



Columbia, Missouri
The Worship of God • October 31, 2021



The Scripture
Luke 4:16-30

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

The Message
“Jesus, for Real: Once Affirmed”
Mark Briley

I spent time at a few airports this week; grateful to be my wife’s Plus One on a trip with her colleagues. Airports are interesting places to hang out. I’ve mentioned before that you really only go to airports because of where they can send you. They are not a final destination themselves. And because of this, people are eager to get out of the airport itself as soon as they can. They want to be *sent*. They do not want to stay *there*.

This also means while people are in these holding zones we call “gates,” they don’t tend to be their best selves. Do you know what I mean? And right now? With the pandemic kind of hanging around still – enough that we can’t throw all caution to the wind – people are really grumpy about masks and all. The FAA, or Federal Aviation Administration, reported just 146 unruly airline passengers in 2019. That seems reasonable. What do you think the number of unruly airline passengers is so far in 2021 – with two months yet to go in what is likely to be the busiest flying season yet? Any guesses? 4,941.¹ Did I mention people are grumpy these days? I don’t know the secret to happiness, but I’ve never been sad at a Mexican restaurant. Just something to think about.

My airport time this past week was not all that bad actually. But I did hear of a man who was super frustrated with an airline ticket agent when he wasn’t getting his way with a particular flight situation. He butted his way in front of others in line to speak to the agent and started in with his demands. The agent was very patient with the man and kept things pleasant on her part as he kept jarring back to any response she offered. Red-faced at this point, the man yells, “*Do you know who I am?*” And without skipping a beat, the ticket agent picked up the phone receiver and makes a big announcement over the intercom for all to hear: “*Excuse me – can someone please help this man? He does not know who he is.*”

We’re talking identity today! It just so happens to be Halloween – a day when many decide to disguise their true identity and have fun dressing up in costume. My kids have some plans for the day and our dog Taylor has a taco costume, so I guess we’re ready to roll.

Beyond the fun, identity is our focus today and in a much more sacred way. How do you identify yourself? You’ve already had an instant answer to that pop into your head. It might be your given name, your work, or based on the primary relationships in your life – a dad, a spouse, a friend. It might be your gender or some affiliation you have

¹ https://www.faa.gov/data_research/passengers_cargo/unruly_passengers/

with any number of activities or organizations. I had a friend this week who attempted to respond to a text saying, “*I am on vacation*” but instead simply said, “*I am vacation.*” Isn’t that a marvelous identity? I’m already more relaxed.

If you’re feeling spiritual enough this morning, your first thought might be your identity as a child of God. Nothing more pure and beautiful than that! We broaden this when we talk about things like the identity of our church. What do we claim about ourselves? We say we are people with Broad Hearts, Broad Minds, and a Broad Reach. We say we are people who follow, “*Where Love Leads.*”

In 2013, as our denomination, The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was resolving to “*become a people of grace and welcome to all people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity,*” Broadway followed with an overwhelming positive vote six years ago this month in favor of becoming an open and welcoming congregation in that same spirit. This was a monumental moment for Broadway that I know didn’t come without much prayer, study, and dialogue. It’s certainly a conversation that has polarized many friends, families, and the nation as there has been an ingrained culture press *against* the five-and-a-half percent of the US population who identify as being lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender or something other than heterosexual.

For many of us, growing up, we didn’t talk a lot about sexuality at all. Maybe you had “*The Talk*” as if it were a one-and-done conversation. Given the taboo nature of it all, speaking for myself in rural, middle America, especially several decades ago... even fewer of us knew someone who identified with the LGBTQ+ family, so we didn’t wrestle with it all that much. But this has shifted, and I guarantee your kids and grandkids are talking about it. They are protective of their friends and have bad feelings about the wider Church that has bashed on their friends. The Barna Research Group surveyed 16-29 year olds and 91% of them place the identity of the Church at large as “*anti-homosexual.*”

If you ask me, it’s never best to be known for what you’re against but always better to be known for what you are for. Broadway voted to be for people first – as the real Jesus always seemed to be *for* people first. In his day, people would find someone to blame or be against, and Jesus would step in and say, “*Hold the phone... who’s dictating this condemnation?*” And Jesus would quickly turn on the accusers. He was for people first. Their identity in his eyes was one of love – love like you have for your own child, your own brother or sister.

Given the size of our congregation and the percentage of the population that identifies among the LGBTQ+ community, 33 of our brothers and sisters at Broadway might identify this way. Familiarity breeds affection. These are people we know and love whose identity is far more than who they find attractive. Is that the primary way *any* of

us want to be known? I would guess not. But this has become the perception of Church for many.

You said six-years ago, Broadway, that you don't want to be known in that way. Our latest Visioning effort enhances this desire to **Grow Affirming Ministries with LGBTQ+ Persons and their Families**, a.k.a. Action Team 5. Why focus on a ministry to 33 people in the congregation? The number doesn't really matter, of course, but we know the reach is far more than that – when you include siblings, parents, grandparents, and many others who love someone who is gay, lesbian, or otherwise – it's hundreds. *And* because Jesus was about this work, for real. His ministry was always working toward the marginalized, the outcast, those who others didn't understand and often mocked, ridiculed or abused.

