

## The Kingdom of God is Queer: A Pride Sermon

- Amanda Udis-Kessler, High Plains Church UU, July 17, 2011; updated June 15, 2022

Reading: Luke 13:20-21

And again he said, “To what should I compare the Kingdom of God?” It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.

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In 2009, I went to the Mountain Desert district annual conference of the Unitarian Universalist Association, where singer and activist Holly Near gave the keynote speech, which was really more of a keynote sing with brief stories between the songs. We all sang along and had a marvelous time. When Holly got to “Singing for Our Lives,” which we often sing during pride services, she introduced it with an explanation for a recent change of words in one of the verses. Back in 1979, when Holly wrote the song in response to the aftermath of Harvey Milk’s murder, it was perfectly reasonable to sing “gay and straight together,” the words that still appear in our hymnal’s version of the song. But increasingly lesbians wanted to be acknowledged separately, because “gay” came to refer mostly to men. And then us darned bisexuals had to come along and complicate matters. More recently, we have been adding the T to LGBT, recognizing that while gender identity and sexuality might not be identical matters, we share important struggles and are part of a larger community. The circle keeps expanding. For Holly, this raised a problem – what to do about the verse that starts, “We are gay and straight together and we are singing, singing for our lives?” Fortunately, Holly came up with a solution. Here is what she had us all sing that night: “We are all in this together and we are singing, singing for our lives.”

We are all in this together. We are singing, singing for our lives. The circle keeps expanding. Here is the good news for us this Pride Day 2011: The Kingdom of God is queer.

Okay, a lot of you in this room are heterosexual and you are probably wondering what a queer Kingdom of God has to do with you. And for the many of you in this room for whom Christianity falls anywhere between deeply problematic and not your cup of tea, you could be forgiven for thinking, there’s no good news in this for me. Well, friends, bear with me for just a few minutes. We’re going to get from the Kingdom of God to the beloved community. But there’s a good reason to start with the language attributed to Yeshua ben Miriam, or as we commonly call him, Jesus.

The biblical scholars I trust the most have pointed out 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 of the places were pretty lousy. At least some of the Jewish leaders seemed to have responded to this situation by stressing the importance of purity as a way to hold the Jewish community together in the face of intermittent persecution and routine economic exploitation. And, at least according to the Jesus stories, plenty of Jews were not able to maintain purity, for a

variety of reasons. So here's a group of people struggling to meet the demands of their own community while facing poverty and Roman militarism. Not a lot of good news for them.

Then along comes yet another one of the many prophets and potential messiahs of the era. Only this one says some different things. In his many parables and aphorisms, Jesus claims that the world that the holy intended for the Jews and built for them is just the opposite of the imperialism and dehumanization of Caesar's empire. It's a world turned upside down, a world of radical hospitality and forgiveness, in which the hierarchies of the day are rejected in both word and deed. Jesus puts his vision into practice by eating with or healing pretty much everyone he encounters regardless of gender, class, ethnicity, religion, social status, cleanness, and possibly even sexuality. When we sing that there are all kinds of people around the welcome table and no fancy style there, we are remembering a kind of inclusion to which we still aspire today, whatever our personal relationship with Christianity.

Possibly the strangest thing that Jesus ever said about the Kingdom of God was that it was impure, unclean, not the model of holy separation that Jews expected from the Torah but something actually defiling, namely yeast or leaven. Specifically, the Kingdom is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures, or about 50 pounds, of flour until all of it was leavened. Baking bread sounds great to us and in fact I have been enjoying Phoebe's recent bout of bread-baking very much, but we should remember that the Jews expected an unleavened kingdom. This expectation came from the story of the Exodus, in which God's presence and demands were identified with unleavened bread. Before and during Jesus' time, leaven stood for moral corruption, and in fact Jesus used the term in other places metaphorically to mean exactly that: 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, this guy 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. (I know, I know, we hate that word.) Doesn't matter if you are a Roman centurion or a tax collector.

