

**St Andrew's on the Terrace Sunday 17 November 2019 Transgender Day of Remembrance Pentecost 23****Readings for the Gathering****Hebrew Bible****Leviticus 19:34**

The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God

**Gospel****The Greatest Commandment****Matthew 22: 34-40**

<sup>34</sup> Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. <sup>35</sup> One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: <sup>36</sup> "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

<sup>37</sup> Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' <sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup> And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' <sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

**Contemporary Reading****'Violence toward the Transgender Community'**

<https://www.glaad.org › tdor>

The [2014 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and HIV-affected Hate Violence Report](#) from the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Projects shows that, of the victims murdered, 80% were people of colour, 55% were transgender women, and 50% were transgender women of colour. Transgender women survivors of hate violence were also more likely to experience police violence, physical violence, discrimination, harassment, sexual violence, threats, and intimidation compared to those who were not transgender women. Findings from the ['Injustice at Every Turn'](#) report conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) and the National LGBTQ Task Force showed alarming rates of violence and harassment experienced by the more than 6,000 transgender respondents across a variety of contexts, including educational settings, at work, in interactions with police and with family members, at homeless shelters, accessing public accommodations, and in jails and prisons. As murders of transgender people often go unreported, and the identity of transgender murder victims is often misreported, there is no way to know accurate numbers.

**Reflection for the Gathering****'Unconditional Love'**

A crucial underpinning philosophy in our Western society is dualistic thinking. Things and people are neatly categorised into "either... or" categories. You are for instance, this kind of thinking says, either 'good' or 'bad'. You may be either 'black' or 'white', you might be either 'fat' or 'thin', 'tall' or 'short', 'clever' or 'dumb'.

You may already be protesting in your mind. Yes, these are crude categories, designed to allow us to stop thinking. Just apply the appropriate dualism, and we know exactly where everyone is and what's more, how they should be treated. These dualistic pairings not only sort people into different camps, a value judgment is also placed on the different sides of the dualism. For instance, here is a short list which is usually put together: *Good/Bad; Law abiding/law breaking; Public/private; Logic/emotion; Rational/irrational; white/black.*

Sometimes an exceptional circumstances will turn this around – for example the All Blacks have made black a colour of honour, but looking at this list you can see why it has traditionally be hard for people of colour to make it to elected office or high positions in corporations. It also explains, why when an All Black sheds a tear, they are called out as being emotional – it is still a difficult concept to attach to these men who in every other respect tick all the boxes on the 'good' side. Because yes, on that "good side" is the word male and on the "bad" side is the word female. Here we have the crunch for Transgender Days of Remembrance and most of the homophobia which swirls around the gay community even in the most enlightened of societies. *Good/Bad; Male/female; Law abiding/law breaking; Public/private; Logic/emotion; Rational/irrational; white/black.*

These dualisms are not Christian ideas. Plato may be the first westerner whose philosophy revolved around a dualistic view of the mind and body. Aristotle took a different tack but still used dualistic thinking. Later on, in the Enlightenment period Descartes (the philosopher who said "I think therefore I am") picked up dualism in his work.<sup>1</sup> The Enlightenment has had a widely pervasive effect on our thinking in the western world and so Descartes endorsement of this was pivotal to dualism becoming a bedrock of western thought.

This is not say that Christianity did not pick up this concept and use it, sometimes to devastating effect. Thomas Aquinas and others who followed him in the medieval period made use of dualistic concept so effectively that they have come to be inextricably linked with Christian thought and practice. Yet Jesus is explicitly working against those dualisms in today's Gospel reading when he says that the greatest commandment has two inextricably linked halves – the love of God and the love of self and neighbour. Recognise some religious concepts in the expanded list below? *Good/Bad; Law abiding/law breaking; Public/private; Logic/emotion; Rational/irrational; white/black. Sin/virtue; Heaven/Hell; Saved/sinner; faithful/backslider;*

It is important we always consider our context. Though we may feel that we need to use certain philosophical tools to explain ourselves in the current climate, we need to be careful that the master's tools are not building a completely different those than the one we intended. So it has been with the use of dualisms. Whenever we find in Scripture a dualistic approach, we