We have the richness of Scripture to demonstrate this over and over again. If society was pushing you away, treating you as anything other than equally valued and loved, Jesus was shouldering up next to you. Oh, that made people uncomfortable. Jesus was great at making the comfortable feel uncomfortable. The role of spirituality in our lives is for us to be in constant transformation, steady growth toward fuller union with God and our neighbor. If that was simply a comfortable thing to ooze our way into, everyone would yawn and be fully transformed. No. Any growth, any transformation, comes with friction and refining and discovery. It's interesting how we tend to think about these things. I like to think if Jesus was human-ing it up today, he'd like to hang out with me, dance to '90s R&B songs and complain about the Chiefs. Maybe he would hang with Florida Georgia Line and Chris Rice, *sittin' here, drinkin' beer, talkin' God, Amen*. In reality, I think he'd make me uncomfortable. Maybe you, too. Jesus really messes with the comfort of his hometown peeps in our passage from Luke's gospel today.

Jesus has just come off his undefeated season against the Devil in the wilderness and followed that up with a teaching and slam poetry tour of the countryside before getting back to visit his mom in their hometown of Nazareth. It's good to be back home, and he headed up to synagogue on the Sabbath to worship with the congregation that raised him. The church ladies pinched his cheeks and told him he wasn't eating enough. The kids a few years older than him in the youth group reminisced about old lock-in shenanigans and laughed about how they never ran out of pizza when Jesus was there. What was that about?

But now? Jesus was there to lead. He read the psalm litany, and the people gleamed. He sang a Steven Curtis Chapman song and they said, "*That boy can sang!*" He read a text from Isaiah, and they hung on every word. "*God's spirit is on me,*" he read. "*God's chosen me to preach Good News to the poor, pardon prisoners and recover sight of the blind. I'll set the burdened and battered free. And all God's people said, "Amen!"*"

and they shouted “*Amen!*” And then? He sat down to teach. That’s how it worked. You stood to read the scroll, you sat to teach.

Jesus says, “*You’ve just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place.*” They were on the edge of their seats. Jesus was really doing it. He was making it. He was going to be a real leader. They couldn’t believe Joe and Mary’s boy had this kind of presence. They thought, “*He’ll come be our pastor, and we’ll all feel so good and be so proud and have fellowship dinners and it’ll be great.*” But as quick as he got them pumped up, he said, “*I know you want me to come home. I know you’ve followed in the news all the things I did for the folks up the road.*” And they cheered. But then he goes on and tells them about some of their faith heroes – Elijah and Elisha – how they helped the outsiders – the Gentiles of all people instead of their own Jewish community – and the cheers became eye rolls and crossed arms. Jesus says, “*I can’t stay here either. I’m going to serve those outsiders, too.*” One thing leads to another, and Elder Jones calls, “*Bull!*” from the back of the room, and they bum rush Jesus – pushing him straight out the building and up to the cliff wall at the edge of town. What anger! What’s that all about?

I think we get uncomfortable when we’re asked to stretch our comfort zone or when we’re told life isn’t going to revolve around us alone. How many of us look at life – whether that’s looking at our workplace, or our church, or our school and think – “*What they need to do is...*” It’s about making it fit better for ourselves.

Someone shared with me talking about those who are part of the LGBTQ+ community -- “*I don’t care. Marry whomever you want but don’t tell my kids they can be gay.*” To be clear, I’m not able to make someone gay. I have a hard enough time making a sandwich. This is not within my realm to do.

And beyond that, I think when people encounter someone uncomfortable or unfamiliar to them, they tend to identify the extreme in the other. When a heterosexual person in such a state thinks of themselves – they think of a responsible, monogamous, life-together person of faith and good moral character. When that same person thinks of the Other – a person who is gay in this instance – they think of an irresponsible, promiscuous, life-falling-apart person with no faith and shady character. That’s not really fair. I don’t want to be identified as the same as every other straight, white male that you know. Every person is a unique and dynamic person with many layers to their identity – all invited and capable of striving for healing and transformation in their lives. I could pretend to be someone I’m not, but that’s exhausting. One preacher said it this way: “*God doesn’t bless who you pretend to be. God wants to bless who you are, for real.*” This particular woman’s angle, not wanting her kids to be gay, stemmed from her desire for them not to have the hard road of being judged or ridiculed by some segment of society. This *can* happen when you’re 5.6% of society and the majority of

people don't understand or share in relationship with you. It's easy to judge what, or who, you don't love.

Jesus doesn't get hurled off the cliff... not sure why exactly. Was he allusive like Barry Sanders and just twisted and turned and hurdled the crowd to escape? I don't think so. Was his mom in the crowd in tears at how her beloved church family had turned on her beloved son, and some of her friends escorted Jesus off the cliff to safety? Did one of the elders speak up and say, "*Let him be. We love him and trust him to follow his calling even if it's not here among us.*" I don't know.

