensive or of questionable intent. Of course, engaging the Sadducees’ questions did not prevent Jesus from challenging their premise or changing the terms of the conversation. After all, Jesus basically ignores the Sadducees inductive reasoning and powerfully points instead to the validity of resurrection. Jesus demonstrates the importance of not prematurely cutting off communication with those who cannot or will not yet see things our way.

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



God of steadfast compassion and liberating transformation,
With wisdom to accept
the past and the courage to work for the future,
grant us today compassion for those who reject transformation,
and patience for those who are not ready to face and embrace
change.
Challenge us to develop integrity in all of our relations
until your presence and love may be manifested
across barriers of time and difference.
Amen.

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33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 28, Year C

It Will Be a Long Time Coming!

A different future — one of justice and peace — requires not only faith and vision, but patience and endurance. Such a future does not come easily because God calls for solidarity and identification from us with those who suffer from structures that often give us comfort and apparent safety.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 65:17-25 & Isaiah 12 or Malachi 4:1-2a & Psalm 98; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19](#)

Who's in the Conversation

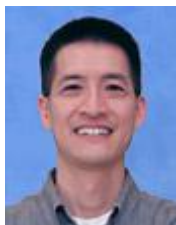
A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“I think the vehem-ence with which same-gender re-lations are resisted is a reflection of the threat they may pose to a stable sense of self for those opposing such re-lations. I some-times say to my students: ‘If it gets under your skin, that is because it is under your skin!’” -Ron Hopson



“We pro-lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-gender religious lead-ers must use texts like these to — as the Pentecostal brethren and sis’tren say, ‘remind the saints of the hope’— while teaching, contrary to a culture of instant gratification, they can endure.” -Alma Crawford



“Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and trans-gender folk are, of course, most aware of how Christian traditions can be both medicine and poison. They know the need for courage and wisdom to know what to treasure and what to trash.” -Tat-Siong Benny Liew



“I pray too for humility, lest in my honest critique of the privilege of others, that I forget the places and moments of my own privilege. I pray lest I forget the people who can help me understand better my own arrogance and practices of exclusion.” -D. Mark Wilson

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Today's biblical texts testify to God's investment in creating a new world. We also see in these passages human beings who keep on struggling and enduring with God's persistent promise and relentless presence. These passages cause us to long for — and call us to work for — a future that is almost beyond our imagination. We must look up and keep on working. It is not over until it is over; the end is not yet here.



From your first reading of these passages, what do you see as the promises in them for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people?

While **2 Thessalonians 3:6** talks about the need to live according to tradition, **Luke 21:5-6** talks about how an edifice or an institution will be toppled, thrown down or thrown away. One must be careful to not promote any kind of anti-Jewish implications given the long history of such within Christian traditions and practices. What these passages do point to is the possibility for change, whether it is a tradition, an edifice or an institution. Many LGBT persons have suffered from problematic traditions (including Christian ones) and have witnessed changes that are close to being catastrophic (like various forms of backlash against LGBT campaign for equal rights). The good news is even religious institutions and traditions are subject to critique and transformation, and we can participate in — and be witnesses to — positive as well as negative changes.

In addition, **Isaiah 65:17-25** proclaims the good news that God is also committed to and involved in bringing about positive change. The promise or the vision is that God will put an

end to all ideologies and practices that cause premature deaths (**Isaiah 65:20**). There are many causes of such deaths today, but they certainly include various “ism-s” like heterosexism, sexism, racism, colonialism and nationalism.

After a reference to ending and replacing exploitation with a hopeful future (**Isaiah 65:21-24**), Isaiah paints the beautiful picture of the wolf and the lamb feeding together, and the lion eating straw like the ox (**Isaiah 65:25**). This is a future when difference will no longer be a barrier to harmonious existence. Instead of the wolf hoping to eat the lamb and the lamb doing all it can to flee the wolf, the two are in relation with each other. Perhaps even more astounding is the vision that the lion and the ox will both eat the same thing. In other words, what we see here is more than just a truce or making peace, but a mighty carnivorous predator developing an herbivore appetite and diet, and being nurtured by straw like an ox. Do we, as a LGBT people living in a heterosexist world, really dare to believe in Isaiah’s vision?



