

St. Luke's UMC  
 September 17, 2023  
*Fall Series*

*Stumped*

## ***What Happens When Someone I Love Comes Out?***

*Genesis 1:26,31 and Luke 15:30-32*

**John and Noel** are members of St. Luke's. They are both physicians who come from big families. Noel is 4<sup>th</sup> of five girls and John is 6<sup>th</sup> of seven boys! They saw other members of their family acknowledge they were gay and watched how those families walked through those experiences. As doctors they knew the percentage of population that is gay and sometimes wondered how they would react if one of their children came out.

As it turns out this is what happened ten years ago when their son, 14 at the time, acknowledged to his parents that he was gay. He was terrified. He knew his parents were active churchgoers and feared how they might respond. The son's experience at church, a different one from St. Luke's, was not so welcoming and understanding. He assumed his parents' faith will mean that they wouldn't be accepting.

But because his folks had been considering this topic from a faith perspective, it shaped how they were able to support their son and show acceptance. For them it was a matter of asking simple questions like what the mission of the church is. It is to make disciples. But how can you make a disciple of someone if they are told they are living in sin simply for being who God made them to be? They heard church people say that homosexuals will go to hell. And they couldn't reconcile the grace of Christ with such a feeling.

Yet their faith helped them, particularly finding a church that is welcoming. They did the hard work of understanding this topic, what they believe, and how they felt Jesus would want them to love their child.

In this series called *Stumped* we have been looking at questions you have been asked by children, other family members and friends which you say you would like help answering. Today we consider the question, **"What do I do when someone I love comes out?"**

This question is very different from prior weeks. It doesn't sound like a directly theological question, but for a person of faith it is. It gets to the root of what we believe about God's creation, sin, God's desire for human community, and God's will for our lives.

Let me also say that I know addressing topics like this is a turn off to some. They say, "Why do we need to talk about such things? Isn't this just trying to be woke and bring divisive matters into the church? Peoples' personal matters should be kept private so let's just talk about God's love."

That's an understandable response, but we should consider a couple things. For one, the church has been responsible for much of the division and hurt toward Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender people. Therefore it's important that the church name LGBT persons in expressing God's love and acceptance of them. Bad treatment by other churches gives a responsibility to good ones.

And then, the other thing I would point out is that not talking about this topic has not helped most churches. Our United Methodist Church is dying as a denomination because many congregations haven't had conversations. People who would like to understand and think about this matter haven't been given a chance. And now, many United Methodists are finding themselves without a church home. So not talking about it hasn't seemed to help.

So this morning I want us to consider a question so many families have wrestled with and will wrestle with. Families of faith want to know how they can keep their family together without losing their faith. What do you do when someone you love comes out, when someone you care about trusts you with their truth?

First, as a person of faith you **hold onto your theology of creation**. Now that sounds rather impersonal doesn't it? But think about the importance of what we believe. Genesis 1 affirms, **"So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them...God saw everything that God had made and indeed it was very good."**

I remember a conversation that began my change of thinking on this topic. I wasn't always so open. In seminary I felt the Bible was clear and that such a choice was incompatible with scriptural truth. But when I lived in England I met a 44 year old college chaplain who shared his truth with me, that he was gay. He asked me a startling question, "Rob, could you choose to be homosexual?" I admitted that I could not. He went on to say, "As difficult as it would be for you to change the way you are, it is just as difficult for me." And when he recounted what it is like to live in constant fear of rejection by family and friends and congregants, he said with tears in his eyes, "Why would anyone choose this?"

That made me do some wrestling. I had to pay attention to science that was providing clear evidence about sexual identity as being who we are, not something we just choose. And I had to pay attention to my Bible. God created humans in God's image. That is an image of love. Who are we to say God that because of the way God created someone they are less significant or deserving of love just as heterosexual people?

Now I thought twice about including the part of that verse that says "male and female God created them." Because it is very binary. And someone who don't identify as binary would say, "yeah, the Bible still leaves me out." But notice it says, "Male AND Female God created them." God created them. Them doesn't necessarily mean plural or more than one. I believe this verse can include those who are non-binary. **God created him, her and them.**

Now, creation theology is a starting point, but when it comes to relationships we are more than issues. Relationship is involved. So what else can we do when someone we love comes out?

