

‘Just the Way You Are’

John 8:1-17; Luke 18:18-19

June 30, 2019

I attended a Billy Joel concert last summer with my daughter. Among his many songs I like is “Just the Way You Are. He says don’t go changing to try and please me.....I love you just the way you are.” That’s a good definition of unconditional love. A more conventional definition is love offered without limitation and without conditions. You are loved just the way you are.

Scripture makes it clear that God loves us. My favorite gospel is the gospel of John, sometimes called the mystical gospel, or the gospel of love. You can’t read John and not know that Jesus loves us.”for God so loved the world,” and “no greater love has a man than this.”

Jesus’ love extended to everyone. He was no respecter of persons. He famously ate with tax collectors, thieves and adulterers. He healed on the Sabbath, and rebuked the powerful religious people of his day. He did not care what they thought about him. In the gospel message we heard read the woman in question was probably guilty of adultery. The penalty under the law was stoning. The people gathered to stone her were technically doing what was right. And Jesus would have been within every right to pick up a stone himself. But out of love, he showed mercy. Rather than stone her, he forgave her, and pointed out to the others that they were no more righteous than her. So it is abundantly clear that God loves us. It’s a comforting message. I love you, just the way you are.

We come to church and we hear that, and it is comforting, and re-assuring. Jesus loves me. Great! Is that it? Is that really the whole message of the gospel? It seems that today often that is it. You’ve told me that Jesus loves me. What else do I need? What else is there? Didn’t Billy Joel express it in his song “I love you just the way you are?”

I am here today to tell you that God’s love is only part of the story. It can be said that today we live in a psychotherapeutic age. The self-help section of the book store is the largest section. There are millions of self-help blogs, memes, and sayings posted on line. (and I do post them) Oprah made her fortune getting people to talk about their problems on air and offering psychological advice.

Everyone talks the language of psychology and positive affirmation. I believe this influences our modern image of Jesus. Jesus is our holy therapist. He has been reduce to a validator of us, here to re-assure us that we are finejust the way we are. We believe he is here to tell us we are okay and help us to reach our personal goals. But that is not how Jesus is. We can not reduce the gospel message to a just positive affirmation. We cannot reduce Jesus to some sort of supernatural life coach who gives us a hug and tell us we’re okay just the way we are.

The highest goal in our therapeutic is to be our “authentic selves.” If by that you mean using out talents and gifts properly then I’m all for it. But think about it. Look at history, look at crime reports, do we really want everyone to be their true selves? But do any of you who have ever had a 3 year old really believe your job as a parent is to let them be their “authentic” selves.

What does Jesus say is our authentic nature? We have a belief in our culture that if you recycle, hold the right opinions about everything, and vote the right way, then you are a good person. In the gospel message we heard Jesus was speaking to a “good man.”..... This man had kept all the laws and commandments all his life. But when the good man called him good teacher, Jesus told him “no man is good, no not one.”

We celebrate Jesus because Jesus met with tax collectors, thieves, adulterers, and all sorts of socially unacceptable people. Yes, he did. He did that to show that he loved them, he loved them enough to not leave them to stay as they are. He did it to show them that the gospel message was not limited, that it was for everyone. But I dare anyone here to show me where he told them to keep cheating people, keep stealing, keep

committing adultery. In the gospel story we heard how Jesus saved the woman from stoning, and then he said (and this last part is hardly mentioned in many churches today) go and sin no more.” Jesus was calling her a sinner? I thought he loved her. Yes, he was and yes, he does.

Perhaps now you are confused, or may be even offended. But I have been told that Jesus loved me unconditionally. I came here to feel affirmed. I came here to have my feelings validated (I was never good at sales)

I am here to tell you that Jesus does love you. The gospel is not possible without the love of God. But it is also not possible without another word. That word is repentance. Love is God’s part, repentance is our part. Repent means to be sorry for, to acknowledge, and renounce our sins. It also means to re-think, to change. Jesus is not Billy Joel, saying “don’t’ go changing,’ I love you just the way you are.” Jesus is saying “I loved you enough to die, to give you the chance to change.” Jesus is not just some kind of holy self-help guru. He is the Redeemer. He loves us enough to tell us the truth about who we are, and to offer us a chance to become our “authentic selves through the message of the gospel. We need Jesus to become our true selves, to be “good.” Do you want to change? Are you hearing the gospel call for transformation? Have you drifted away, and seek renewal? Will you confess your sins, will you come before Jesus and admit who you really are, and accept his offer of salvation and transformation?

Please stand. Pray- Jesus, we come before you. We admit that we need you, that we cannot be truly good without you. Do not leave us “just the way we are.” We ask you to come into our lives, to transform us, re-new us, through the power of your love, and the power of your forgiveness. (moment of silence.) General prayer for the people in hospital, etc. ... The Lord’s Prayer.