

The Rev. Jake Miles Joseph

Text: John 3: 14-17

Sermon: “The Great And” March 11, 2018

Plymouth Congregational Church, UCC of Fort Collins, Colorado

Note: This Sunday, for the first time in decades at Plymouth, we sang Old Rugged Cross and In the Garden as our focus hymns.

Thank you to our liturgists this morning for leading worship and reading the Scripture.

Will you be in prayer with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be good and pleasing to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Have any of you heard or sibling rivalry? How many of you have experienced it? [Ask for a show of hands for both.] Well, today we are going to talk about why talking to other Christians, siblings in Christ, is often so much harder than interfaith work—basically sibling rivalry. Today, I am preaching a different kind of sermon. I want us to think about how we can stay in conversation, in dialogue, or maybe even in community with those who believe very differently than we do. It isn't easy work, but it is the test of progressive Christianity for our time. I am going to do this by a little bit of honest testimony about my own experience and then conclude with a concrete practice that is sort of a take-home exercise. How does that sound?

I remember the rooms—a yellowing hand-embroidered pillow with the words from the King James Version neatly, yet obvious hand-stitched: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” It was on the chair I was offered. The chaplain was always offered the chair with the John 3:16 or other verses embroidered pillow on it, of course, as a sign of respect. The patients almost always cried. So many elderly patients get far too few visitors—getting old can be lonely. I remember one patient. She buckled over on herself in the wheelchair every time I would visit, tears flowing, and was overcome with tears and I just kept singing and singing. It was all I could do, for I was without words for the first time in a year. I had discovered a secret language of communication, however, that could overcome dementia, Alzheimer's, differences of theology, and age—a couple of singable, simple hymns that always said what I could or would not.

I had, up until that point, been a smart-ass seminarian, a self-described and self-righteous social justice warrior, a progressive firebrand who believed that he was somehow sent or cursed by God him or herself to be one of the only out gay liberal voices at a Southern, United Methodist Seminary. I was, needless to say, a miserable seminarian for three years completely out of my element in a world of bowties, suits (seersucker), big hats, and conservative/ politely closeted formalities of Emory University. Don't let me even get into what I thought of the subtle racism, Coca-Cola idol Worship, and the coffee hours at local churches (I kid you not) complete with chocolate fountains and tiers and tiers of cucumber or pimento cheese finger sandwiches every single Sunday.

After my first full year of seminary, I had a transformative experience that reshaped how I now hear and see “traditional” or conservative Christianity not as a sworn enemy but a potential partner for if nothing else healthy conversation. That is when things took a turn for the better. I

entered a full time three-month summer program called CPE with Emory University Healthcare and Emory University Hospital as a chaplaincy full time intern for the summer.

This is where I found or reclaimed my calling after having lost it somewhere in Atlanta during that turbulent first year of seminary. My call to ministry wasn't primarily social justice advocacy (even if I am good at it) as I had expected, but geriatric and elder care, nostalgia nurturing, and old time religion translation and meaning making for the progressive church. In addition to being assigned to overnight on call shifts at the main hospital and weekly shifts as the chaplain for Emory's shocking Electroshock Therapy program (ECT), I spent most of my time at Wesley Woods—Emory's geriatric hospital and nursing care campus.

It was there that I discovered the power of these hymns, "Old Rugged Cross" and "In the Garden" among others to literally create common ground, common language where it wasn't before. Even as some of the theology in them made and still makes me cringe, I was able to see the meaning they have for others. **It isn't all about my liberal theology and me.** This is also the case for our passage today: John 3:16. As I was willing to let go of just a little of my pride and perfect progressive pedigree, learn to sing these simple, personal, nostalgic rural hymns.... I was able to reclaim a call to ministry after that first year of seminary. It is with this same gratitude and attitude of openness that I learned singing hymns with the elderly in Atlanta that have been able to survive Christian ministry as an out gay minister in my 20's. The humility to know that people may dislike what I stand for, but I can still work to find ways to relate is powerful. **These hymns remind me what is a stake: a sense of the humanity of the other and a willingness as a progressive to laugh at myself. This is not something we remember how to do often on the progressive side in these times—and it matters more than ever.**

I learned that these old folksy hymns, Scripture like John 3:16 from the KJV, and other signs of traditional faith were tools for pastoral care, conversation, and being with people in the hardest times of their lives and deaths when words and lectures and difference no longer matter. If someone is dying alone and you are his or her only companion as chaplain or you as friends or family, what do you say? I know some of you have experienced this. What did you say? **Do you lecture them about not being liberal enough even then?** No, you sing. No, you find common ground in this one life to live. We have been rejectionists of tradition for a longtime, and that is good. A lot of it needed to be rejected. We have learned, through trouble and toil, a new way to be Christian and progressive (Amen!)... but now comes the hard part for the UCC (the next step)... still remaining in community with those who are different without being condescending.

Often when we talk about our sister and brothers in other Christian traditions, we do it with the condescending tone of the older brother. *We love our sisters and brothers, but they are just so misguided... wait till they grow-up like us.*

My patients, like the one with the John 3:16 pillow, probably didn't vote the way I did. They probably would not have been kind to my husband, and me but they were vulnerable humans for whom their faith had kept them all the day and nightlong. Their faith could have kept them, helped them survive and endure situations in life beyond my understanding and often beyond words. Who am I to take that from them?

