

June 11, 2023  
Second Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 5, Year A, Track 1  
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert  
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Genesis 12:1-9  
Psalm 33:1-12  
Romans 4:13-25  
Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

I apologize on this first “summer” Sunday—I’m giving you a longer sermon instead of a shorter one, but here we go.

In most of the country, June is Pride month. Because New Haven celebrates Pride in September, and because y’all hear me preach regularly about LGBTQ+ issues, I’d planned to let the subject slide this year. But my resolve began to teeter as LGBTQ+-related news added up. And it toppled on Thursday with the announcement of the death of Pat Robertson.

Fox News online shared the news in story with this headline: “US faith leaders react to Pat Robertson's death: ‘Kind and gracious servant.’”<sup>1</sup> One must consider the source, and it being Fox News; “kind” and “gracious” are certainly not the first words that come to mind when I think of him. Most of the people offering comments in my social media feed opted to limit themselves to some variation of the following sentiment: His fate is in God’s hands.

Robertson is particularly disliked in the LGBTQ+ community, because he particularly targeted us. You may remember that he rather famously blamed gay people for the 9/11 attacks and various natural disasters.<sup>2</sup> But there are many more reasons to be unhappy with the man and his legacy. As that FoxNews.com article went on to say, “Robertson was known for his ‘700 Club’ television show and for making religion central to Republican Party politics.”<sup>3</sup> Along those lines, *The New York Times* offered this headline: “How Pat Robertson Created the Religious Right’s Model for Political Power.”<sup>4</sup> We are all living daily with the results.

As other news this week reminded me, far-right Christians haven’t limited their mission ground to American soil. For example, they have successfully exported their brand of anti-LGBTQ+ religiosity to Africa. For that purpose they found particularly fertile ground in Uganda, which just enacted one of the most pernicious anti LGBTQ+ laws in the world. It includes the death penalty for “aggravated homosexuality” and prison terms of up to twenty years simply for “promoting homosexuality.”<sup>5</sup> On May 31, the Episcopal News Service reported that the leader of the Anglican Church of Uganda expressed gratitude to Ugandan lawmakers for passing the new law.<sup>6</sup> On Friday, the Episcopal News Service reported that the Archbishop of Canterbury responded by condemning the new law and urging the Archbishop of Uganda to retract his support for criminalization.<sup>7</sup>

I want to be very clear here in case you didn’t know this: far-right American Christians were a primary force behind that new law in Uganda. They’re after the same thing here—consider the recent legislative activity across the country; consider the recent vitriolic attacks trying to influence Target and Budweiser and even Chik-fil-A, that darling of the right.<sup>8</sup> In response to the legislative activity, last week the Human Rights Campaign declared a national state of emergency for LGBTQ+ people.<sup>9</sup>

The fact is, anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric is a powerful hate-based political organizing tool. But let's be clear: this is not just about LGBTQ+ issues, it's about a whole lot more. The marriage of far-right religion to far-right politics has massive implications, both at home and abroad. For a frightful example, just take a look at what's going on with the Orthodox Church in Russia.

That subject is beyond both my pay grade and my intentions for this sermon. Before I went down that rabbit hole, my goal today was to talk about one of the major roots of anti-LGBTQ+ Christianity. And for that, I'll start with a story.

When I was in the ninth grade, one of my best friends, a Roman Catholic like me, became born again. She joined the Southern Baptist church just down the street from where I lived, and then set out to bring me into the fold. After weeks of increasing pressure, one evening she just showed up at my front door, trying to get me to come to the revival meeting that her church was hosting that week. For the longest time, she stood there at my open door and pleaded with me to join her. I didn't ask her in, but I stayed pleasant in my begging off, and eventually she left. The next evening she returned, and we repeated the entire scenario. That time, after I closed the door, my mother gave me an ultimatum: either I tell this friend to stop trying to recruit me, or my mother would. I think my mother's words were more like, "Either you run her off or I will." I did very soon speak to my friend, and our friendship immediately ended.

She and I attended the same high school, one large enough that we went on to have very little contact, but also small enough that I could see her become increasingly immersed in and committed to the Southern Baptist world. During our final semester of high school, I surmised that, the path of pastor being closed to her as a woman, she would surely instead *have* to become a pastor's wife. Sure enough, a few years later, she did indeed marry a pastor. The only surprise was that she married one of my second cousins. I never again saw her after high school, but my mother did; she reported seeing her at the occasional extended family gathering.

