

Trinity Sunday

Gen 1:26-31, Matt 18:15-20

Sermon



FELIPE: I'd like to invite Eric Riddle and Jose Lopez to come up front, and we are going to have a podcast sermon like Tracy had some months ago

FELIPE: Welcome. I'm glad, I'm glad you're here. This summer, we're trying to lean into the part of what we have talked about in the strategic plan, which is to have meaningful worship and to have relational kind of connections with one another. And so we're merging both of those ideas with a sermon series and several different storytelling opportunities for us to talk about our connection to God and our connection to one another. So I want to begin by asking you to please tell us a little bit about your faith journey and how it is that you came to believe in Jesus and follow Jesus's teaching. And let's start with Jose.

JOSE: Well, thank you so much for inviting me. I appreciate you and everybody here who have helped me through my faith journey, 'cause it's kind of recent. You know, thank you for picking the most tweaker, unhinged person in the congregation- ... to come out here and talk about, you know, finding God. 'Cause if you don't know, you know, it's been rough. It's been rough, and it's been seven years now in recovery. [Applause] Thank you. And it's not a perfect route, you know, but through it and psychosis, I learned the voice of God who says, "You know, I love you no matter what. I love you if you want to be a girl, I love you if you want to do good in this world. And even if you don't, I'm still here with you and I love you." So through that psychosis, I understood further of a God that I thought I couldn't approach

because I'm gay or wanted to be trans. So, I decided to put more effort into that voice and to learn what it was, and it led me to, like, try a higher power, which is religion. And through, Christianity, which is what I grew up with, different types of Christianity, I was led here. And I said, "Well, we are an open and affirming church, right?" For those of you who don't know, we are an open and affirming church, and that's when I came in to try it out, and I have not left since. So I was led through a voice into a space that I was welcome and love.

FELIPE: Thank you, Jose. Eric?

ERIC: So I really don't remember a time when I wasn't in church, right? I come from a family who raised me in the Presbyterian Church. I actually the most difficult time in my life is when I moved to Columbus and this was our church. And I really struggled during that time, but, the youth group here really helped me find Christ again at a time of doubt and I just, I feel really lucky that I've had that deep root that I could tap into even in really dry times in my life. And I, I also wanna say in coming back to First Presbyterian with Jen three years ago, it really felt like coming back home, and, I just thank all of you for the relationships that, that I was able to keep through those years. So thank you.

FELIPE: So we shared in part of the scripture at the beginning that God made humans in God's image. And one of the reasons why I wanted to have the two of you speak is because I wanted you to share stories about how you have regularly encountered God in these, these days or with people with whom you're connected. So especially Jose, I'm interested in how you see God in the lives of people that you support actively through your job, through the ministry of the church and hot meals, and how you channel God's love to them. So how do you see people-- how do you see God in people you serve, and how do you channel God's love to them?

JOSE: So for those of you who don't know, I work for IU as a case manager for people with special needs, health needs. So it's a special population and of course marginalized by society. You know, my connection to God is individual like all of us, and I appreciate the opportunity to get to know people one-on-one. Full disclosure, I am not a Bible person. This is new to me, I said before, right? Four or five years ago is when I really started getting myself into congregations, but I wanted to be candid, but I cheated a little bit and I researched. So, some people call it radical proximity, where, like, you get next to people and, and that's how you know their needs, and I learned that in nursing school, right? So through that, putting myself in front of a person and asking them for their name. You know, asking them, you know, "How are you doing today?" And really listening to their answer. And again, this is part of a nursing assessment. It's not new, you know to us in healthcare. But, I put it together with God. God knows our name. And He knows our situation, right? And He knows what we need, and I practice that in my profession, but also with our guests here

at Hot Meals, you know. It's hard to know what people need if you don't talk to them, and it's hard to put yourself in their shoes if you've never been to them. It's easier for me because I've been homeless, you know. It's easier for me because I've done drugs, and I've been in that mental state of desperation, not having where to go, not having a place to lay down my head. But I have to say that even in those moments, in those worst moment in my life, high as a kite with nobody around me, is when I heard that sweet voice say, "I still love you. You know you can be whatever you want, and I will love you." And I want to be an example of that little voice to someone else. I still love you. It doesn't matter if you're using drugs- 'cause I've seen them. I've been them. That's not what I'm here to judge. If you need a blanket, I'll get you a blanket. If you need a place to sleep, we will try to arrange something for you. If I can't, I can't, and sometimes God couldn't for me. He couldn't make my house payments when I wasn't working. He couldn't. But I'm here, and I can do something, so I try to do something. I see God in... I saw God in both sides. When I was at my lowest- I heard Him, and now that I am, back to where I am, my goals are, I try to channel that to someone else. And really listen and, and try my best to do what I can. Thank you.

FELIPE: Eric, same question, but I, I wanna ask it from the perspective of your commitment to the environment. I wonder if you could tell us how you experience and see God in creation, and how you embody then God's love back in stewardship of creation.

