

The Kin-Dom of God is Queer: a Reflection for Pride Sunday

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The good news of Jesus Christ is that the kin-dom of God is queer. I don't mean queer as in lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, or non-binary. I mean something much bigger.

Reputable Biblical scholarship tells us that Jesus used the image of the Kingdom of God over and against the kingdom of Caesar, that imperialist, militaristic, oppressive world in which Roman power meant Jewish suffering. The Roman Empire may not have been completely heterosexual, but it certainly was straight – vertical and hierarchical. Everyone had a place, and most places were pretty lousy. Some Jewish leaders responded by stressing purity as a way to hold the Jewish community together, but many Jews could not maintain purity and struggled to meet the demands of their community while facing poverty and Roman violence.

Then along came a prophet with a new message. In his parables and aphorisms, Jesus rejected the imperialism and dehumanization of Caesar's empire, preaching a world turned upside down by radical hospitality and forgiveness, rejecting Caesar's hierarchies in word and deed. Jesus put his vision into practice by eating with or healing pretty much everyone he encountered regardless of gender, class, ethnicity, religion, social status, cleanness, and possibly even sexuality.

Perhaps the strangest thing Jesus said about the Kingdom of God was that it was impure, unclean, even defiling. Specifically, the Kingdom was like yeast or leaven that a woman mixed with flour until all of it was leavened. When we think about this image, we should remember that in the Exodus story, God's presence and demands were identified with unleavened bread. Before and during Jesus' time, leaven could stand for moral corruption, and Jesus sometimes used the term metaphorically to mean moral corruption. So, is the Kingdom morally corrupt? Unclean? Impure? What kind of Jewish mystic would say something like that?

I think the answer is, a Jewish mystic who wants to offer good news to all the people around him who are already leaven, already unable to live up to purity standards, already socially defined as morally corrupt. Hey all of you people who are devalued and dehumanized by society, he says, the Kingdom is for you and about you and among you. Blessed are you poor. Blessed is everyone who loves God and neighbor, period. Doesn't matter if you're female. Doesn't matter if you're a sinner. Doesn't matter if you are a Roman centurion or a tax collector.

So how would we translate that today? In our world, normalcy is still vertical and hierarchical. We still have purity codes; we just don't call them that. Anyone remember the magazine ad from decades ago, "You can never be too rich or too thin?" That's our purity code. Or part of it, anyway. So, if you can never be too rich or too thin or too heterosexual or too male or too white or too young or too able-bodied or too "fill in your own favorite blank" here, sooner or later most of us will fail the test. That's part of the bad news of our time.

The good news is that the kin-dom of God is still available to us if, as biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan said, we accept it, enter it, live into it, and thereby establish it. We can follow Jesus by building the realm of the holy on earth. In this realm, purity codes genuinely don't

matter because we are all blessed and made whole as we bless each other and help each other become whole. I bet most of us in this room and on this Zoom have failed our society's version of the purity test. I bet most of us in this room and on this Zoom are queer in one way or another, maybe not sexually, maybe in some other way. But in the kin-dom of God, it does not matter. We're here to transform ourselves and transform the world, beginning and ending with love. And given how little the world we live in values love, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, and radical hospitality I think that makes all of us mighty queer.

Now, all of that said, what does Jesus's vision offer those of us who identify as trans, non-binary, genderqueer, bisexual, lesbian, gay, or otherwise gender-creative or sexually diverse? In a word: everything. We, like everyone else, are invited to co-conspire in building the kin-dom of God where all beings can flourish. We, like everyone else, are invited to grow in love, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, and radical hospitality. We, like everyone else who falls outside the purity code, are assured that we are utterly, wholly, completely, fully, joyfully loved exactly as we are. What better news could there be?

We who have been brutally humbled by the cisheteropatriarchy, are now exalted – not because we are better than anyone else – we aren't – but because we are exactly as precious to God as are those who have brutally humbled us. Those of us who are queer while benefitting from other social identities, such as being white, are invited to understand how cisheterosexism has harmed us, to commit to our own healing, and to commit to working against white supremacy and any other form of inequality from which we benefit, so that we begin to stop causing harm to others and help them to flourish instead. This is part of what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves, which is part of what it means to love God.

On Thursday Pastor Mallory and I participated in the interfaith Big Gay Blessing. The (heterosexual) pastor of Christ the King Lutheran Church had her congregation fill out messages of blessing. We were all invited to take a message home after the gathering. The one I found said "You are a child of God!" on one side; on the other side, it read, "Be loved. Be kind. Be you." I cannot think of a better encapsulation of Jesus's message or a better way to end this reflection.

The good news of Jesus Christ is that the kin-dom of God is queer. Let us rejoice and be exceedingly glad.