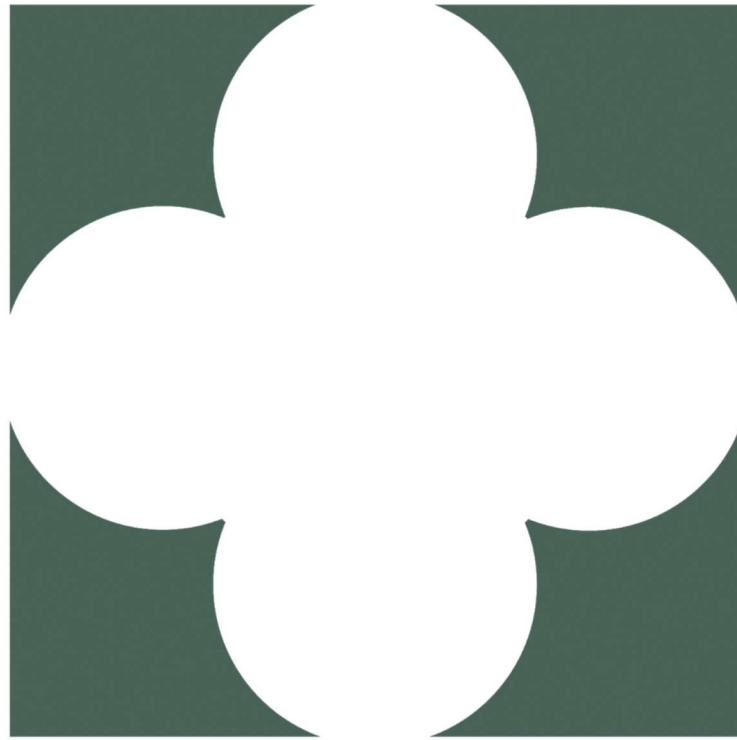


Tell It Plainly

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seattle first baptist

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John 10:22-30

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At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Judeans gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah,[a] tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."

CW: I will be talking about reproductive rights and justice and abortion in this sermon. If this topic is triggering to you, please take care of yourself and do what you need to do with no judgment.

Note about language: Instead of saying "women," I will be using language of "people with uteruses." This is because transgender women may not have uteruses and transgender men may have uteruses. And, some nonbinary people do have uteruses as well.

"Tell us plainly! How long will you keep us in suspense? What do you really mean? Who ARE you?"

Jesus is confronted by these questions in our scripture today, which takes place in Jerusalem, during the Feast of Dedication, which has become the holiday of Hannukah. This festival commemorates the rededication of the Jerusalem temple by the Maccabees in 126 BCE, after it was desecrated by a Seleucid Empire king. The Maccabees are often remembered as freedom fighters, and God's divine caretaking remembered in the story of the oil that lit the temple menorah for eight days and nights.

The Judeans, probably including Jewish religious officials and temple authorities and other pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem for their festival observance, asked Jesus about his identity. Perhaps they had heard about him, perhaps they had seen him doing miracles, perhaps people had been whispering about what he was saying about God's heavenly kin-dom. What is clear is that there was some confusion about Jesus' identity and his role, and some exasperation as the people tried to figure out what Jesus was about.

At this point in the Gospel, the only person who has correctly identified him unequivocally as the Messiah is the Samaritan woman at the well in chapter 4. An outsider, an “other” to the author of John, is the only one to see and claim Jesus’ identity. All other conversations about his identity with his disciples and crowds and religious leaders are in the context of a question: they want him to admit his identity plainly, and they are, for some reason, hesitating to just say it out loud.

They are saying to him, “Tell us in plain language—are you really the Messiah, the one we’ve heard about?” and Jesus is saying, “Well, if you’ve been paying attention, my words and my actions would have shown you that I am!” But I wonder if Jesus is also wanting THEM to tell him plainly that they understand his identity.

Jesus tells the people wondering who he is that he has already shown them who he is—through his words and deeds. This is a big deal in the Gospel of John—words and deeds are the core of Jesus’ ministry. This gospel is known as “the spiritual gospel” because there’s so much theological imagery and spiritual illustration woven through the stories of Jesus’ life. For example, today is Good Shepherd Sunday because the image of the Good Shepherd is a central image in the Gospel of John, and Jesus says “I am the Good Shepherd.” Then in our scripture passage today, we hear Jesus again appealing to the imagery of the shepherd to make his point about God’s unconditional love and his identity being apparent through his action. Jesus uses the image of shepherding to describe the deeds that a good shepherd does, how he protects his flock and seeks out the lost members.