I do know that many friends in the LGBTQ+ community find affinity with Jesus in this moment. This pericope (or passage of Scripture) is typically titled, "*Jesus' Rejection at Nazareth*" but some find strength in calling it "*Jesus Claims His Identity.*" Jesus has said, "*Here's my call. I know you've known me as a certain way before, but God is sending me to free people who feel trapped, feed people who are starving, be an ally to the ridiculed and help people who can't see beyond their favorite political one-liners, beyond their 6x6 cubicle, or beyond their simple comfort level, that God sees a whole lot further and a whole lot deeper.*"

We're trying to do that here at Broadway, too, because that seems most like what Jesus might do for real. We won't do it perfectly, of course, and I certainly don't have all the answers. But we're called to stretch in love. And that can be uncomfortable... but that was Jesus' deal. When it comes to the 33 or so Broadway beloveds who claim their identity beyond the normative and their families and friends who love them and are seeking a Jesus word on how best to love – we're working at love together – and where it leads us forward.

Broadway's own Mila Horner and Zachary Willmore were on the homecoming court last weekend at Rock Bridge High School – congratulations to both of you! Zachary was named the first openly-gay Homecoming Queen in the school's history. You're breaking barriers and inviting all of us to dance to our own songs and celebrate the songs that make others dance, too.

I had a first-time experience this past week that pushed the boundaries of my usual comfort zone. It was a beautiful evening, and an announcement was made that a Silent Disco would be starting in less than ten minutes. Immediate red flags. I dance like Albert Brennaman in the movie *Hitch*; if you've ever seen that you understand the quandary of such a moment. But before I knew it, we were in line to pick up our headsets for the Silent Disco. Ultimately, everyone gets their own headset, and on those headsets are three, live stations playing the music of three separate DJ's. Each station is represented by a different colored light on your headset so you can scan the



crowd and see who else is dancing to the same song. You can flip between the three stations whenever you want. It was amazing. You'd watch as the colors shifted in the crowd and see people respond when their jam came on and they would cheer and jump and smile. It was hilarious to take your headphones off once in a while, because you couldn't hear the music at all, but people were all dancing around – thus Silent Disco. Once in a while, most all the lights would

sync, and if you lowered your headphones, you'd hear the people belting in a Capella fashion, "*Just a small town girl, livin' in a lonely world...*" or it may be mixed in with another group of folks belting out, "*I'm going down, down baby, yo' street in a Range Rover...*". And it was so freeing. There was no judgment about anyone's dance moves, because you were constantly changing songs and beats and yet... we were all part of one beautiful dance floor.

There is so much that remains mystery to me about the uniqueness of your identity and mine ... however you identify yourself in this world. I just know God loves you in that uniqueness. I believe Jesus rallies alongside of you in your striving to be you in this world and you in a way that brings color to the world, and healing to the world and justice to the world and joy to the world. I believe, as Genesis says, "*God created you in God's own image,*" and, therefore, there is something unique about God that I can learn from you. I don't want to fear our differences. I want to grow in my understanding of them.

Author and business coach Donald Miller when speaking of his friend, Jamie, who was doing his unique part to heal the world said, "*I know you, and I may not be wired like Jamie, but you are wired like you, and I am wired like me. The more fully we live into ourselves, the more impact we will have. Acting may get us the applause we want but taking a risk on being ourselves is the only path toward true intimacy. And true intimacy, the exchange of affection between two people who are not lying, is transforming.*"²

² From the introduction to "*If You Feel Too Much,*" by Jamie Tworkowski. Penguin Random House. New York. 2015.

Who are we, Church, if we're not seeking authentic transformation in our lives? Action Team 5 – bless you in your efforts to expand our dance floor so all might share in this transformative dance of faith with us and with Jesus... *for real.*

Song of Focus
“We Are All God’s Children”

WORDS AND MUSIC BY ED VARNUM

1. “Look! He is a stranger, not one of us. “And she’s not from our culture, not one to trust. “They live a lifestyle we don’t understand today. They are different, outsiders. We see their ways are not our way.
2. But he is so gifted, both skilled and smart.
Her life makes an impact, a caring heart.
In our busy schedules, tell me, will we take the time
to really get to know them beyond the prejudice that blinds?

Refrain:

Christ is God’s gift for each soul in every place.
None is too far from the reach of God’s grace.
Christ is God’s gift: through him we are all one.
We are all God children, daughters, sons!

3. Oh, Broadway, with broad hearts, broad minds, broad reach,
called by the Spirit to welcome and teach of God, whose creation,
filled with diversity also (joy and wonder!), created both you and me!
4. Now, Spirit is saying, “Walk alongside.
“The people before you for whom Jesus died.”
Love them as they are, then lift your heart to pray
for courage to welcome, and new ways that you and I can say:

Refrain:

Christ is God’s gift for each soul in every place.
None is too far from the reach of God’s grace.
Christ is God’s gift: through him we are all one.
We are all God children, daughters, sons!

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH