

GENDER PRONOUNS: WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

Matthew 3: 1-6. 9: 14-17. Luke 7: 31-35

Gender pronouns... Let's begin with what we mean by those words. I, Harris, use the pronouns "He" and "Him" for myself. That means that I identify my gender as a man. Well, some of you may be thinking, that's obvious Harris. You look like a man, talk like a man, dress like a man, and presumably, your body parts are those of a man too. So what's the issue?

Well, what if I came to a point in my life where I realized that regardless of whatever body parts I was born with, I don't really feel like a man deep in myself. I've learned how to fit into that identity because I was raised that way and everyone has treated me that way. I've learned how to be a man or a version of how society images a man and I've lived into that. But what if, for whatever reason, I begin to feel disconnected in myself?...

There is a medical word for this experience of disconnection with your gender as assigned to you at birth. The word is: dysphoria. The dictionary definition of dysphoria is: a state of unease or generalized dissatisfaction with life. It is the opposite of Euphoria. And so, gender dysphoria is a dissatisfaction that keeps growing in you with the gender assigned to you. It no longer feels your own but something that was imposed on you. Even though your body parts are identified with a certain gender because that's how society and traditional norms have determined it, you feel very differently.

If at some point, I felt such gender dysphoria myself and was able to talk about it with someone; if I was able to find others who also felt as I do; if I was able to get some counselling and therapy to guide me; if I began to feel some genuine hope of living more into myself, I would begin to explore other directions beginning with my pronouns.

So, if I began appearing on zoom or in conversations where I began identifying my pronouns as "they" and "them" that would mean I no longer identify myself as exclusively a man. Or if I further changed my pronouns to "she" and "her", regardless of the way you would see me and think of me, I myself would be living into the experience of myself as a woman and all that that means. Will I begin to change the way I look, the way I dress, the way I'm freer to behave and express my behaviour? Would I then, with medical counselling and guidance, begin to use some hormone therapy to begin changing the way I look and feel physically? If I am really beginning to feel alive in myself and discovering who I really am in a way I have never fully known it before, I may consider more permanent surgical procedures that are safe and very much affirming of my living into my gender identity more fully.

All of this takes years, and surgery that is permanent is something not available to young people until their bodies are adult enough and their minds mature enough. All of it is a process that takes many years and much counselling and conversation... The goal, of course, is for people to become more fully on the outside who they discover themselves to be on the inside... How free are any of us to fully be ourselves when it comes to our gender?... What are the parameters for what makes a man or a woman in a way that is acceptable socially and culturally? How much is gender something we're taught rather than something that is also in us? How much is the way we think of ourselves determined by what is imposed on us and we live into because we want to be accepted and included rather than rejected and persecuted?

By me using the gender pronouns "He" and "Him" for myself, I am inviting you to be free to tell me what gender pronouns you prefer for yourself. I shouldn't just assume because you look like a woman in my mind, more or less, I will use pronouns for you that are a woman's. I make space for anyone else to share what pronouns they feel are true for themselves without making assumptions or judgements myself. Imagine if we all indicated what pronouns to use for ourselves. The message in that is: I will not make assumptions about your gender identity. You can tell me your pronouns which will also tell me how you identify yourself. I want you to feel comfortable, safe and accepted with me however you identify yourself. I am making space for you because I care about you and I want you to feel alive in yourself rather than dysphoric.

And this, my friends, is an extension of compassion and care. And this is especially so as we live in a political climate these days, spurred on with the inauguration of Donald Trump, I believe, where pronouns have become a hot button issue. Provinces are coming out with laws banning young people from changing their pronouns because parents are threatened not having control over their children. Travelling to the U.S., anyone using other pronouns than either strictly male or female ones, and as assigned at one's birth, will not be allowed in or will be questioned. What's going on here? We're just talking about words? Pronouns are just words. So what's behind all this politics? What's the fear?

The fear in the freedom to use different pronouns for your gender identity, I believe, is rooted in a larger fear about gender roles. Traditional and conservative people believe that our society has been undermining the proper place, role and behaviour for men and women and how they are taught to live and express their gender socially and personally. The MAGA movement in the U.S., is the extreme end of this social movement. Another more negative word for it is toxic masculinity. Women are supposed to look and behave in certain ways, and their best place is in the home having babies and raising children. They should definitely not be in professions that require physical exertion, force or any job that involves protection. These are traditionally men's jobs, like the military, police, construction or certain sports, for example. And men should be doing men's kind of work or activity which makes them primary providers and protectors of women and their homes. Gender pronouns and the freedom for young people to change them whenever they want is a real threat to all this... Really?...

Well, and many of the strongest proponents of this kind of traditional gender understandings also claim to be Christians who follow Jesus and the bible. OK, so why don't we actually consider more seriously what Jesus really teaches and lives beginning with John the Baptist who prepares the way for him.