The drive to be understood is something that most of us have experienced at some point. At our deepest level, we want someone to know who we are and get what we are about. Someone who can tell our identity and call us into being our fullest, whole-est selves. I like to think the people may have been wanting to be seen and understood in their confusion, and that Jesus was also wanting them to see him and name that they understood who he is and what he’s about.

Gary D. Jones in the *Feasting on the Word* commentary says, “The trouble with talking plainly about the things of God is that the things of God are anything but plain. When a person begins speaking with unequivocal certainty about God, this is a sure sign that the person is no longer speaking about God. We can speak with unequivocal certainty about things our minds

can grasp, but God is not one of those things. God grasps us; we do not grasp God.”

So it’s complicated to “tell it plainly” when it comes to God.

And on the other hand, it’s not complicated. In our Scripture today, Jesus says we already belong to God and no one can snatch us out of God’s hand. And if that isn’t good news this week, I’m not sure what is.

In my sermon a few weeks before Easter on the woman who anointed Jesus and washed his feet with her hair, I commented that the Church has not been kind to bodies. This is not a mistake. This is by design. There have been movements over the past two thousand years to denigrate the body, to reduce it in importance, to spiritualize everything about Jesus so that we wouldn’t have to think about how he had a body and how bodies are important. Because if bodies are important, that means we have to get real about what it means to care for bodies. And if we get real about what it means to care for bodies, that means we have to talk about food; about housing; about poverty; about healthcare; about racial justice and the carceral system; about education; and about sex and reproductive health and justice. And the church doesn’t always like to talk about those things. But we’re gonna go there. We have to go there. We have to go there because these issues affect people in this building—they affect me and you and our loved ones, they affect our children and our neighbors, and the future of this world.

We have to have the courage to tell it plainly about how our bodies are experiencing words and deeds done in the name of one group’s beliefs.

This week has been hard for many as we read the news about the potential reversal of the Roe v. Wade decision in the Supreme Court leak. I’ve heard from folks who fought so hard in the 60s and 70s for legalizing abortion care, and I hear the heartbreak. “Why are we going backwards?” “We fought so hard and this will be the beginning of generations of people with uteruses who have fewer rights with bodily autonomy than their parents and grandparents.” I’ve heard from people who have had abortions or whose loved ones have, people who have had to access abortion care because of the health of the pregnant person or because of devastating medical revelations about the fetus’s potential to live independently.

Let me be real here:

I’m not sure how many people with uteruses of child-bearing age you have heard preach, but I am here. I have a uterus. I menstruate. And my

bodily autonomy, and the bodily autonomy of millions of people with similar body parts, is being threatened. This is not new, not at all, but this is on my heart and my mind this week. The news about *Roe v. Wade* is difficult. It is scary. It is disheartening and depressing. And it is a matter of faith.

And so as we consider this scripture where Jesus is pointing out that his words and his actions have testified to his identity, I wonder: how do our words and deeds testify to our beliefs? How does what we say and do show who we are? As we hear people in our scripture story wrestling with recognizing Jesus' identity through his teachings and actions, I wonder: what does faithful speech look like for us right now?

In Washington, because our state is one that has protections for abortion, and in Western Washington we have multiple places and providers that can help people with uteruses access the healthcare they need, it may seem like less of an immediate issue. But we cannot allow the idea of "Well, at least we're ok because we're in Washington" or "it's not affecting us as much here" to make us complacent. And we also cannot give in to the narrative of exceptionalism just because we live in a progressive city in a moderately progressive state. This past week I've heard people talk dismissively about "backwards red states" or "Republican majority states" where anti-*Roe* sentiment flourishes. But there are brilliant people who have been fighting very hard for many years in those states, whom we cannot dismiss. We cannot pretend to be the Shepherd that guides these less-intelligent sheep. No, as Jesus says, he is the shepherd and no one can snatch us out of the Parent's hand. We are all sheep, in this together.

Faithful speech for Jesus-followers looks different for us in Seattle, Washington than it does in Tennessee, in a small rural town where my friend Claire is an Episcopal priest. While visiting this week, she told me that the work for her and other progressive churches and clergy is going to be about being available to accompany people across state lines to access abortion services; collecting financial aid that can be available to people who need to travel; comprehensive sexual and reproductive education that is not available in public schools.

In this country today, there's a lot of talk about what "Christians" believe and what they do and how they act. And it's easy for us (or I guess, I'll just speak for myself and say it's all too easy for ME) to distance myself and say, "Well, I'm not THAT kind of Christian." That kind of Christian that threatens abortion providers. That kind of Christian that calls for the death penalty.

