

Sermon, June 29, 2025 – Grete Norquist

Please pray with me.

Reconciling God, source of Life, draw us to Yourself, that we may be drawn closer to one another. Amen.

Fair warning: The weather forecast for this sermon includes a one hundred percent chance of showers.

When Pastor Lara and I first talked about me preaching during Pride Month, I asked what she thought you all would need and want to hear. Immediately she responded, “Tell your story.” In the time-honored tradition of most people called by God to do something, I was taken aback. Nearly a quarter of my and my husband Peter’s extended family belong to the LGBTQ+ community, but I do not one. I’m a straight, cisgender, middle-aged white woman—and my story doesn’t necessarily seem like the most important one to tell as we celebrate Pride. But as a member of this Reconciling in Christ congregation, I eventually realized that I do have a testimony to share, and it is this: how God changed my heart to accept and honor queer people. So this morning I will tell you just a few parts of my journey. I believed, as I was taught growing up, to “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” Now I believe that such a doctrine is harmful and untenable. And it is partly because of my changed theology that I have become a scholar and college instructor not only of English literature but also of Women’s, Gender, & Sexuality Studies.

I will try to avoid slipping into apologetics this morning, because there are other people who have laid out the theological and scientific arguments for inclusivity better than I ever could, especially in a relatively short sermon. But I *will* link my testimony to our readings for today, because (even though it may seem unlikely on the surface) they do speak to one of the most challenging aspects of my journey: grappling with scripture. The interpretation of scripture was one of the biggest obstacles for me in embracing the goodness of LGBTQ+ identities, and it remains so for many people—perhaps for some of you.

This won't be a neat and tidy three-point sermon—but I'll start out sharing a bit of my story, and then we'll look at our biblical stories, and then I'll talk about one more piece of my story. Sound like a deal?

I first came to Issaquah in 2007, fresh from completing my undergrad degree and primed for a year of biblical studies at Trinity Lutheran College. (That was the college's final year at their Providence Heights campus.) At Trinity I experienced two extraordinary things.

The first was that my professors invited, or rather, *encouraged* me to read scripture using all the literary skills I had just learned as an undergraduate student. Suddenly the Bible became alive to me in a way I hadn't experienced before, and I was repeatedly astonished by the depth of insight waiting to be uncovered in the text. For example: Chapter and verse? Artificial constructions added to the text for convenience. When I set aside those constraints, suddenly I could recognize a gospel's narrative structure—how one story led into or mirrored another. Troubling, impenetrable passage? Perhaps it would make more sense when interpreted within the larger framework of the book it appears in, or within the historical and cultural context of *when* the book was written, by whom, for whom, how they lived, and what they believed about God and the world.

In my literary education, I had learned that all reading involves interpretation—and at Trinity it was reinforced for me that this includes our reading of scripture. Sometimes we know we're doing this, and we call that act of biblical interpretation *exegesis*. Sometimes we *don't* realize we're engaged in interpretation. We think that's just the way things are, just the way the world works, just the Truth with a capital T. And that's often where we get ourselves into the most trouble.

In Trinity's environment, with my literary skills newly brought to bear on my life of faith, I read more interpretation of the so-called "clobber passages" that are leveled against queer people. In earlier years, I'd frequently felt that the scholars interpreting those passages in an inclusive way were stretching the text, trying to make it say what they wanted it to say. A text does not just mean whatever we want it to mean; there are limits to reasonable interpretation, based in the finite content of the text itself. Yet as I read more biblical scholarship, this inclusive analysis of the grammar, narrative context, and historical and cultural factors compelled me.

So, extraordinary experience number one for me at Trinity Lutheran College was a revolutionized relationship with scripture, that had me devouring the Bible with what felt like wide-opened eyes—and beginning to see that scripture was not as hostile to LGBTQ+ people as I had thought.