What hope and challenge do you see for LGBT people in the vision of Isaiah?

Just as we have to discern between positive and negative traditions, we also must discern when it is actually safe to sit down with “the lion.” Trusting in God’s salvation and not being afraid (**Isaiah 12:2**) does not mean that disempowered and endangered groups can let down their guards and give up their protected space after, say, a single sensitivity training workshop.

It is also important to remember that the changes that Isaiah envisioned were in the terrible context of when God’s people were scattered in exile. It gets even more challenging when we see that by the time of Luke — that is, several hundred years after Isaiah — the vision is still far out in the future. In fact, Luke’s Jesus is clear that the toppling of a religious edifice does not only *not* imply the arrival of lasting change, but it may lead to more conflicts and greater catastrophes (**Luke 21:9-17**). The promises of positive change, like those given by Isaiah, are to be trusted in and worked for, but their realization may take a long time or occur only across generations. Faith involves not only a vision, but also patience and endurance. As difficult as it may be to hear, the reign of God will not come with the failure of a federal marriage amendment or even the legalization of marriage equality.

Part of this has to do with, no doubt, the resilience of oppressive structures. Notice, for example, that Isaiah’s vision still has the serpent eating dust (**Isaiah 65:25**). Talk about ruining a perfect picture! What this may point to is the importance of shifting alliances, or the need to get beyond single-issue politics. Justice will come only in partnership with justice for others.

As shown in Isaiah’s example of the lion eating straw like the ox and his warning against exploitation, LGBT people also need to be challenged to be in solidarity with — to name just a few — immigrant workers, prisoners and refugees around the world, even or especially if they are not LGBT in orientation or practice. Justice and peace will not come if LGBT people do not see problems with or do anything against gentrifying impoverished neighborhoods or preying on

poor nations.

Not only does **2 Thessalonians 3:13** correctly advises us to “not be weary in doing what is right,” what goes before that verse also suggests that peace and justice always involve “toiling and laboring” with others rather than living apart from or lording over others. Rather than reading this passage as advocating a capitalist-oriented, “no work, no pay” Protestant ethic, perhaps we should bluntly and honestly interpret the passage – suggesting the importance of going beyond empathy for others to actually identifying with others. Just like Isaiah’s example of the lion eating straw like an ox (**Isaiah 65:25**), a just and peaceful future will require us to see both our pains and our privileges, and to become fully identified with those whom we may see as a lesser “other.” We must be willing to give up our privileges for the privilege of relationship.

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



God of harmony and diversity,
God who created the wolf and the lamb, the lion and the ox,
help us to take a long view toward the change you have promised.
Let us not be so intent on seeing the transformation of the lions
that threaten our lives and haunt our experience
that we fail to notice those who might be pinned
under our claws, those who also cry out for delivery and safety.
Amen.

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Reign of Christ, Proper 29, Year C

Come and Gather

As the Christian year concludes with celebrating the reign of Christ, these passages speak of not only God's commitment to reconcile and gather up all peoples and all things, but also of our call to care in the midst of changes and challenges. "Come and gather" is not only God's promise to us, but also God's call to us as well.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46 or Luke 1:68-79; Colossians 1:11-20;](#)
[Luke 23:33-43](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"These passages affirm that God longs to include all in God's fold. God will never forget the forgotten, and we can serve God without fear." -Tat-Siong Benny Liew



How can LGBT people forgive if heterosexist and homophobic shep-herds have never said, 'I am sorry for what I did to make you suffer'? No, I don't need to hear that. God is my light and my salvation, and God will bring me through. But hearing some words of apology would surely move me to tears, and move me from anger to experiencing the grief to know that somewhere inside they may hurt as much as I." D. Mark Wilson



“No matter how de-structive we become, Psalm 46 insists that God is always seeking to transform our vio-lence and force into unity and peace. That is our ultimate refuge and strength.” -Ron Hopson



“God is able and will-ing to offer particular promises and revel-ations to any who are lost or abandoned.” Alma Crawford

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The celebration of Reign of Christ Sunday can be difficult for some Christians and churches, since the idea of Christ's coming, particularly his “second coming,” has been hijacked by some with their gleeful predictions of who will be “left behind.”