Let me use a recent example of where the UCC missed the point entirely! When Billy Graham died last week, there was an outpouring of emotions on social media and Facebook in particular.

Mostly the attitude I saw was extremely negative. Most of my clergy friends took time away from sermons, budgets, and whatever the heaven clergy are supposed to do to write long diatribes and Facebook post polemics claiming that Billy Graham ruined American Christianity and pointing out homophobic statements he made in the 1980's as a reason to discredit his entire ministry. **It made me wonder how many of the people I love now and who love me now [silently look out at our mostly older congregation] said or thought something homophobic in the 1980's.** Have we developed such a litmus test for “good progressive Christian” that we have forgotten about grace, about falling short, about forgiveness, or even process? Where did this litmus test for perfection come from in our circles? **Are we any better or more holy than any other Christian because we have declared ourselves enlightened? Have we forgotten about grace and redemption?** This is a question I would like to ask our denominational leaders in Cleveland. **I sure hope that I am not judged, my life is not summarized, and my entire ministry isn't evaluated based on my worst moments.** Don't we all hope our lives aren't summarized by our falling and tripping?

As Progressive Christians, unlike other Christians, listening, inclusion, unity, and trying to build bridges is central to how we understand Jesus—so being the ones who are willing to stay in conversations, even the hardest conversations, fall on us (the Otis) as progressive Christians to find ways to be in relationship rather than cut off. For us, it is fundamental to our belief, so it is our job to stick with it. See it is our faith to be bridge builders even if it is harder on us than the others. **Verses like John 3:16 and hymns like those we are singing today are hard for us, but it is our job to stay present and find the good even if hard at times.**

I want to leave you today with a simple tool I call “The Great And” as a method of learning to speak with those with whom you disagree. “The Great And” is something I learned at a workshop called “Identity Bowling” this past summer at General Synod's National LGBTQ Coalition pre-conference. Here is how it works: Whenever you want to say “but” in a sentence... instead say “and” –then see how the sentence comes together differently.

How many of you have ever caught yourselves saying, “I love you, but you drive me crazy” or “He is a good minister, but he is so young?” Anytime you end a sentence or start it with “but” you are negating whatever came before it. If you hear something you disagree with, if you respond with “and” you are not negating what they just said... rather you are adding your own thought on top of it. This is a radically different way of dealing with disagreement. The need to say but is the need to define yourself in your sentence rather than the need to communicate and community. **If you are confident in whom you are in the discussion, then you don't need “but” anymore.**

Examples:

Billy Graham was a conservative, evangelical minister who said some terrible things about LGBTQ people in the 1980's **and** he transformed many lives and brought American Christianity new vitality. We can even say that the Mainline progressive congregations wouldn't be what they are today without him.

The Old Rugged Cross is a song about personal salvation, blood, gore, **and** the word rugged can mean something durable, changeable, natural, organic, enduring and that helps me sing that hymn in my own progressive way. Rugged is a word I relate to as a Coloradan.

In the Garden is an outdated, bad theology, terrible hymn we should never sing, **and** for many it is a powerful hymn that reminds people of their grandmother's love of nature or finding God in nature.

Beards are itchy **and** some people like wearing them.

Or here are some harder examples formulated as what someone might say to us, and then I provide an optional response. Note that humor, irony, and play is helpful in disarming tension and keeping relationship intact.

Gay people shouldn't be ministers... **and** it's a little late for that.

The UCC is just Unitarians Considering Christ... **and** boy do we spend a lot of time considering him. You would almost think we were Christian ourselves!

Deportations are part of a fair legal system... **and** so should being allowed to take care of your neighbor, bring water to the refugee, and exercising our Christian values of love for the stranger.

Guns are part of the American dream, **and** for some of us that is feeling more like a nightmare.

The CSU stadium has ruined Fort Collins, **and** it has provided a space for the community to gather for music, marathons, and other events.

Being Christian, even a progressive Christian is a waste of time... if God existed there wouldn't be such mess in the world... **and** some of us still find comfort in religion, in church community, and believing in a higher purpose.

These are hard conversation, but the simple word "and" can allow engagement without agreement. "The Great And" does three things—it leaves what the other person said intact (you aren't going to change their mind with a but and a negation), it keeps the conversation going, and it allows you room to have a sense of humor. It does not mean that you agree with what they said, but it allows for relationship even in the hardest time.

Of everyone at Plymouth, I am probably the most hated and vilified member of our community by those on the outside as your proud and out gay liberal minister. If I can engage these conversations, humorously deal with the barbs, show up at events with people who really think I somehow symbolize the end of the religion as we know it, and attempt to stick with the "great and" responses rather than "but" retorts, then I promise you can do it too! It just takes some time and self-assurance, **and** it is worthwhile.

May we never give-up the effort of building relationships, especially with others in our faith, even if it is hard and painful. After all, we are all in the same garden. Amen.