Here I want to use the most famous of Jesus' parables, *The Prodigal Son*. It, of course, is the story of a father's son who is rebellious. He wants to get on with his life and asks the dad **for his inheritance now**. When does one normally receive an inheritance? When the parent dies. How would you feel if you were the dad?

That's the point of the story, not to dig into exactly how the son spent the money. Not the specific deeds he committed but how a dad would feel brokenhearted, maybe even betrayed by a child. It's also important to consider context. Without stating it, Jesus paints the picture of a Jewish religious family, in a very religious setting. Religious laws would have dominated cultural values and norms. A child's behavior now has to take into account how other people would interpret it as well as the foreboding idea of whether God would frown upon that person.

But things fall apart for the son. He repents and decides to return home, as much as anything out of a survival instinct. While still faraway from the house, the father sees the son. What does that say? The father probably spends everyday looking, hoping, waiting. The Father goes running to the son.

Before getting to the end of the story the listener already gets the idea that this Father symbolizes the behavior of God. God respects our decision-making, but God is one who waits and longs and hopes. Instead of saying to the son, "You have disgraced me, leave my property at once!" Rather, he embraces the son. **He calls for the son's robe** to be put on him. Has the family signet ring put back on his finger. And calls for a feast. What did all that mean? He is made a son again.

And this is a slight detail, but if you read this story in Luke 15, you might notice that the son had a speech prepared. It was an, "I'm sorry speech," that shows his repentance. But the Father welcomes him home without needing to hear that. We'll come back to that idea in a moment.

Then the story shifts to the elder son. Elder is key. In Jewish tradition the elder son is the one who receives the lion's share of inheritance, twice what his younger brother already wasted. In other words he is quite wealthy, much more than the younger son would have been, because of nothing more than birth order. He's been living in grace everyday of his life, but you can't tell it.

He's angry. Not at his brother, but his father. He's worked everyday for his dad. He's been the obedient one, but the Father welcomes home his brother and it makes him mad. He has spent his life trying to earn acceptance and approval and it makes him mad that life doesn't work that way.

The elder brother symbolizes the religious community and what can happen to people who bind God's love to their good behavior. The story ends with that issue unresolved.

We don't know if the elder son ever joined the party. But what is clear is that the religious community doesn't restrict God's love. And while laws and right behavior is important, that must always be scrutinized. The community's values must align with God's mercy, and mercy triumphs over judgement.

I share this story with this particular question today, because there are perhaps a few more lessons here that can help us when someone we love comes out. Not only should we focus on our theology of creation, but we should also **Love as God Loves**. That's the lesson of the parable. The Father represents God's love. William Barclay said this parable has really been misnamed as "The Prodigal Son." It should be called "The Story of the Loving Father." Jesus paints a picture of God's love and what it means to love that like God.

There is human freedom. The Father allows the son to leave and make his decisions. But he never stops loving. Sometimes when we keep looking, hoping and waiting, we find that we experience a change of heart. Godly love as Jesus describes in this story means **we always hold people tighter than principles**.

The late Dr. Cecil Myers told a story about a dad who had a son who was a rebellious, renegade, always getting into trouble; regularly causing heartache for his parents. One day he was talking with another dad, a very principled man. He said to his hurting friend, "If that were my boy I'd let him go." The father of the wayward son replied, "If he were your son, I'd let him go too."

When we love like God we don't so easily let go of people we love.

Then another lesson in this story is **Focus on the Other Person's Need**. This is not easy to do when our first thought is, "What are the neighbors going to think? What are church members going to think? What is our family going to think?" It takes some work and courage to step aside from our own internal reactions to imagine being in the shoes of the loved one who has shared with us, and consider what might they need?

Biblical archaeologist, Jim Fleming, says there is a reason the Father ran to greet his son. He wanted to make sure he reached his son before any villagers did, because they would have felt they had a responsibility to stone the son to death to preserve their village from disgrace. They may have even thought they were doing his family a favor. He ran and restored his son to right relationship in order to save his life.

He placed the needs of his son first in his mind.

And this brings us to a final consideration of this story and of this question, "What do I do when someone I love comes out?" And that is **Focus on the Real Sin**. Some people might respond to this use of *The Prodigal Son* and say, "but wait. The Prodigal was repentant. He wanted to change. He was forgiven. This is a story about confession and acknowledgement of wrong."