The late feminist theologian, Letty Russell, however, has advocated an “adventology” in which followers of Christ are to be watchful for the in-breaking of God's reign on earth. This watchfulness involves looking for and being attentive to the places in which we, who are called by God and have been gathered by God's grace, may also be agents who participate and help in God's dismantling and reconstruction of the world.



Where do you see evidence in our world of
God's realm of justice and love breaking in?

Several of the passages for today emphasize God's coming to gather and reconcile. **Jeremiah 23:1-3** talks about God's promise to gather God's own scattered and forgotten flock. **Colossians 1:11-20** refers to God's rescue, and ends with a proclamation of God as one who “holds all things together” and “reconciles all things” to God's self. The texts from **Luke** not only tell of God's “favor” and “tender mercy” (**1:68-79**), but also show it through Jesus' acceptance and welcoming of a “criminal” who was crucified next to him (**Luke 23:33-43**).

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have not only been scattered and separated from the fold — whether that fold be our churches, families, or communities — but we have also been scattered at times from knowing our own selves, our emotional and physical health, our bodies, our sexual pleasures and God-given desires, as well as our faith and our spirituality. Because of these scattering experiences, we sometimes feel that God has no place and no need for us in God's world. We can be comforted today, however, that God cares for us, and that God will come and gather us into a special community of comrades and friends – even when others have

tried to forsake us, distance themselves from us and leave us alone.

We can, as **Colossians 1:12** states, claim full rights of inheritance as God's children, and be confident that God is not only with us in our midst, but also will be our refuge, strength, and help (**Psalms 46**). In spite of all that we have been through, the day of God's reign will be a day and a place of safety and protection for us (**Jeremiah 23:5-6**).

As **Jeremiah 23:1-2** suggests, the scattering of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people may often have something to do with the failure of our shepherds. While shepherds are supposed to protect, counsel and encourage, they sometimes end up abandoning, harming or even driving away part of God's flock. Even shepherds may have their own homophobic misunderstanding and/or malice. Jeremiah points out, in other words, that sheep being scattered is an effect of errant shepherding. The tendency is for sheep to flock together, if not because of shepherds who make a point to turn (minor?) differences into barriers. Not only does the text of **Jeremiah 23:1-2** make it clear that there will come a day of reckoning when these failed shepherds will face up honestly to what kind of violence and destruction their homophobic theology, rituals, and practices have done to LGBT children and adults, but **Jeremiah 23:4** also promises that God will raise up alternative shepherds for God's forgotten and discarded sheep.

We know that there have been people who willingly stick their necks out to care for, as well as minister to and with LGBT people, even if they themselves are straight. In addition to speaking to LGBT people who have been scattered, perhaps the promise of peace and help amidst roars and uproars (**Psalms 46**) is a relevant one also for these faithful shepherds who may find themselves threatened by denominational excommunication and ecclesial crucifixion.



What are the qualities of leadership that are needed both within the LGBT community and the church? How are the qualities similar and different? What kind of leadership may God be asking of you?

