



“PUT ON LOVE”
SCRIPTURE: COLOSSIANS 3: 12-17
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
Sunday, May 22, 2022 - YOUTH SUNDAY
Isaiah Kyremes-Parks and Mary Elizabeth Shoop

Banter #1

Isaiah starts
(WAITING)
Nice weather, eh?

Where are our moms?

What's the date?

We have to do what our parents do.

Gotta do our own thing
scary, right?

Grace covenant supporting us to do this and will take what we have to offer them.

Isaiah

As a pastor's kid, a lot of this should be second nature, right. I mean I've been in a church my whole life.

I mean that very literally, the pastor of the church, where my mom worked, was a family friend and was in the hospital awaiting my arrival into the world. Church has always surrounded me. Everywhere I have moved has been because of Church.

For such a long time I never thought much about my faith at all. I just knew I was a Christian in the Presbyterian church. That is all I needed to know. I knew most of my friends were Mormon but that didn't matter much to me.

My experience of church as a kid was a very inviting environment and that was just perfect because that is how I understood the bible. Jesus took care of people, anyone, no matter who they were. And as a Christian that is what I should be doing. Being in a community with anyone and everyone. This is still what I want to believe.

In all of the teachings of Jesus that we read week after week in church, I still understand that individual to be a person who sought after sinners and was always looking to bring love, healing, and justice to everyone. Especially those pushed to the margins.

I saw the church to be this, and only this, until just after I was confirmed. We were living just outside Cleveland amidst hard lines of affluence in one neighborhood and poverty in the next, separated by none other than train tracks and highways. In middle school is when I really started to question what being a Christian meant to me.

I became more acquainted with what Christianity means through a historical lens. There is no debate, people have been pushed to the margins, systematically oppressed, killed, and enslaved in the name of God, under the guise of Christianity.

How does that fit into my framework of proclaiming myself Christian?

Even in this denomination, just seven years ago, if I decided to marry a person of the same gender identity, that marriage would not take place within this denomination. To clarify, the PCUSA general assembly voted to extend that ability to pastors in 2015. But I also might mention that this denomination is about as progressive as it gets.

I went through confirmation before I started to wrestle with all these realities. Being the child of a christian educator I felt like an imposter when I would be in conversations surrounding faith because I was grappling with whether or not I subscribed to christianity. I of course could talk the talk, add to conversations, and share my own interpretations of scriptures, it just did not feel right to me though. I was speaking confidently about things I really wasn't sure of.

To add insult to injury, the church I was attending in Cleveland really did not line up with what I sought in a church community, even just community in general. The church was located among multi million dollar houses of which, one might imagine, were owned primarily by white folk. The congregation of that church by and large were people who grew up in church, liked the idea of it, but wouldn't take the time to really internalize what

the bible was calling them to do. Instead most focused their energy on things like what the clergy were and weren't wearing on Sunday, where the flowers were on the chancel, emails and phone calls about how frustrated they were that a few rows of pews were removed to make space for families and their children.

I understand that not all church members are privy to all the nitty gritty details of the inner workings of a church community and that I have a unique inside view to some of this. I also found some really amazing people within that church who have helped shape me into this person I am today. I am not telling this story to invalidate all of the things but rather put forth the question that arose in me which is "Are these really the things we hold the highest value in?".

This same congregation threw a 100th birthday party for the church that cost more than the median income of a person in this country, for a one night party that really only served the purpose of inflating the ego's of the church member's who wanted to put on this event.

A year's worth of income. Not even ten minutes driving distance from highly impoverished and systematically oppressed communities.

I guess what I wanted church to be as a kid was just a naïve idealistic understanding right?

Beyond my immediate church congregations, throughout the years I have also participated in numerous denominational conferences and events. Among them being triennium. I served on the planning team for about two years for the 2019 Presbyterian Youth Triennium.

In the midst of this planning, I was coming to terms with a lot of the questioning and discernment surrounding my own faith.