The second extraordinary thing I encountered at Trinity was an unexpectedly large number of LGBTQ+ Christians. And what floored me about them was not just their love for Jesus. What astounded me was how many of them planned to go into ministry. They were so sure of God's love for them and so sure of God's call on their lives that they intended to enter ministry even though they *knew* they would face hostility, even though they *knew* they would face rejection, even though they *knew* there would be bureaucratic barriers to their very ordination. Keep in mind that I was meeting these people in 2007, and in the ELCA at least, it wasn't until two years later that our Churchwide Assembly voted to allow member congregations to call and ordain gay and lesbian pastors in committed monogamous relationships. My queer friends were prepared to face all the challenges of discrimination for the sake of the gospel, when they could've chosen to do anything else with their lives instead, and protect themselves from so much backlash. Their example filled me with deep respect and admiration, and furthered God's work of softening my heart. They were already in ministry without even knowing it, and I was one of the people they were ministering to.

But it's uncomfortable to have your heart softened and your mind changed. It's uncomfortable to go through theological growing pains. I often felt guilty about turning away from the teachings I had been brought up to believe. I worried that meant I was in fact turning away from God. Although I didn't conceive of it exactly this way at the time, it felt like rejecting the conservative heteronormative interpretations of scripture meant I was rejecting scripture itself—kind of like King Jehoiakim in our reading today from Jeremiah, brazenly disregarding the word of God and throwing it, piece by piece, into the fire.

The scroll that Jehoiakim burns had taken Jeremiah and his scribe Baruch about a year to write. Jeremiah had served as a prophet for some twenty-odd years at this point, and the Lord commands him to record all of the prophecies revealed to him over that

time, compiling them into one document to be read aloud to the people of Judah. When this collection of messages from God is finally read in their place of worship, it makes a profound impression on some of the government leaders. They want to share this word of God with King Jehoiakim, but they warn Baruch and Jeremiah to go into hiding first—which turns out to be very sound advice. Not only does Jehoiakim display his contempt for God’s word by burning the writings, section by section, he also orders the arrest of Jeremiah and Baruch. Safely hidden away, they rewrite all the prophecies...and, some scholars say, we have the book of Jeremiah to show for it. The king dies while Jerusalem lies under siege by the Babylonians.

Jehoiakim gives us a clear example of how *not* to respond to the word of God. Rejecting it and discarding it because we don’t like what it has to say—obviously that is not the path forward if we want to remain in relationship with God.

But it is also possible to have the opposite problem, and get so wrapped up in the scriptures that we lose sight of Jesus. That might seem counterintuitive, but our gospel reading for today shows us how easily that can happen—and what we should do instead.

Now, I want to zoom out a little bit to what leads up to this passage from John 5, so that we know who Jesus is talking to and why. Jesus has gone to Jerusalem for a religious festival (John doesn’t tell us which one). While he’s there, Jesus encounters a man who has been ill for thirty-eight years. Even though it’s the sabbath, Jesus heals him, and tells the newly healed man to pick up his mat and walk. The religious authorities object to this: both Jesus and the man he healed were breaking sabbath laws that prohibit work. Jesus responds to their criticisms with a sermon explaining his authority to do such things and his relationship with God the Father. This morning we read roughly the second half of that discourse, but it’s the last couple verses that I will focus on. Those tie most directly into the question of how we should approach scripture.

The translation I read for you a little bit ago puts the text this way. (Keep in mind Jesus is saying this to the Jewish religious leaders who were challenging his actions.) “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”

I'm not a scholar of ancient Greek, but studying this passage with my dad, who's a Lutheran pastor, I learned that the Greek verb for *search*, as it's used here, can be read two different ways. It makes sense interpreted in the indicative, a simple statement of fact: "You search the scriptures." But it also can be read as an imperative, a command: "Search the scriptures!" Which in this scenario would be an ironic or sarcastic remark—because these are religious experts Jesus is addressing, people who would already know the scriptures backwards and forwards. Their knowledge of the law was part of the reason they were so upset with Jesus and his rule-breaking ways.

