

# ...and will have compassion on his suffering ones

Hespeler, 8 October, 2023 © Scott McAndless – Harvest Thanksgiving

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20, Psalm 19, [Isaiah 49:8-13](#), Matthew 21:33-46

In our plan for this year, I committed myself to spending some time preaching during this month of October about valuing and including people in the church, especially people who are different from us. I started out last week by focussing on how Jesus challenged the religious folk of his day by telling them that the tax collectors and prostitutes would be ahead of them in the kingdom of God. I suggested that Jesus would likely seek to challenge us in the same way.

## Not Letting myself off the Hook

But, even as I preached that last week, I recognized that I couldn't afford to let myself off the hook too easily. As I said, Jesus would challenge each one of us individually to think about welcoming and valuing the very people that we would most struggle to do that for. So, who would be that person for me?

I think I am a fairly empathetic person. I do not quickly judge many of the people who are easily rejected by others. Though I may have some trouble with the moral choices people have made, I am usually quick to understand that they may have some good reasons – or at least some good excuses – for how they have chosen to act. I know that the world can be a hard place and that many people are just doing their best to find themselves and make their way.

I don't say this to suggest that I am better or less judgemental than other people – I'm not. It's just that, because of my own personal backstory, I tend to judge a bit differently from some people. And there are people that I do struggle with.

## Who I Struggle with

Over the last several years, we have seen the growth of a certain group of people who I do struggle in valuing and welcoming. I suspect that some of you do too. Since about 2016 and then accelerating greatly after 2020, we see more and more people in our society who get caught up in conspiracy theories. Now, I remember a time when conspiracy theories were just these harmless little hobbies that sometimes people got caught up in.

But more recently, many of them have taken a turn in a very dangerous direction. Today, as a result of the proliferation of such theories, people don't just believe untrue things, they believe some very dangerously untrue things.

## Conspiracy Theories

You are probably familiar enough with these theories, but just to give a few examples, you have people today who believe that when they give you a COVID vaccine, they inject you with a microchip, who believe that they are putting litter boxes for students in school bathrooms, that hospitals in Canada perform genital reassignment surgery on children, that 15 minutes cities are a nefarious plot to control everywhere you go instead of a city planning idea that has been around for ages, and the list goes on and on.

These conspiracy theories, and many others like them, are quite untrue. It can be demonstrated very easily that they are untrue. But people believe them.



## When False Ideas Cause Harm

And, again, I don't really have a problem if people believe things that aren't true, so long as they don't do anybody any harm. But many of these conspiracy theories are starting to do harm in various ways. We see them being used to target and marginalize vulnerable people. We see it causing the deadly resurgence of once nearly eradicated diseases like the measles. We see some of these conspiracy theories leading people down paths towards dangerous radicalism.

### I Struggle

So, yes, I will say it. I do sometimes struggle in terms of valuing and accepting people who get caught up in conspiracy theories. I have had, at times, people come into this church and talk to me. It hasn't really happened on Sunday mornings, but on other days of the week.

They seem like very nice people, and we can chat contentedly for a while. They might even show interest in the life of the church. And, of course, I will invite them to come and visit us on a Sunday morning. But then we get into discussing some conspiracy theory that they are invested in.

When they bring it up, I might gently correct them and say that some point they have raised is simply not true. I don't do it in a confronting way, I just want to explain that I don't necessarily agree with them. The conversations have ended cordially.

But I will confess that, once the conversation is over, I often leave it with the inner desire that they don't show up to church, that they don't start sharing their conspiracy theories among us. I fear it might cause some harm.

So, there is a real question about how we can relate to and accept those who do get caught up in various conspiracy theories. How can we accept them, love them and value them for who they are?

### A Crisis in Ancient Judah

This morning we read a portion of the Book of Isaiah from the forty-ninth chapter. I think it is a passage that can greatly help us navigate our present moment. It was written at a time when the nation of Judah was coming out of a series of disasters, and the hard times were hardly over.

They were returning from a devastating time of exile, trying to put their lives back together and dealing with ongoing crises like out-of-control inflation and attacks on their sovereignty by hostile nations. It reminds me a lot of the kinds of challenges that we are dealing with today.

And so, you can well imagine that a lot of the people were deeply traumatized by everything that they had gone through and, like always happens under such circumstances, they were probably not dealing with it very well. Some of them probably even got caught up in conspiracy theories about the governor or some of the surrounding nations. But what we have in this passage is God's response to everything that the people were going through at that difficult moment.