I was in limbo, I saw so much value in what events like these mean and meant to people, how powerful a faith enriching experience it could be for folks. But I wasn't there personally.

Through being on the planning team I got to meet so many amazing people who I still keep in contact with. I was so happy to be around the people I was, I felt so much love in that community.

A perk of having a parent so nerdy and involved in the national church was being able to see a world outside of my congregation. A community of an ever so slightly more diverse representation of what this church is.

Having more queer folks in one's life would't usually be attributed to church, but it was for me. The love that reigned from so many individuals created this community where I felt like I had support and role models who really exemplified that child like understanding of christainity I had. Kind, genuine, thoughtful humans who I cannot imagine my life without.

There is this book called the bible. It is a very underground book written thousands of years ago, I doubt any of you all have heard of it.

From my view, the bible offers something pretty amazing. Stories, parables, and songs that either through direct or more abstract interpretation, offer a guide. A guide of principles, ethics, and morals that teach us how to treat each other.

When those teachings of love and life prevail combined with a community of people dedicating the way they live to that, incredible things can ensue.

I took part in a year-long virtual cohort called Youth Mission Scholars. In this program we were encouraged to connect more with our community through mission while also examining the systems that create the need for philanthropy and volunteer work.

At the end of the program I was helping with a promotional video about the program and one of the questions was about what the program did for my faith journey. My answer was a reflection on both the program and the church as a whole.

With any community there is so much potential for the change that it can affect. Church to me is a really amazing example of a community that can be used as a conduit for change, support, and action. People united to help each other out.

I think for me though, one of the most important things is to use love as a guiding principle. I am so happy that people can find that in a community like church or even in their own study of the bible.

I am even happier that it's not the only way.

I've found so much love from the church communities that have accompanied and supported me through seasons of life. Grace Covenant has certainly felt like a place driven by love that has supported me and this whole community. I've also found so much love in so many other places and I couldn't be more grateful for that too.

Being a de facto Pastor's Kid I've felt a lot of pressure, mostly within myself, to have this faith stuff figured out.

Examining my confirmation when I was in seventh grade, I thought I knew then, I want to know now, but maybe I don't need to.

I would rather rest assured that I am doing the best I can to lead a life of love than leading the life of a "good christain" when I am not clear on what a "good christian" is.

For now, I see church as an organization of people who love their community, and that community should include everyone.

I can get down with that.

I think as part of a sermon I am supposed to relate all of this back to the scripture.

These verses from Colossians talk about the golden threads that knit christains together. I want to go a step further and proclaim that these can be the things that knit us together as humans.

Community, whether that be a church family, a small group of friends, or anywhere one can be loved and supported by others, is one of the best things we've got. Continue to choose love, love for yourself, love for others, and love for this world. We'll make it if we take care of eachother.

Banter #2

Thank you Isaiah, that was a really beautiful story about how you've experienced community and how you see the church as a part of your life.

Thank you, I wasn't exactly sure how it was going to come out... I am so grateful that we are in a place and a community that allows me to come up here and talk about how I don't have all the answers

Yeah I really resonate with that. I get uncomfortable in places where it seems like people think being a Christian means you have all the answers.

For sure I really think part of being a christian is being able to figure it out on your own and being given space to grow

Mary Elizabeth

At our high school, there is a time each week when a Christian minister comes and visits each of the school's sports teams to talk, read scripture, and pray. He encourages athletes to "take up the cross" and make sure they're reading their Bible and praying regularly. We're usually all gathered for practice, where we're supposed to be at that time, when he starts to talk to us.

And that's really where the problem lies. This is a public school, and a captive audience who really doesn't have much of a say in whether or not they participate in this time. As an athlete, and a teenager, I never felt like I could've just gotten up and left when this happened, and I've heard other athletes say this as well.

This time has always felt icky to me. I am a christian, but here is this man coming into my community and projecting himself as the model of the true, correct christianity, when I really don't agree with what he believes. It feels icky to me that he gets to come and talk to my peers and say, "this is what Christianity is" when he works at a church that doesn't

ordain women, doesn't support the LGBTQIA+ community, and doesn't interpret the Bible the same way that I do.