The second cousin she married has long been the pastor of a large Southern Baptist church in Louisiana. Sometime during the pandemic, for some reason I can't remember, I decided to look up his church's website. I wondered whether it would be transparent on issues of gender and sexuality. Most non-affirming churches keep that information opaque, and this church mostly does so. But I will give them a little credit, because their website does have a link you can click to download their articles of incorporation and bylaws. Article I of the bylaws is what it calls a "Doctrinal Statement." The whole Doctrinal Statement is not very long, a little less than 500 words. But most of it has to do with what it calls "Marriage, Gender and Sexuality." Under that subsection, it says this:

We believe that God wonderfully and immutably creates each person as male or female. These two distinct, *complementary genders* [emphasis added] together reflect the image and nature of God. (Gen. 1:26-27.) Rejection of one's biological gender is a rejection of the image of God within that person.<sup>10</sup>

It goes on to denounce same-sex marriage and a few other things. This Doctrinal Statement encapsulates far-right Christianity's obsession with marriage, gender, and sexuality. Jesus, of course, never said a word about any of those things. He did, on the other hand, heal the sick and feed the hungry. As our reading from Matthew reminds us, he even dined with tax collectors and generally chose to hand out with them. None of that is mentioned in their Doctrinal Statement. But there is one other bit that goes this way: "...for purposes of the Church's faith, doctrine, practice, policy, and discipline, our Pastor, with the approval of the Deacons, shall be the Church's final interpretive authority on the Bible's meaning and application."<sup>11</sup> Yikes! I don't want that job. But I couldn't help but imagine what it would feel like to have it. It would be a big temptation.

What I really wanted to focus on here is this idea of "complementary genders." It reflects a theological position called *complementarianism*. While complementarianism is well-known among evangelicals, I have found it to be little-known among Episcopalians. With this sermon, I thought I would try to help fill that gap, because I think we all need to know. Complementarianism asserts that men and women have different roles, roles that are supposedly complementary but not unequal. Frankly, it sounds unequal to me, because, for example, in the household, the husband is the spiritual head, and in church, women are not allowed to teach men. Complementarianism also asserts that a human is born biologically either male or female, and that can't change; a person's sex is the one assigned at birth and must be expressed in all aspects of life, perhaps especially as you marry someone of the opposite sex. All this is about LGBTQ+ people, but it's also about the status of women.

As its sole inclusion in that Doctrinal Statement indicates, complementarianism is basically *the* theological litmus test for many conservative churches. A person is either male or female; depending on whether a person follows the rules for being either a male or a female, that person is either in or out. The holiness and therefore the salvation of a whole entity—be it a church, a denomination, or a society—depends on policing those boundaries. It's hard for me to square this with the boundary-breaking Jesus of today's reading from Matthew. It doesn't even fit with the law-suspicious and grace-trusting Paul of today's reading from Romans.

A woman named Beth Moore is a very well-known and best-selling Christian author and teacher. Two years ago she rather famously left the Southern Baptist fold, primarily over the issue of complementarianism. I recently looked around to see where she ended up; I learned to my surprise that she is worshipping at a church associated with the Anglican Church in North America, or ACNA for short. That's another thing that Episcopalians are often unclear about, so let me help clarify: ACNA made up mostly of churches that broke away from the Episcopal Church over issues of sexuality. Most left after Bishop Gene Robinson was consecrated. Some left after the church approved blessings for same-sex relationships. What many don't realize is that only a few ACNA churches recognize women's ordinations. If you go to the ACNA denominational website, or to the websites of its member churches, you will not see any transparency about these things. I recently checked the ACNA denominational website myself, and discovered there was nothing on there about any of this. People go into those churches completely unaware.

Sometimes I put all this together and wonder, *How can I even be a Christian?* Fortunately, I usually get an answer to that question pretty quickly. I think you know that a handful of us participated in the Middletown Pride March last Saturday. It was kind of a big deal for the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, because the diocese as a body had never before participated in Pride, and Bishop Jeff would be the first bishop to ever march. At first I had mixed feelings about that. I first marched in a Pride march with my then bishop, the Bishop of Vermont, over twenty years ago. It made me a bit grumpy to remember that Connecticut lagged so far behind. In the end, though, once I was there, I felt mostly relief and joy, especially while we were marching. As church groups always are, our diocesan contingent was met with cheers and even a few tears.

