

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost – Jess Chambers

2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Two weeks ago, in the Gospel reading, Christina saw a call for the church to confess and repent of its sins, and of its putting of those sins upon others. Last week, Bob showed us, by way of the Epistle, the tension of learning to live the Christian life alongside people who speak with as much conviction from the Spirit as we do, yet who live vastly different lives. This week, we turn to our Old Testament reading, and we find ourselves in the midst of a healing. We Christians love a good healing; the church is all about healing. Right?

Elisha has a reputation for being a healer. He has this reputation to the extent that Naaman, a great commander and enemy of Israel, is willing to load up his riches on some mules and head to Israel for healing. As a result, this great enemy of Israel, who certainly doesn't worship the God of Israel, is shown the power of Israel's God. He leaves a changed man, a man who follows God.

I've often heard that reputations don't really matter, that it doesn't matter what people think of you. As a Christian, I reject that. In the same way that Elisha's reputation invited a man into life with God, the church's reputation has the power either to invite people in, or to push them out.

Our reputation matters. So the question, then, is what kind of reputation do you think the church has? It is not one of healing. It's easy for us, in the church, to think it is, because we've seen and felt the healing which we have received, ourselves. We are shown God's power in the church's love and acceptance. But the farther away you are from cis-gender-heterosexual-able-bodied-neurotypical-upper-middle-class-white-male-Evangelical, the less true that becomes.

I can say that with a great deal of certainty, because I am only about three of those things, and when you are this far removed from the typical, for your own sanity, you need to find friends who are similarly removed. But I can't. I have tried, but I can't because I am Christian, and they are terrified of me. They fear that I am going to live up to the reputation Christians have for being judgmental and coercing, rather than healing and listening.

What I hear of the church's reputation among people who are like me, it is that the church is self-righteous, it is abusive, and it will reject you when you ask it for healing.

Now I know that it is often unwise to point to the congregation, and say, "You all are doing a particular thing that you oughta stop doing," and not include yourself in that exhortation. In this instance, however, I am "us" the church, and I am "us" the queers-and-otherwise-rejected. I am caught in the middle, trying with my whole heart and body to keep believing that I won't be forced to reject a piece of my identity in order that I might be allowed to embrace another.

It would be a lie for me to stand here in this pulpit and only say that I am "us" the church, when I am also "us" the hurting. So I have to say both. I will say "us" when I mean "you and me, the church", but I have to say "you", when I mean "you" the church who has excluded me, the queer, and otherwise rejected.

Naaman expects to buy his healing with riches and gifts, but Elisha asks for nothing. He simply instructs him to wash in the river. Naaman is initially outraged, as though he feels he's been duped. How could it possibly be this easy?! He has perfectly good rivers at home and they have not brought him healing. But he goes and he washes and he is healed. It seems it should be astonishingly easy for one to receive healing from the church. ... It should be astonishingly easy. to receive healing. from the church. People should come to us expecting to have to buy their healing, and then we should astonish them with our grace. We ought to tell them that we don't want their riches, that we simply. want. them.

One should not have to beg to be allowed to experience God's healing powers.

Notice that Elisha gives Naaman exactly the kind of healing he asks for. Elisha doesn't say, "Actually ... ya know what? Your skin lesions—they're fine. But there's this other thing ... you're from Aram, and I'm gonna have to heal you of that and make you an Israelite, just like me." No. Elisha trusts that when Naaman asks for a certain kind of healing, he knows what he needs. To do otherwise would be absurd. But that is exactly what the church likes to do.

For us, the rejected, the healing for which we ask is a community of people who loves and celebrates us. But the church refuses its healing waters until we promise to become indistinguishable from you. You'll let us be queer, so long as we don't behave queerly; you'll let us be disabled, so long as our disability doesn't get in your way; you'll let them be black, but only if they speak, dress, and worship like you.

What many of you know of my experience of being queer and Christian is positive. You maintained your affirmation of my call, despite learning that I am unrepentantly queer, and knowing that that excludes me from ordination. That is beautiful and I will always feel delight and gratitude for that. Maybe more importantly than my delight and gratitude, what that evinced for me is that what I already suspected and hoped for was true—this place is safe, and the church can offer healing.

What you may not realize about my experience of being queer and Christian, is that I spent four years having to do my best guessing as to who of you I could trust with my queerness. St. Paul's is the most progressive church in this area, yet I didn't know if I was safe here. Your silence is rejection. Maybe that sounds harsh to you, because you feel that I ought to have known that your love is deeper than that. But queer people have learned that those we trust the most are the people who most readily reject us for our queerness. You have queer students at the college who have no idea if they're safe anywhere in this town. You should not make us guess whether or not we're going to risk our relationship with you or the church if we trust you with ourselves. Do not be misled into thinking that queer people feel safe here.

I suspect that it is also the case that many of your black students and black neighbors are not sure if they are safe here. We've got a Black Lives Matter sign on the lawn and that's great—for this town, that is a lot. But we've gotta figure out some ways to keep saying it. We leave the doors of this church unlocked, because we say that we welcome those who are locked out, but we have to keep saying it so that it becomes really obvious and actually true, or we will never have the reputation we think we have.