As you probably guessed, the stubborn cross country coach who is usually up here talking to you all, did not put up with this for long. She quickly met with the principal, the athletic director, showed up to this time (sitting in the front row), and made sure everyone knew that Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop had some questions.

But what does it mean to be a "correct" christian? Who am I to tell this man he's wrong when he can just turn around and say the same thing to me?

This passage shows us that the real problem is not differing theologies, although that is problematic to me, but that it is about the way that power is used in a community.

This time has actually taught me a lot of meaningful lessons. It showed me how complicated the dynamics of a community can be. It's taught me that community is not a coercive practice where we sit and listen to someone tell us what to believe. Beloved community is not just people being in the same place at the same time, beloved community is an atmosphere of mutual respect and curiosity. It's a place where we trust God to touch each person's heart. Not a place where we use our power to try and play God. We have to let God be God.

When I first read this Colossians passage a few years ago, I saw it as sort of a checklist for Christianity. Be compassionate. Forgive people. Be grateful and loving. It's easy to convince ourselves that these touchstones are the trick. As long as we're nice to each other, God is happy, and we're doing good. But when we really dig into this passage, the call is so much deeper than that. The scripture tells us to "clothe ourselves in love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony".

What kind of love fosters this kind of perfect harmony that the scripture talks about? I don't think it's a shallow love, or a transactional love. I don't think it's a hand out a check and post a picture kind of love. This love calls us to action. A perfect harmony kind of love is a relational, deep, meaningful, and very challenging kind of love. It's a love that doesn't

think it has all the answers. It leaves space for questions and curiosity, and it centers liberation, not conformity.

Jesus' love was radical, challenging, and mysterious. Jesus sought after the people pushed to the margins, brought them in, and told them over and over again how loved they are. It's hard to imagine a love like that right now isn't it? A no exceptions, all encompassing, never ending love.

A perfect harmony kind of love is trusting God's mystery. It's being okay with not knowing how God works sometimes, and not worrying about living life as an application for heaven. When we shove God into this little human box that we can compartmentalize in our little human heads, we're doing a *serious* disservice to the power of our God. God is far above our heads. We are not God, none of us, and we have no business acting like we are.

I bet there's a handful of people in here who have failed a chemistry test, or maybe a calculus test, or better yet an environmental science test. Which makes sense, our world is extremely complex, and it would be absurd for us to think we know all the information held in the multiverse that God created. So if we can't understand all these worldly things, who are we to say that we understand God? We have to unlatch the human box around God, and let ourselves trust, because that's what community is.

Community is trusting God and one another. It's trusting that we are all mutually working towards that powerful love that Jesus so boldly demonstrated for us. Community is holding people accountable when they do harm with their power, and standing with those who are pushed to the margins when power is abused.

Being beloved community is bold, and very challenging. But if we want to live into God's calling, it's not up for debate. We have to do it. We have to love fiercely and unendingly. We have to be courageous and curious. We have to be equitable with power, and we can't let ourselves fall into the trap of using coercive community to pass as beloved community.

Friends, we are on a long journey, but we are on it together. Let's continue to put on love, boldly.

Banter #3/Close

IKP: Thank you Mary Elizabeth, I think your reflection on how community can be coercive is really important. I know there are so many places where people can feel suffocated by truths that are being proclaimed for them without being able to proclaim them for themselves.

MES: Yeah, I think it's crucial to make sure our communities are life giving and seek to include everyone.

IKP: And community is such a powerful thing, It hangs in the balance of being able to be something that fosters love and inclusion but can also harm and ostracize people. This scripture is very intentional about how to treat each other in community and how we should share that power.

MES: We are God's chosen people, all of us. And we are all called into a community that is compassionate and kind,

IKP: Humble and gentle,

MES: Patient and loving. Let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts.

IKP: Because we are part of a community,

MES: And in all things, give thanks

IKP: For the love that has no end.

ALL: Thanks be to God.