There was at least one other notable death last week, on Wednesday, a priest of the Church named Ann Coburn.<sup>12</sup> Jakki and I knew her because she worked for the seminary that Jakki and I attended; she preached at Jakki's ordination to the priesthood. Ann was the first woman ordained an Episcopal priest in Connecticut. That was in 1977, only a year after the Episcopal Church approved the ordination of women, and three years after the first women were "irregularly" ordained. Besides being a groundbreaker, Ann went on to make that ground she broke easier for other women to follow along behind.

We've come so far on women's equality and on LGBTQ+ equality that we sometimes forget that it's all really pretty new. Later this month will be the twentieth anniversary of the Supreme Court decision in *Lawrence v. Texas*, the ruling that made sodomy laws unconstitutional across the country. Twenty years isn't so long. My marriage to Jakki has had Federal recognition for only ten years.

Yes, sometimes I wonder why I stick with this often infuriating Christianity and this often compromised denomination. I guess the short answer is that it is my home I am not ready to give it up. Even more, I hope I help pave the way for others who will come after me. Here I'm not us talking about sexual orientation and gender identity. I'm talking about all the folks who believe in a theology that embraces the Jesus of the Gospels.

You know what? You all get to help make that path easier, too. We all get to help pave a way for people who are looking for the Jesus of the Gospels. Let's take a moment to imagine that, as Jesus called Matthew, Jesus called you. Not just to *any* expression of spirituality or religion or Christianity; instead, Jesus called you to the expression of Christianity that we have all together created here, the one that together we help pave the way for others to follow. I'm telling you, I have seen it, right here, again and again. I saw it most recently with the people that Bishop Jeff laid hands on last Sunday who had been in our inquirers class.

Some of the more snarky social media posts about Pat Robertson last week speculated about his eternal fate. Me, I'm not willing to consign him to hell. In my view, no thing and no one lies beyond God's saving grace and redemptive glory. And actually, fretting about all that is exactly what keeps so many folks so theologically conservative. Let's just leave all that to God, so that we can focus on love: love here, and love now.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dierdre Reilly, “US faith leaders react to Pat Robertson's death: ‘Kind and gracious servant,’” *Fox News*, June 8, 2023, available online at <https://www.foxnews.com/lifestyle/us-faith-leaders-react-pat-robertsons-death-kind-gracious-servant> (accessed June 11, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Ryan Bort, “Pat Robertson, Televangelist Who Blamed Gay People for 9/11 and Hurricanes, Dies,” *Rolling Stone*, “June 8, 2023, available at <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/pat-robertson-dead-obituary-1234766208/> (accessed June 11, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> FoxNews.com.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Dias, “How Pat Robertson Created the Religious Right’s Model for Political Power,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2023, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/08/us/pat-robertson-religious-right-politics.html> (accessed June 11, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> David Paulsen, “Anglican archbishop thanks Uganda’s leaders for nation’s harsh new anti-LGBTQ+ law,” *Episcopal News Service*, May 31, 2023, available online at <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2023/05/31/anglican-archbishop-thanks-ugandas-leaders-for-nations-harsh-new-anti-lgbtq-law/> (accessed June 11, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> David Paulsen, “Archbishop of Canterbury condemns Uganda’s anti-LGBTQ+ law, urges Uganda archbishop to drop support,” *Episcopal News Service*, June 9, 2023, <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2023/06/09/archbishop-of-canterbury-condemns-ugandas-anti-lgbtq-law-urges-uganda-archbishop-to-drop-support/> (accessed June 11, 2023).

<sup>8</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Holly Yan, “Human Rights Campaign declares a national state of emergency for LGBTQ+ people,” *CNN*, June 6, 2023, available online at [Human Rights Campaign declares a national state of emergency for LGBTQ+ people | CNN](https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/06/human-rights-campaign-declares-emergency-lgbtq-people/) (accessed June 11, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Broadmoor Baptist Church (Shreveport, LA) Bylaws, Article I, Section 3, undated, available online at [https://moor.church/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/BBC-Organization-Articles\\_and\\_Bylaws\\_2016-09-19.pdf](https://moor.church/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/BBC-Organization-Articles_and_Bylaws_2016-09-19.pdf) (accessed June 11, 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, Article I, Section 4.

<sup>12</sup> “RIP: Ann Coburn, advocate for women in the priesthood,” *Episcopal News Service*, June 7, 2023, available online at <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2023/06/07/rip-ann-coburn-advocate-for-women-in-the-priesthood/> (accessed June 11, 2023).