

Rev. Rebecca Schlatter Liberty
Worship at Redeemer Lutheran Church, Bangor, ME
January 28, 2018—4th Sunday after Epiphany and RIC Sunday
Texts: Psalm 139:1, 13-16; Acts 8:26-40; Mark 1:21-28

Reconciling in Christ

Welcome

Today we celebrate **Reconciling in Christ Sunday**. “Reconciling in Christ” is a term for ELCA churches who have committed to a public and intentional welcome of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people. In worship today, that means we give thanks and praise to God for God's radical welcome of all without exception.

We specifically say out loud that LGBTQ+ people are included in God's welcome, contrary to other messages that say they are excluded.

We recommit to God's vision for the church, a “welcome table” like our stained glass window at which all are truly welcome, without exception.

We also confess that we are still living into this vision, still learning what it means for us, still uncovering our own blind spots and prejudices and shame and fears.

Many of our words for worship today [the confession, creed, and prayers] come from the national organization that oversees the Reconciling in Christ network. Depending on your own experience, some of those words may be unfamiliar or even uncomfortable. If you come from a church that understands God's welcome less inclusively, then some of those words may be a great relief. Radical welcome can be both those things.

Children's Time

Sometimes when you're talking about big ideas like welcome, the idea that everyone is included in God's family, a picture can help. So I wanted to share this picture with you. It's a cartoon by a pastor named David Hayward; I don't know him but I appreciate this picture very much:

<https://nakedpastor.com/2015/11/the-jesus-eraser/>

Since it can be a little confusing when you first see it, I'll tell a story about what I think is happening here. Most people in this picture are doing the same thing: they are drawing lines with their pencils. But there's one person in the middle who is doing something different: he's erasing the lines that other people have drawn. When we look more closely at this special erasing person, we see that he has a crown of thorns on his head. So now we know it's Jesus! Hmm... all the people except Jesus draw lines, and Jesus erases them. The story is that it is a very human thing to "draw lines" of all kinds—lines that separate people...

by age (young people here, **other** old people over there),
or color of skin (light-colored skin here, **other** dark-colored skin over there),
or ability (able-bodied people here, **other** people with different abilities over there),
or religion (Christians here, all the **others** there),
or background (you're a Mainer, you're not a real Mainer—there was even a story in the Bangor Daily News about that this week, so you can tell it's not just church people who draw lines!).

Anyway, as human beings we just can't help ourselves in drawing lines that separate people. It's called sin. But Jesus comes and forgives that sin and reconnects us to each other by erasing all those lines. The fancy word for what he does is reconciliation—we say we are reconciled to one another through Jesus. But since we can't help drawing lines, that forgiveness is an ongoing process—that's why as a church we say we're "reconciling," not "reconciled" as if our work here is done.

Today we give thanks for Jesus' eraser, and we pray that we might become better erasers, too. So everyone will take home their own pencil today, so you can practice erasing those lines wherever you find them. (They're kind of sharp so we'll hand them out at the end instead of right now.)

Introduction to the sermon (on video)

We have a guest preacher today. His name is Leo Bancroft and he's a Lutheran from the Pacific Northwest. He's preaching on the second reading that is suggested for Reconciling in Christ Sunday, the story of the Ethiopian eunuch from Acts.

A few days ago, when I wrote the email announcement for this week about Reconciling in Christ Sunday, I noticed something kind of uncomfortable. It went like this; I read it at the beginning of worship:

In worship today, we give thanks and praise to God for God's radical welcome of all without exception. We specifically say out loud that LGBTQ+ people are included in God's welcome, contrary to other messages that say they are excluded.

Sounds okay, right? Or maybe you noticed something kind of...off about that. It's the pronoun: "they." As a straight person myself, when I talk about LGBTQ people, I say "they." But then it makes it sound like "we," the church, are so kind and generous to welcome "them," LGBTQ people. Those poor people who have been excluded in so many ways from so many places. The exclusion is real, but we don't need to welcome out of pity. Like everyone, LGBTQ folks have powerful gifts for the body of Christ as well as the brokenness of sin we all share.

So I really wanted you to hear a really good "we" sermon that included a story different from mine, and I didn't really know how to preach it myself. Then I heard Leo, one of our transgender brothers in the body of Christ. Not only does he preach a good sermon, he's also really good at "we" language rather than "they" language. He talks about how, like the eunuch, LGBTQ people can rightfully claim a place in the body of Christ through baptism. That welcome is a gift from God, not a gift to be extended or not by the church.

When I listen to Leo, I think about our Jesus erasers, and how we might erase some lines that set apart trans and queer people as "other." And I think about how we could use the other end of the pencil to draw, not lines, but circles, keeping on practicing making bigger and bigger circles until they are as big as God's infinite circle of love.

You can find Leo's video sermon, which we watched in its entirety, at <https://www.reconcilingworks.org/ric/ricsunday/> (You can also read a bit about him on the same webpage.)

In our sermon hymn today we practice another pronoun: not "we" or "they," but "you." It's the way God addresses each of us with infinite love and welcome. ***Hymn of the Day: ELW 581, You Are Mine***