That kind of Christian that covers up sexual abuse in the church. That kind of Christian that shouts for bombs to be dropped on countries threatening our capitalistic way of life. That kind of Christian that cries for “the right to be born” but then dismisses asks for universal healthcare and food security and housing for all and universal education.

There’s a whole lot of Christians like that out there, and though we may feel distanced from them, to folks on the outside of this religious tradition, they’re not seeing a whole lot of difference.

That is an UNCOMFORTABLE truth. But it’s there.

On Friday night I was humbled and blessed to attend the Beyoncé Mass at St. Mark’s Cathedral, a worship service centered on womanist ethics, that is, centering Black women’s experiences and wellbeing towards liberation. This incredible service was curated by Rev. Yolanda Norton, who, while delivering the sermon, said “I have no problem talking about God, but I have a complicated time talking about the Church.”

As Christians, and as Baptists, we are familiar with this sentiment. We are much more diverse than the media portray. We know that some people benefit from the illusion that all Christians are like fundamentalist Southern Baptists. How do they benefit? By controlling the narrative that THE God is THEIR God, giving them the right to draw those lines we’ve talked about before: who’s in and out, who’s with me and against me, who’s righteous and sinful, who’s like me and who’s different, who is worthy of treatment as a whole human being and who is unfit to make decisions about their life.

So let me ask plainly: generally, we are very clear about what kind of Christians we are NOT, but how are we showing what we are FOR? What are we doing as Jesus-followers to behave like we believe? What words are we saying, what deeds are we doing, to honor the Way of this brown-skinned poor man born under oppression and killed by state violence of the empire? How do our words and our deeds testify to our beliefs and our integrity of faith?

I know you’re doing things. I know we’re doing things. I’ve seen you. I’ve been with you. But while we’re planting trees and marching for Black lives and advocating for voting rights and picketing to support unionization and feeding hungry people, let’s be clear about our intentions: we’re not just doing these things because that’s what “good people” do, but we are doing them because we are convicted by our faith. We are speaking and acting with the conviction that the Way of Jesus is a way of love and justice for all

people. As last year's Romney Lecturer Rev. Osagyefo Sekou says, our activism must be grounded in "deep abiding love." And as last week's Romney lecturer Genjo Marinello said, it is when we are grounded in faith that our contemplation leads to actions that change our world.

So how do we tell people who we are and what we believe and how we are committed to living our lives? Through our works that show our deep abiding love, plain as day for all to see and know.

So whether you are moved to donate your financial resources to organizations that provide abortion care in states that may move to make abortions illegal, or you are going to contact an abortion provider to volunteer to be a clinic escort, or you are planning to write and call legislators, or you are going to share your own story of reproductive justice and access, I pray that your actions would be rooted in your deep abiding love for all people who are affected in some way or another by threats to individual bodily autonomy.

Beloved church, I pray that we are living our lives every day in ways that lead to no one being confused about who we are and what we are about. I pray that our words and our actions point to our beliefs and our identities as people who follow in the Way of Jesus called the Christ.

So let's tell it plainly.

Reproductive rights are human rights.

Abortion is healthcare.

On this holiday when many honor mothers and mothering, let's advocate for actual policies that enhance the lives and wellbeing of parents and children.

And as we are moved to tell our experiences plainly, I pray we are moved to listen deeply as well, to people who have had to make heartbreaking choices for the sake of their own health; to people whose bodily autonomy has been violated; to survivors of violence who have had their choice to bear children taken away; to people whose relationships and marriages are on the line because of the logical next steps in the promotion of invalidating laws protecting personal privacy.

Writer Adrienne Rich says, “When a woman tells the truth she is creating the possibility for more truth around her.” And I pray that we all, regardless of gender, will tell our truths, even when our voices shake, even when we are told to be silent, even when it is scary. Because when one person has the courage to speak out, others are empowered to share.

Beloveds, do not hide your story. Do not dim your light. Do not downplay your experiences. Do not hedge around your convictions of justice. No, be bold and wise and compassionate, but let your love of justice, your love of self, your love for your children and grandchildren, your love of neighbor, and your belief in the divine blessedness of all created beings inform your words and actions, so that we would speak and act faithfully in this time and in this place.

May it be so.

Benediction

May the Lord Bless you and keep you.

May God's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you.

May God give you grace not to sell yourselves short,

Grace to risk something big for something good,

Grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything but
truth, and too small for anything but love.

May God take your minds and think through them.

May God take your lips and speak through them.

May God take your hands and work through them.

May God take your hearts and set them on fire.