### God's Response

This is the response of God that particularly strikes me in this passage: **“Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; Break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted his people and will have compassion on his suffering ones.”**

Think of what that is saying. In times of change and uncertainty, how we often react is that we start to call for everyone to agree or get on the same page. We demand that nobody stir things up with their

unreasonable demands or conspiracy theories. God does none of that. God's response is comfort and compassion for the afflicted and suffering.

## Learning Compassion

And if we want to find joy and hope in our uncertain times, we must follow God's example. And so, I am working on learning some compassion for the conspiracy theorists among us. And I do believe we can find it.

Yes, I know that many of the things that some people believe are simply untrue and potentially very dangerous, but I am also coming to understand the suffering that has fed such beliefs.

## Vaccines

Let's take vaccines, for example. Everything I have read has convinced me that the COVID vaccines have been safe and effective, but I am also learning some compassion for those who hesitate to take them. I don't necessarily think that industry and government were always as transparent as they should have been, and that quite understandably did not inspire trust in some.

I think that we all had a hand in downplaying and dismissing risks when it probably would have been more honest to speak of some relative risks and put them in the context of the greater risk of getting the disease. We promised too much in terms of protection and when our promises didn't quite live up to the hype, yes, some people understandably lost faith in the system.

## Distrust of Corporations

Does that mean that the pharmaceutical companies were injecting us with microchips and the government had an insidious plan to implement social control? No. The beliefs that some have embraced are not literally true, but there is a certain sense in which they are emotionally connected to some of the things that are truly wrong with our systems and their deep dysfunction.

It is true that pharmaceutical companies are more concerned with their own profits than they are with the public health, that they are doing things like investing way more money into stock buybacks (which only benefit shareholders) than they are into researching life-saving drugs, for example.

## Erosion of Freedom

It is true that our individual freedoms are being eroded and that social control is growing, it's just that it is not necessarily being carried out by shadowy government entities so much as it is the stated goal of some of our largest and most powerful corporations.

## Rapid Pace of Change

Many of the other conspiracy theories that we hear are connected to the rapid pace of change within our society – change that is understandably hard for some people to deal with.

If people are going around and saying that schools are putting out litter boxes for students and encouraging students to change their genders on whims, they are of course wrong on the facts of the matter.

When they say that genital surgery is available to children in Canada, they likely know nothing about actual medical policy. And it is hugely problematic because those kinds of beliefs are putting very vulnerable people at risk – in particular, kids who dare not be open with their parents about the things that they are struggling with because they know that it will lead to their total rejection.

## Acknowledgement Matters

But, at the same time, I don't necessarily think that it helps anybody to fail to acknowledge the things that people are feeling about how the world is changing, how old certainties and old binaries that once made things seem so simple, are fading away. And, yes, it is true that the old certainties and binaries were never as simple as they appeared to be – it was just that we didn't even let people talk about that complexity – but now it has become so confusing to many people. We need to find ways to acknowledge what people are feeling without compromising in terms of protecting vulnerable people.

And I'm not entirely sure how we can accomplish that, but I know it has to begin with some basic compassion for everyone who has suffered.

## Increased Polarization

Over the last several years, our society has become increasingly polarized. It's not just that people disagree; people have always disagreed. It's that we seem to have decided that we cannot even communicate anymore because we do not see things in the same way. I am appalled at some of the conspiracy theories that people believe, especially when they are used to justify hateful actions and attitudes.

## Legitimate Feelings

But at the same time, I do think that many who have fallen down such rabbit holes have done so because they are dealing with a feeling that is quite legitimate – the feeling that things are not right in our society.

And when we don't allow people to express that feeling, when we shut down all criticism of how things are, people will look around to find someone who will take seriously what they are feeling. And often that means that they will take refuge with conspiracy theorists because they are the only ones who will validate what they are feeling.

But if we can learn some compassion for what people are feeling, I'd like to think that we could short circuit some of that. Compassion, by the way, does not mean feeling sorry for people. That is just condescension. It means actually listening to people where they are and respecting them for who they are. And, if anyplace, the church should be a place where that kind of compassion is found.

## No Easy Solutions

I don't really have any easy solutions to any of this. I'm sure that most of us do encounter people who believe things that we have a hard time with. But perhaps we can appreciate what they are feeling – that there are some things that are seriously wrong with our society.

We seem to be so afraid of some people's unease about how the world is that we drive them away and into the arms of others. But Jesus knew that all was not right with the world – that is why he came to save it and why he proposed the alternate reality of the kingdom of God.

There is supposed to be a place for everyone in the church – a place where we can bring our real fears, real worries and real concerns. Our feelings should be validated here, and nobody's feelings should just be dismissed. I can't help but feel that if we can find the compassion to allow that to happen here, things will begin to change for the better.