More astounding still, however, is **Luke 1:76**: "and you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High." **Luke 1:68-79** is, of course, Zechariah's song of praise to God upon the miraculous birth of his son, John the Baptizer. As is characteristic of Luke's theology, Zechariah sings of a God who sides with the marginalized and turns the table. Yet this God also seems to specialize in doing so in unexpected ways, so God chooses also among the *unusual* suspects to name a harbinger of Jesus' coming. After all, who would expect the messiah's herald to be born from a barren, old woman, even if she and her husband are both of priestly descent? As we have seen, God is still calling prophets and shepherds out of *unusual* suspects, even among God's abandoned and scattered LGBT children. The church, the community, the world and God have need of you! God can see in a person far beyond what anyone else can see, or even far more than a person can see in himself or herself. Zechariah has learned the lesson that he cannot listen to and believe in all the mess that has been said about him and his wife. Likewise, LGBT persons are not what others have said about them. Do not think that no one needs us; God needs us, and the LGBT community needs us to be heralds and prophets of God's coming, and shepherds of God's neglected fold. If we have full rights to be God's children, we also have full rights to answer God's call to play an important role in God's work of gathering and

reconciliation.

The good news is that alongside the harsh “woe” that **Jeremiah 23:1** delivers to the failing shepherds there is also the word of forgiveness we find in **Luke 23:33-43**. When we, who have also been false or inadequate shepherds, are willing to relinquish our role and admit our wrongdoings, we will find Christ always already there, more than ready to forgive and gather us up.

We must admit that it is not easy to live in the promise of God’s coming reign and participate in God’s work of change. Can we — who may have experienced the loss and destruction of our communities through AIDS, guns, drugs, poverty, forced migrations, breakups and abandonment — trust somehow that sacred realities may yet exist as remnants which God alone can preserve?

How may we, as we come to the close of yet another year, believe that behind the destructions of the familiar, God is somehow working to bring about another vision? How can we reconcile the promise of **Jeremiah 23:1-6** and the proclamation in **Colossians 1:11-20** that the promise *has been fulfilled* in Jesus? If the promise has been fulfilled, then why, as the Staples Singers sang in the 1960s, “are we treated so bad?” Is the writer of **Colossians 1:11-20** guilty of “spiritualizing” a promise or a possibility that is actually in extreme conflict or dissonance with the lived reality? Is this a kind of escapism, or a disassociation that is so familiar to those of us who have experienced torture or abuse?

Yet, escapism can be a necessary survival skill for the oppressed. While many of the so-called diversity or anti-oppression workshops for the privileged emphasize immediate confrontation and interruption, **Colossians 1:11** is honest enough to suggest that there are times and places when all one can do is “to endure everything with patience” and remain present through the want, the violence, and the pain, but trusting that indeed all of creation has been and is being transformed by the power of God in Christ.

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Holy One ,
Thank you for trusting us with your work.
Help us to trust in your vision and mission even when we cannot see clearly.
Come, Holy One!
May your justice and peace reign over all your people.
Send us out to reconcile human beings to each other and to your good creation.
Scatter our fear so we can be gathered and do your work of gathering.
In the name of Christ, Amen.

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Thanksgiving Day, Year C

Thanks Thinking on Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving requires a prayerful way of thinking – a thinking that requires both memory and perspective.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Deuteronomy 26:1-11](#); [Psalm 100](#); [Philippians 4:4-9](#); [John 6:25-35](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



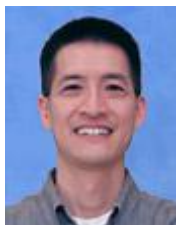
“Wholeness demands vigilance in searching out those gifts that come from God and those things that are perks of class, gender and racial privilege. Otherwise our gratitude may become spiritualized self-congratulation, and our offerings of thanks degenerate into celebrations of entitlement.” -Alma Crawford



“I see new economic developments and so-called city renewal projects springing up in West Oakland, attracting white gay men with money and political influence to buy property in communities where black people for a long time have asked for resources to build schools, jobs and opportunities for their children, but with very little response from city, state and federal governments.” -D. Mark Wilson



“The genius of Mandela and Tutu is to help prevent the oppressed from becoming the oppressor.” Ron Hopson



“The passage in Philippians is familiar and much loved, but I am curious why this passage is often cut off from what goes before and after it. I am also very curious as to what we can make of it in the context of the other lectionary passages of this week as well as in the context of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender lives.” -Tat-Siong Benny Liew

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The lectionary passages for Thanksgiving focus on praise and joy (**Psalms 100**). This we do because of what God has done in the past (**Deuteronomy 26:1-11**), in spite of present conflicts and struggles (**Philippians 4:4-9**), and in the midst of much needed discernment (**John 6:25-35**).