Neither John nor Jesus fit into roles that are acceptable to the authorities who are also the politicians as well as those who define socially and religiously acceptable behaviour and expression. We see that in what Jesus says in our reading from Luke: "For John has come eating no bread and drinking no wine"... why? We see in our first reading that he lives off the land in the wilderness surviving on locusts and wild honey, and making his own clothes from what's out there... Wow! So what do you do with what you don't understand and therefore fills you with fear or disgust? "He has a demon" you say. He's possessed, he's sick in the head, he needs help, or maybe he needs to be locked up (which is what ends up happening to John).

But why is John such a threat and why is he so maligned by the authorities? Yes it's about how he lives and what he looks like. But more than that, it's his message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." So why is this message a threat? It's a threat if you take it personally as something you need to do yourself. John is saying that you need to repent. You need to change something. You need to shift your thinking and behaving. You need to stop doing something you shouldn't be doing or do something you've avoided doing or failed to do.

And John directs this message to the authorities as much as to the people. And because people are buying into this message and thinking about everything that's wrong in their world and that it can maybe change, it makes them restless rather than passively accepting, guilt-ridden and hopeless that change is in any way possible. John is riling up the people with his message of repentance.

OK, but what if repentance also means repenting of your ignorance? What if repentance also requires you to open your mind and heart as much as your spirit to new ways of seeing, believing, hoping and embracing of others as much as yourself? What if much that goes by way of tradition, or what's deemed natural or God-ordained is simply imposed on you by those in power who are served by keeping you in that way of thinking? If you are a woman in a man's world or a marginalized group because of your sexuality or how you express your gender outside what's acceptable, or if you are the wrong race of a person or class or religion or whatever... couldn't repentance and the shakeup it could incite be a good thing too? The call to change is rough for people who like to keep things as they are. But it is energizing for those people who are desperately in hope of change... Think about it...

Well, and this also brings us to the third reading, which includes an important parabolic saying of Jesus: "No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from

the cloak, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are ruined, but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved."

Now, imagine Jesus is the brand-new unshrunk cloth or the new wine, and you and I are a piece of cloth or a wine skin to receive him and all he has to give us... Are we ready to take in something new and become new clothes and new wineskins ourselves? Or are we stuck in old ways of thinking and being and cannot accommodate the new ways Jesus wills to transform us beginning with our hearts? Are we ready to repent of our ignorance and learn new things because our hearts are open in love rather than shut down in fear?

Well, if we are willing to repent of our ignorance and open our hearts and minds to new ways of seeing and loving, how do we see John, but especially Jesus? In Jesus' world, diversifying pronouns was not an option anyone thought about. But there were very clear understandings of acceptable gender behaviour. If you're a man, you cannot complete your manhood if you are not married, socialize with men, keep women at home and only talk with your spouse, and do other manly things. Neither John nor Jesus fit this in any way, and, in fact, Jesus refers favourably to eunuchs in the gospel, who would be considered non-binary persons with both manly and womanly traits, and therefore, today would use "they" and "them" pronouns. Eunuchs were treated with contempt and disgust in their society, whereas Jesus feels deep kinship with them.

Moreover, Jesus very deliberately encourages women to step out of their traditional roles in households having babies and keeping close to home by having a number of single women in his entourage of disciples, and having some of the most intimate and revealing conversations with them as recorded in the gospels. And this freedom from gender norms also spills into the early church as we see in Paul's letters and elsewhere, where women take on all kinds of leadership roles in the church well beyond taking care of the kids and providing food for the men at home or at church.

So then, if we provided John and Jesus with freedom to use whatever pronouns they wished for themselves or offer that to the women they engaged with like Mary Magdalene, Mary & Martha, for example, or Chloe or Lydia or Junia in Paul's letters, what do you think could happen? I bet the diversity and freedom we witness in the biblical accounts we have would make the pronouns we use equally diverse and fluid.

You see, the real issue behind pronouns is how boys and girls, men and women behave, dress, look and live their gender. How open are we to diversity? If we claim to be totally open, why are pronouns an issue? If we allow freedom to our young people to dress in certain ways, or be interested in any activity or profession they like, why do we care what pronouns they use or what that may lead to in the future in terms of their living ever more fully into themselves?

So then, the question each of us is left with on this 2nd Sunday of Advent as we ponder the witness of John the Baptist, is this: where and what do we need to repent of so that we are ever closer to the kingdom of heaven God wants to establish more fully on earth as it is in heaven? What ignorance is in us we have not fully perceived or understood but simply accepted as built into the order of things because that's what we've inherited under the guise of tradition or nature or God? May this Advent and Christmas season open us up to new visions as we welcome the new wine that is the Christ-child... Amen.