There's truth in that. The son for sure violated an Old Testament law. It says in Deuteronomy 21: ***"If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place...Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death."*** (vv18-21)

Now, it doesn't say the rebellious son sinned, but if you're going to kill him, then its clear you are talking about behavior that shouldn't be condoned. And there are lots of behaviors like this mentioned in the Bible. They aren't labeled as sin, but behaviors that the culture at the time did not tolerate. Homosexuality is mentioned in this way.

Of course, not all these behavior are viewed the same today. After all, we don't execute rebellious children. If so, how many of you would still have your kids with you?

We don't have time in this sermon to deal with all the Bible says about Homosexuality, but several years ago I produced a DVD resource called ***Faithful and Inclusive***...

For now, lets understand that sin means broken relationship. The Greek word for sin is *hamartia*. Literally *hamartia* means "to miss the mark." Sin encompasses all the ways we can pull away from God and each other.

So I have always found it interesting that people who deal with a loved one who comes out by shunning them and cutting them off from relationship is willing to commit sin in the process. Sin is broken relationship, so if response to someone we believe is living in sin is to shun or cut off, then we are combating sin with sin.

And at some point you have to ask, what's the real sin?

As the late Bishop Dick Wills used to say, ***"Holiness is important to me. Faithfulness to God is important to me. But not everything is so clear. And if I err I will err on the side of grace."***

What you say? Maybe today's question is very relative to you. Someone you love has shared news with you and you are looking for guidance to know how to make the right response. But maybe you haven't faced that. Its easy not to tune into a message like this, but you never know when someone may come to you and say, "I have something I need to share." It would be good to consider now what your response would be, and if it lines up with Jesus.

So we started this message with a story about church members, let me close with one...

***Sara Wells and Renee Wells*** are members of St. Luke's. They began attending Midtown on opening Sunday and found it to be a place where biblical faithfulness is preached in a community of openness and acceptance. Sara came out to her mom when she was about 17 years old and was fortunate to have a mother who was supportive and understanding. Her being gay was not a problem until she started going to church.

In her early thirties she began seeing someone who was out not only about her sexual identity but also her being Christian. Rene wanted to find someone who would accept her faith as well, so Sara gave it a try. They began attending a church together and heard the powerful good news of the Gospel. There was liberation and freedom in what she heard. She chose to stop drinking and begin doing things to take care of herself. She responded to God's grace by offering her life to Christ and being baptized.

It was wonderful...until she and Rene sought to join a couples class at the church. They didn't exactly fit the requirements of "a couple" for that church. They were told they could not attend, but they could go to women's events, separately. Also, now that they were "out," her baptism would be rescinded. She couldn't be a full member. They couldn't be in leadership in the church and they could not participate in mission trips.

This put them on a search for a church where they could live out their discipleship to Jesus Christ, but in a community where they didn't have to hide. They found that at St. Luke's. They came to Midtown simply to support their friend Beck who is the worship leader, and they experienced a spiritual home.

In my conversation with Sara she said several important things. One is that "coming out" is not a one time event. She came out to her parents, but found she did this over and over again in her life. She had a boss who one day asked about her husband. She felt close to this person and wanted her to know. Another time she had a boss who was a deeply convicted South Baptist, and she didn't want to live in hiding from her. She said, "You never just come out and it's one and done."

And then she said, "It has also helped me not to think of it as coming out, rather I call it 'inviting people in.'" She invites people she cares about to know her and be a full part of her life. She extends trust. She invites people in.

She and Rene said there was one family member not so excited about their relationship. A conservative Christian pastor. He had a hard time accepting. He made it clear he would not be at their wedding. But he didn't close them off. He didn't shun them. He stayed in relationship. He kept learning and understanding and wrestling with the Bible himself. And he changed his mind. He did attend the wedding. And more than that. He helped them prepare the service and he said a prayer for them at their reception.

I think that looks like Jesus. And I think St. Luke's is a church that isn't perfect, but seeks to live out the kind of church Jesus had in mind.

What do you think?

Jesus paints picture of Godly love in the context of human love showing a father showing a father who continues to love no matter what. And you never know, but when we continue to love and stay in relationship, what changes in our own hearts can occur.