So how would we translate that today? We still live in a world where normalcy is vertical and hierarchical and most of us fail to be normal in one way or another. We still have purity codes, don't we? Anyone remember the magazine ad from years 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 able-bodied or 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.

But we have good news, and we don't have to rely on Jesus or Christianity for it, though our liberal religion does come down through those roots. Our Unitarian heritage teaches us that there is a unity underlying all things that excludes no one and nothing, from which we emerge, which is always part of us. Our Universalist heritage teaches us that the unity underlying all things draws all of us back to it eventually, that no matter what we do we are part of that grand design,

that ultimate oneness, however we envision it. I would say that's awfully good news. It says that we really are going to sit at the welcome table one of these days. And not just those of us in this room. All of us.

But our work isn't just to sit at the welcome table, it's to set that table and welcome others to it. The holy has no hands but ours, and while most Unitarian Universalists don't talk about bringing the Kingdom of God anymore, we do talk about building and being the beloved community. The beloved community is our vision of a world in which purity codes really don't matter, in which all of us are blessed and made whole, and in which each of us lives to bless each other and help each other become whole. I bet most of us in this room have failed our society's version of the purity test. I bet most of us in this room are queer in one way or another, maybe not sexually, maybe in some other way. But in the beloved community it does not matter. We're here to transform ourselves and transform the world, beginning and ending with love. We are, indeed, here to stand and sit and recline and dance and sing and ponder and talk and listen and hope and heal on the side of love. That's what makes us the beloved community. And I must say, if you look at the world we live in and how little it values love compared to lesser goods, I think that makes us all mighty queer. The Kingdom of God is queer. The beloved community is bent. And so much the better for it.

We heard about a marvelous beloved community today in the story for all ages, "And Tango Makes Three." This community existed in the Central Park Zoo in my native New York City. When the male penguins Roy and Silo spent all their time together, winding their necks around each other and ignoring the female penguins, their keeper didn't think, what evil, sinful penguins. He didn't decide that this was proof that the apocalypse was coming. He didn't send them for reparative therapy or kick them out of the zoo for being perverts. No, he thought they must be in love. And he supported and facilitated their desire to deepen that love by raising a family. What a lovely example of the beloved community – and one that is even inter-species! Talk about the expanding circle!

This is our hope and our joy and our gratitude and our obligation: the beloved community bids everyone welcome, those who come with weary spirits seeking rest, those who come with troubles, those who come hurt and afraid, those who come with hope and anticipation, those who come proud and joyous (and what a wonderful day today is to come proud and joyous), those who seek a new faith, and those who are returning home. Whoever we are, whatever we are, wherever we are on our journeys, the beloved community bids us welcome.

One last thought. Some of you may have noticed that I have said nothing about sexuality as such today. I have not talked about Stonewall or Harvey Milk or the recent homophobic hate crimes that put our city to shame. I have not talked specifically about the blessings of same-sex love, of coming out, of transitioning among a supportive community. Why not? Because lifting up the entire beloved community is not about putting down myself or my LGBTQ friends and loved ones. Quite the opposite: today is a day to honor our particular LGBTQ gifts as part of a much larger tapestry, one in which all of our gifts are woven together without being reduced to a blur of color. Every shade of the rainbow remains sharp in the tapestry of the beloved community. I will be forever grateful for LGBTQ people, a people who I experience as my people. And I will also be forever grateful for everyone who dares to pitch in and work on the beloved community.

There's no contradiction. The beloved community is made up of countless individuals. It contains a variety of social groups. And ultimately, it is one large, division-less body of blessing.

My friends, we are all in this together and the circle keeps expanding. You can call it the Kingdom of God. You can call it the beloved community. You can call it whatever inspires you and wakes you up and puts you to work setting the welcome table and taking your rightful place at that table. If you are aching for that welcome table, if you live on the side of love today, if you're here to build and be the beloved community, and if you are ready to go marching down the streets of Colorado Springs in the name of love, then let's join in song and a final blessing before putting our feet to work. Amen, and blessed be.