<sup>1</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dualism/#HisDua>

may need to say to ourselves, what is this author trying to do here? Whom are they trying to convince? Are they speaking to the Greeks present in their contemporary audience? Is this an accurate representation of the way Jesus taught and lived? Jesus was notorious for consorting with publicans and non-kosher Jews (people usually on his contemporaries' "bad" list. His disciple group included women whom he obviously valued more than the average man of the time. He healed a Roman centurion's son as well as a young Jewish girl. He advocated cooperating with the occupying force of the time. He broke taboo after taboo, helping people on the sacred Sabbath, telling stories about a Samaritan helping one of their deadly enemy, a Jew, and he spoke to a Samaritan woman himself alone by a well, breaking several rules of engagement all at once.

I often think that the various admonitions in the Bible and the rules devised by the church are safety nets for ordinary people who don't have the wisdom and discernment and love or the courage which Jesus showed. Rules draw the lines for us. They tell us what to do. But, as we increasingly find out, when a line is drawn, people are left on the outside as well as included on the inside. Whenever you begin a group, you inevitably define yourself over and against another group. So has been the case with all religions, all political parties, and probably too the rainbow community.

Each letter under the rainbow umbrella of lgbtqi (and one of our congregation adds 'u' for unknown) has its parameters which are held dear by that group. I admire the rainbow community as it holds all these disparate communities together. Sexual orientation is very different from sexual identity and diverse understandings are needed to talk and act intelligently about both. The rainbow umbrella is a marvellous thing.

Even in ancient scripture however, way back in Leviticus, written hundreds of years before Jesus arrived on the earth, the people are urged to welcome those different from them. The dualism presented here is the foreigner and the native born. The people of Israel who are being addressed here are reminded that they once came from somewhere else – from Egypt – and are commanded to "love them as yourself". Some of us struggle to love ourselves. This is another unfortunate legacy of a corrupted Gospel. We are each worthy of love simply because we are human beings. It doesn't matter if our nose turns up or down, whether we are of a different orientation from the majority, whether we are professional or a beneficiary or a low wage earner or homeless. All of us are worthy of love, and deserving of being treated with dignity and respect.

This love should be truly unconditional. Not delivered only if we have been good, or if we go to church regularly or if we have worked hard at our job or got good grades. No, all of us are lovable and are loved and deserve that love, just because we breathe in and out about 12 to 20 times a minute. In fact, on a bad day it is a good idea to sit quietly, noticing your breath going in and out and murmuring to yourself, "Love in, Stress out". As we live and breathe, we are loved.

It embarrasses me that this is necessary to say. But it is, so I probably don't say it often enough. The spiritual journey essentially is a journey towards greater and deeper awareness of Love. Love within us. Love for ourselves first. That is not selfish or greedy. If we do not pay respect and give dignity to ourselves, then it follows that we cannot love others. In both the Hebrew bible and the Gospel we are told that our love for our neighbour springs out of our love for ourselves. If we think we are a little scummy then we will think that of others also.

Unconditional love does away with the dualisms list, especially with the value distance between those two poles. Unconditional love loves the good **and** the bad and all flavours in between those two poles. Unconditionally loving people means that men **and** women are the objects of our love as well as those who find that that hard division between genders doesn't suit them anymore. Every letter of the rainbow continuum deserves respect and dignity, love and support. Even cis and straight people need a little love now and then! Irritating people need our love, as do annoying people, and smelly people and people on the opposite end of the political spectrum from us.

All of us, whether we are inside the lines drawn by the church or outside them, need to be sceptical of some of the admonitions and warnings delivered by religious authorities and think more often like Jesus did and act more often like Jesus did. Out of love he called people out for doing hurtful and hypocritical things, out of love he included the outcast and the maimed, out of love he took the hit when it came, not backing down from his rule-breaking loving. Let's live and work and act and love like he did, unconditionally.

I once told my mother that when I talked with the children in church, I wanted them to know that God loved them to bits. "Mmmm." she said. We were in the car, and after a few more miles down the road, she said "But you'd have to be careful". Let's NOT be careful, let's be loving. If we had love in the world like this description from the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of the first letter to the early church in Corinth, we would not need to have a Transgender Day of Remembrance. *Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 13: 1-4