What does Thanksgiving conjure up in the mind and hearts of LGBT people? What may we need to especially consider and discern this Thanksgiving?

Our text in **John 6:25-35** points to the important discernment between “using” the good news of the gospel solely for our self satisfaction or grandeur and developing the “enduring food” of true community. The latter requires us to give life to the world, as John’s Jesus has come to do. In the gospel of John, what fulfills Jesus’ work on earth is the adoptive relationship that he facilitates — even while hanging on the cross — between his mother and the “beloved disciple.”

The gospel writer comments about that moment, “After *this* [what amounts to the formation of a new relational community], when Jesus knew that *all* was now finished” (John 19:28).

Unfortunately, people who have been oppressed are often tempted to focus only upon their own well-being and satisfaction, even to the exclusion or detriment of others. If we really work toward a life-giving and life-affirming way of living toward the whole world, we would be free to be a people of confidence and thanksgiving. We must therefore learn to discern the difference between supporting life within a little corner of the world (be it “gay” or “straight”) and doing so for the entire planet.



Who and what do LGBT people need to bring to their hearts and prayers this Thanksgiving?

Proper discernment requires proper memory. While we should remember the grace and blessings that God has given us at a time of thanksgiving, as **Deuteronomy 26:1-11** does, we

must not fail to discern that what we find in **Deuteronomy 26:1-11** is partly a faulty memory.

The text about the Hebrew “pilgrims”— a term that is also often used during this season to refer to the early trans-Atlantic colonialists to North America — is in some way also an ideology that actually makes one’s own group look like residents and others like aliens. We must not forget to remember, as Native American scholars like Robert Warrior have tried to remind us, that the “coming out” of the Hebrews is an invasion against a resident people, the Canaanites. Just like the Canaanites of the Hebrew Bible, Native Americans have been either killed off or made into “aliens” in their own land.

We need to become aware of such “politics of memory.” It is important to keep in mind what memory chooses to remember *and* chooses to forget. In **Deuteronomy 26:1-11**, the thanksgiving of the writer has forgotten to remember that some of those whom he or she calls “alien” (**Deuteronomy 26:11**) were actually there long before the Hebrews arrived.

The memory of the Hebrews — their memory of “coming out,” settling down in the so-called Promised Land, and worshiping and celebrating there -- should alert us to how often our own “pilgrim” and “coming out” stories neglect to remember and admit the privilege that some LGBT people have over others.

How easy it is to forget to remember that the initial blow from Stonewall was not the work of white gay men, but transgender Latino and African Americans. When buying property and gaining capital in poor neighborhoods of color, what responsibilities do LGBT persons — those who are white in particular — have in remembering and recognizing the socio-economic needs and political concerns of the people who have been living there for a long time? Do the memory and the thanksgiving of the Hebrew pilgrimage have anything to say about our “coming out” and taking over the land?

Even or perhaps especially when we remember God’s grace and blessings in our lives, we must discern our memory to make sure that we also remember not to forget how our grace and blessings may cause oppression and alienation for others.



How has the “politics of memory” shaped and/or distorted both our memory of the settling of this country and of the movement for LGBT equality?