Bible commentator Frederick Bruner offers an alternative translation of these verses which I think illuminates a valuable way of receiving what Jesus has to say here, not only to the Jewish leaders but to us: "You do pore over the scriptures, because you think that it is in them that you have deep lasting life, and it is true that these scriptures are bearing witness to me. But the big problem is this: you refuse to come to me to receive that life." Knowing the scriptures backwards and forwards won't do us much good if we don't also know Jesus. Jesus himself is our *source* of life and our *model for* life—the One to whom we look, when we need to know whether it's okay to do things like heal someone on the sabbath, or welcome queer people into the church, or make peace with our own sexual orientation or gender identity.

Jesus, rather inconveniently, isn't recorded as having anything to say about queer people. But we know who Jesus hung out with, right? He chatted with the social outcasts, ate dinner with those whom everyone else despised, paid attention to the people society ignored, touched those whom everyone else shied away from. And in doing so, Jesus offered them Life. He offered Himself in relationship. When I search the scriptures, that is what I find.

[[And we know the reality—some of us here, or watching online, *live* it—that people with LGBTQ+ identities face marginalization, discrimination, and even criminalization in this country. Christians are not merely taking part in oppressing queer people but are often leading the charge. For example, earlier this month, the Southern Baptist Convention—the largest Protestant denomination in the United States—voted overwhelmingly in favor of a resolution that, among numerous other things, calls upon its members to actively endeavor to overturn laws and court rulings that support LGBTQ+ people.

In her capacity as the President of the Alliance of Baptists, Rev. Lisa Dunson says about this resolution, “The Southern Baptist Convention drapes itself in scripture, only to distort it into a tool of exclusion.” Or in other words—the SBC has searched the scriptures and then weaponized them against some of the most vulnerable people amongst us. I draw attention to this not because the SBC is the only branch of the Church to have done such a thing. Far from it. But they are a warning to us. Their actions remind us that we need to seek Life, with a capital L, as it is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ.]]

It is on my heart to tell you about one more person along my journey. And that is Lana.

Lana was one of my mothers-in-law—the first out trans person to become part of my life. She was smart, she was funny, she was one of the best storytellers I’ve ever known. Most people sow their wild oats when they’re young, but Lana sowed them for as long as her COPD and other health issues would let her—so her stories were often outrageous and occasionally illegal, which was particularly funny because she had built a successful career as a prosecutor for the Crown in British Columbia.

Lana was also trans. When we were first getting to know each other—when she and Peter’s ex-stepmom Kathee started dating—I still didn’t really “get” what would compel someone to be trans. I wasn’t sure how I felt about it, nor did I know what to believe about it from a biblical point of view. But I knew I loved Lana more and more deeply, the more time we spent together. And one day as we were talking, Lana shared that for her, a turning point had come when she realized that her only viable options were to live as a woman, or to die. In that instant, I was overwhelmed with the assurance that of course life was the answer. What more profound reminder could I experience, that the God we worship is a God who calls us into Life?

Months later, Peter and I were honored to stand in Kathee and Lana’s wedding party. And later, nearly three years ago now, we were honored and grieved to scatter Lana’s ashes, alongside Kathee and other members of our family, in the forest near their home on Vancouver Island.

“Love the sinner, hate the sin.” That’s where I started.

Lana was not someone most people would call a saint. She was a spiritual person, but not exactly a Christian, although she often asked us to pray for her. She could be self-centered, and she often had so much to say, she would talk over and interrupt others. When someone dear to Peter and me came out as nonbinary, she said disparaging and hurtful things about them to us, on multiple occasions, because she believed that they needed to just pick a gender, male or female, no other options. So yes, Lana was a sinner. And I still love that sinner so very, very much, even though she is no longer with us. But being a woman was not one of her sins. Lana chose life. May we look to Christ and receive Life, too.

Amen.