ERIC: Thank you. When Felipe sent this question to me, I've had, like, 100 different responses in my mind, and-

FELIPE: We only need one today. [LAUGHTER]

ERIC: I know. Maybe, maybe two. I actually had a podcast called Revealing Voices, and we asked all of our guests, "What does healing mean to you?" And my response was, it's the movement back from isolation into connection. Right? And one of the ways that I connect is with the more than human world. And sometimes when I'm really struggling with social isolation, feeling lonely, my best way back into connection is through being touched and in relationship with connection, right? So, with that in mind, I wanted to read just one paragraph, from a book I'm writing, from a chapter called *Horticulture Therapy*: <<The dirtier I get, the more blessed I feel. My core belief is that I am one of God's creatures given the responsibility to care for more than just my own preservation. I am thankful for the awareness of my mortality that becomes all the more vivid in my participation in growing cycles. Caring for the earth with my blood, sweat, and tears is the most healing practice in my life. In that seed of care, there is a perennial harvest of hope.>> And then I end all my chapters with a haiku. And so the haiku in this chapter is,

Nurtured by nature,  
our presence is our present.  
Cycle of giving.

FELIPE: Thank you for that. Let me stay with you, Eric, and ask a couple things, right? So, we're having this study on ecologic justice, earth care, and you're gonna be leading us in that conversation for the next few Sundays. We just read the passage in Genesis where humans are given power, and then to quote here, "To subdue and have dominion over all creation." And, Trisha Tull was talking about this last week, that there's, there's been a misinterpretation of that phrase to somehow give carte blanche to say you can do whatever you wish with creation. But I think what it means is really is to have that kind of responsibility that a ruler would have to seek the wellbeing of dominion over that which they have domain over. So I wonder what are some of your thoughts about that notion of having dominion in connected to eco-justice.

ERIC: Yeah. So when Felipe sent me this question, he didn't use the word ruler. He used the word monarch.

FELIPE: Monarch. I did.

ERIC: And I thought he was talking about a monarch butterfly. And, and my mind was in, like, cocoon, metamorphosis, all these places.

FELIPE: I like it!

ERIC: And then I'm like, "I think he might have meant ruler." So, the question for me is- if we have dominion and we're, you know, subduing the earth, what exactly does that look like, right? And for me, it looks like restoring the Garden of Eden. I mean, what other model do we have for what restoration looks like? And one of the things in this chapter is about later on in the Genesis passage about the earth being cursed. You know, what does that mean? You know, we're thrown out of the Garden of Eden just a few chapters into the Book of Genesis and I don't really see the Earth as being cursed. I see my participation in co-creation of the world, in restoring this Garden of Eden, and subduing it back into really what this natural state of, of beauty is, as, as my primary role. And, and in doing that, I just feel connected. And maybe I am going through a metamorphosis, 'cause it took me a long time to come to this understanding, and a lot of it just has to do with witnessing the cycles of life, you know? So I guess one other point. I've got poison ivy on my wrists right now. on Memorial Day, I was actually with Maria Larson, and I thanked her because a bench was donated to the Parks Foundation to put at Blackwell Park, which is a park that I've helped out. And she said, "You know, Phil loved to take the grandkids there and show them the flowers. And just by the way, it's looking a little weedy right now, Eric." And so I spent

Tuesday and Wednesday out there gardening. You know, was I gardening a cursed creation and getting poison ivy from my toil? I don't see it that way. Some do, I don't. I mean, for me, I was restoring that property so other people like Phil Larson can take their grandkids there and experience a little glimpse of the Garden of Eden. Thank you.

JOSE: Yeah. Thank you for that. The word dominion is, is difficult to understand for some people, but I wanna make it really easy. This is what I understand. I have dominion over my finances. I have power over my finances, and I can fix my finances, right? But when you're looking at making an impact to other people, I can share my dominion of my finances with other people and make a good, and make an impact. It's kind of like what you said. You have dominion over what you can control, right? And what you can make, weed it out and make it better, make it your little garden. And then us collectively, little by little, can build something bigger that can help other people, like a community garden, right? Yeah. So, yeah, I have dominion over what I can reach. Yeah. But as a community, we can collectively make something bigger. And that's also the power of God.

FELIPE: Thank you for that. The second scripture we read, I wanted us to read it because of the very last sentence, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among you." But I didn't want to just use one verse, kind of like pluck it out. And I looked at the context, and it begins with this notion of conflict, conflict among people, and I think that some people have misinterpreted that passage and focused only on that last step, the one where it says there's not agreement, and then that person is sort of cast out or looked at really like other, like different. But I think the real lesson is that no matter what happens there, God is with us and keeps us in relationship with one another. So I wonder, as you thought about that scripture passage and as you think about your relationships with other people, what are your thoughts about that connection of God with us even in times of tension?

JOSE: We were talking in the car about it on the way here. It's funny that he says treat him like a Gentile or a tax collector, because if I remember correctly, Jesus stayed with tax collectors.

FELIPE: Correct.

JOSE: Jesus, you know, went out there into the margins and into the people that were ostracized and oppressed by other religions or other places or... Yeah, it's interesting to me that he said to someone, "Treat him as a tax collector," when you dined with tax collectors, when you were open guest of someone who was a tax collector, and you picked that person. You picked that person to be your host. So what I understand of that is that even when you have disagreements, dine with them. Get to understand them and also by

proximity- Right ... set an example. And overall, don't give up on the person. Yes, they're a tax collector. Still go there. Still visit them. Still be nice to them. Be their guest. Teach them something. Maybe we cannot change him today on this day, and that's not the goal, but we can love him today.

FELIPE: I thank you both because both of you have helped me understand the scriptures, those passages, in a different and a new way today. I mean it, and I thank you for that. Thanks be to God for God's word for us. Amen.

Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]