Paul in **Philippians 4:4-9** calls those who follow Christ to “rejoice always” and “in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Readers of these familiar verses should remember that Paul gave this call in the midst of disagreements and conflicts. Right before and after our lectionary passage, we hear Paul urging two women to “think the same thing in the Lord” (Philippians 4:2-3) and Paul expressing his uncertainty about the Philippians’ love for him (Philippians 4:10). This call to persist itself, then, speaks to the need for us to persist in discerning not only the politics of memory (**Deuteronomy 26:1-11**), but also the difference between self-satisfaction and true community

(**John 6:25-35**). In other words, one should not take **Philippians 4:4-9** out of context, and use its call as a form of “don’t worry, be happy” to dismiss other voices and opinions, especially dissenting opinions. This is especially important since we cannot be certain if Euodia and Syntyche were disagreeing with each other, or if they are in agreement with each other against Paul.

Given the content of the entire letter of Philippians — particularly Paul’s own sense of anxiety about where he stands in the eyes of the Philippians and his plan to send to them two male “replacement preachers” (Philippians 2:19-30) — feminist scholars like Cynthia Briggs Kittredge have questioned if beneath Paul’s graceful words is not a not-so-benign politics of exclusion. Once again, thanks-thinking here calls us to persist in paying attention to the differences both within and beyond our LGBT communities.

Philippians 4:4-9 also reminds us that LGBT persons must persist in asking critical questions of the Scriptures themselves and traditions about Scriptures. There are certainly aspects within Scriptures that are problematic (as Paul’s hidden words of exclusion), but there are also potentially liberating and surprising aspects in Scriptures that have been covered over by the traditions. Paul, for example, is well known for what he says about “natural” and “unnatural” sexual relation in Romans 1:26-27. What readers of Philippians may not know is that this same Paul, in referring to what is generally translated as “yokefellow” or “companion” in Philippians 4:3, actually uses a word that connotes a marriage relation. In fact, some early church commentators, including Clement of Alexandria, have understood Paul to be referring here to his “spouse.”

This interpretation is generally rejected because of the long tradition of Paul being single, and because of Paul’s use of a masculine adjective (generally translated as “true” or “loyal”) to describe this person. Because of the grammatical and ideological difficulties that are involved here, some have suggested to take the word as a proper name, although there is no evidence of such in the Greco-Roman world. Let us not forget here the undeniable problem of Paul exercising a masculine power over two women, even or especially if he resorts to a committed or an intimate male-male relation. At the same time, let us be clear that given the scarcity of information, everything is actually highly speculative. However, we do not need to insist on reading the identity of this mysterious person in any particular way to see that traditions, including scholarly ones on the Bible, have a way to prevent thinking from developing in a certain direction, particularly if it may lead to any affirmation or implication of homoeroticism.

The critical questions we ask should also include questioning the lectionary’s weekly choice of texts (like why is **Philippians 4:4-9** often cut off from its literary context). Thanks-thinking means that we must keep on thinking, and perhaps not just about “whatever is honorable” or “whatever is pleasing.”

Philippians 4:4-9 teaches us that we must persist in living as an example and living by example. **Philippians 4:8**, as long as we remember to not read it as an excuse to shut up or shut off dissenting or disturbing voices, does help provide a sense of wholeness and peace. It also, however, prevents one’s understandable and justifiable rage in this heterosexist world from victimizing others, even those who love and support us. **Philippians 4:9**, on the other hand,

suggests that we must keep on choosing mentors whose lives can help give us hope and peace within and around us. As **John 6:25-35** remind us, God does work through people, whether it is Moses, Jesus, Euodia or Syntyche.

Finally, we must persist in giving back. Not only should we keep on giving back to God praise and worship (**Psalm 100**), but we should also keep on giving back to others (**Deuteronomy 26:1-11**). We are to contribute to the “aliens.” We are to return our debts to those whom we have victimized even as we struggle to liberate ourselves from oppression.

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Prayerfully Out in Scripture



God of Love,
Even as we close our eyes to offer you praise,
 we ask you to open them to the things we overlook
 and the things we fail to look back upon.
Show us how to count our blessings –
 numbering our wellbeing
 only alongside the wellbeing of all of your children
 and all of your creation,
 and all that is holy and just.
O God, be in our hearts, be in our lives, be even in our thanks –
 as we give our very lives back to you and to others. Amen.

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