It is hard for me to say these things to you, because I am sure that you, also, have experienced forms of rejection in the church. Rejection is hard for everyone, but the rejection I'm talking about isn't just me, as an individual. Like racism and sexism, queerphobia is systemic, and like racism and sexism, we prefer to remain silent about it. It's hard to voice these things, because I have never felt more loved than I do here. This church taught me what love looks and feels like, and I know that we mean it when we say that we want this to be a place of inclusion and healing, a place for people rejected elsewhere. And that's why I have to say this. We genuinely want this to be a safe place, and in some ways it really, truly is, but in some ways, it really just isn't. Not yet.

We say every week that this Table is open to anyone who intends to lead a new life, and that Jesus' blood shed did provide a full, perfect, and sufficient atonement for the sins of the whole world. We like to think that this makes us radically accepting of those who are different from us, but we have no real idea of how to do that, practically. We preach those things from our pulpit ... but we are the only ones who hear what we preach. We hear those sermons and we feel like maybe we should consider how to be more inclusive, but we mostly feel good about how much more inclusive we are than the other Christians around us—and that's a mistake. If you know you're inclusive, but no one outside of here knows that, then your reputation is not going to be one of inclusivity and healing. Because we have heard it all before—God loves everyone and the church loves everyone ... but despite what we are told, that has largely not been our experience, and that means our fear of you is reasonable. If you don't make it very clear that you're for real, your reputation is going to remain like the rest of the church—self-righteous, abusive, and withholding of God's healing powers.

What does it say about our faith in the Spirit that we think ordaining a few queer people—or even that treating queer people with the love and respect that all human beings deserve—is gonna take down this two-thousand-year-old institution that we call the church? Does the church have so little faith in the Spirit that we think she can't speak up loudly enough for queer people to hear her over our flamboyance?

Do you think that we haven't thought about this? Like... *a lot*. We've prayed and studied to discern whether or not who we are is compatible with the Christian life ... and we've listened to everyone else's opinions on the legitimacy of our existence, and the sinfulness of our love. But, friends—if you're worried about proving your argument, then you're missing the point here. We're not even given a chance.

If you're thinking, "Well, the Galatians text tells us to call out other Christians in their transgressions..." Well. Paul also calls for gentleness, and to *bear one another's burdens*. So do that. Be gentle, and help us carry this burden. And I promise you—it is a burden. Bear it with us so that we aren't killed by the weight of it. If you think there's good enough reason for our rejection that you won't share in this burden, then remember Christina's words: the church is the equivalent of Paul's circumcised Jews. And today, Paul tells us that the circumcised only want the uncircumcised to become like them, because it benefits the circumcised. *Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything.*

The church won't give people a chance to experience all the ways in which they can become new creations. And then you hold all their post-rejection behaviors against them—they don't go to church, or they spend too much time in bars, or they are openly promiscuous instead of shamefully hiding their promiscuity like straight people.

After Orlando, I heard someone say that if you don't understand how a bar could be a sanctuary, then you haven't ever been afraid to hold someone's hand in public. I think, also, if you don't understand how a bar can be a sanctuary, then you don't know what it's like to be told that God's grace isn't enough for you and the sins you embody.

The church can't judge people for finding church elsewhere, when the church is the only reason they can't find it here.

We are doing our best, just like you, to be all of the things that Christians ought to be: loving, joyful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled. But we are trying to be those things while also being told that no matter how well we succeed, no matter how committed we are to following Jesus, so long as we are queer, we are damned and we deserve to be damned. Naaman is washed and he is healed.

We Christians have a thing about being washed. Do you remember the vows you took at your baptism? The same vows which I took? Can you learn to trust that we, the rejected, said our vows with as much conviction and honesty as you said yours? When you were asked if you would be the church, you said, "I will, with God's help."

After three years of sermons and morning prayer, you all have taught me that the church—this church—is for everyone. Every single person is to be welcome and loved and celebrated here. You have taught me that no one is to be locked out of this church. You told me that our reputation was one of inclusivity.

But in your silence and your complacency, you are not doing what you have promised. You are being that king of Israel who believes everyone is trying to pick a fight. By being too afraid of what might happen to you if you gave life, and saying that you aren't God and cannot give life or death, you give death.

Maybe this is confusing, if you remember that Christina told you all that if you aren't a sexual or gender minority, then you need to just keep your mouth shut, and now here I am, one of those people, saying, "How dare you keep your mouths shut?" When Christina preached, my queer siblings and I had just experienced the greatest tragedy our community has seen in this generation; it was too soon for your words, after all these years of silence, to be anything other than painful. But now ... you have to start saying something. Give us a reason to stop being afraid of you.

Remember all the things to which you have said, "I will, with God's help." Remember them and perhaps you will be moved to heed Christina's exhortation toward repentance. Remember them, so that when you ask us if we can ever forgive you, instead of wiping the dust from our feet in

protest against you, we can say with as much conviction and honesty as we said our baptism vows, "I will, with God's help."