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SHAPING SANCTUARY: SERMON BY REV. CHARLES KING

 REV. CHARLES KING /  SEPTEMBER 7, 2017 /

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I want to preface my remarks with three comments. First, I see I am the last in a line-up of clergy speaking. I am assuming it is my job to bring the message home. Second, I was introduced as a Baptist minister. I don't know if you realize it, but that means that I am an evangelical Christian. I hope one of the things you come to appreciate is that not all white evangelicals sound like Jerry Falwell, Jr. and Franklin Graham. Third, I brought my Bible with me, and I plan to use it. I was asked to speak here today as a member of the clergy, and no Baptist preacher would think to step into the pulpit without a Bible in hand.

Growing up in an evangelical household, memorizing and reciting scripture came as second nature, even before I learned to read or write. As a matter of fact, I was only three years old when I first stood up in front of the congregation and recited perfectly John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him, shall not perish, but have eternal life."

This verse, which is at the heart of our faith, is so simple, that even at the age of three, I could understand what it meant. This awesome God, so grand that I could not even imagine Him, loved me so much that he sacrificed a part of himself so that I could live. And all this God wanted from me was that I accept His love and love others around me in that same way. ...But I had not yet learned to read and write when I learned that the "whosoever" in this verse came with an asterisk.

I was five years old when, one day, I went with my mother and several of my older brothers to do our weekly grocery shopping. We left the store with my brothers pushing two heavily laden carts. (I had nine brothers and sisters. So, two carts were the norm.) As we were walking toward the family station wagon, a Rambler, we saw an older man, probably about the age I am now, stumble and fall. He hit his head against a car curb, with a thwack that sounded loudly. Even from a short distance, I could see the blood begin to spill.

My brothers let go of the grocery carts and raced over to help this man. But my mother, who I knew to be unfailingly caring and kind, yelled out, "Stop! Don't touch that man! He's drunk. He's an alcoholic." And so, my brothers returned to the carts, we loaded our groceries into the back of the station wagon, got in and drove away, leaving that wounded man alone in the parking lot.

As I got older, I would learn that the asterisk attached to that "whosoever" was quite expandable, and could include any number of types of people as we, God's people, were informed by our culture, which we then justified through our theology. But no matter how

wide or narrow the asterisk, it almost always included sexual minorities and people who experience substance use disorder. Thus, for years, the evangelical Church ignored and even shunned the AIDS epidemic, even as it ignores the opioid epidemic today.

The truth is, there is no theological justification for any asterisk on that “whosoever”. In Luke 4:18, the writer describes Jesus’ first public witness in a synagogue. Jesus, having found the text from the prophet Isaiah, read, “The spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to program good news to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Would someone who spoke those words have room for an asterisk in his “whosoever”? I don’t think so. Some would suggest Jesus was just speaking metaphorically. But there is no justification for that interpretation. This was a poor and oppressed people awaiting their Messiah. If Jesus was just speaking in metaphor, why did they try to kill him when he went on to suggest that his presence was the fulfillment of that scripture?

Later, toward the end of his ministry on earth, Jesus was even more clear, spelling out explicitly how he expected his followers to make meaningful that “whosoever”. Teaching his disciples, Jesus describes that great day when the King of the Universe gathers all of the peoples and all of the nations around him. Jesus says the King will turn to the ones he has gathered on his right side, and invite them into their inheritance, say, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” (Matthew 25: 34-37) The people ask when they have done these things, and the King replies, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25: 40)

At a time when the number of deaths around this country from opioid overdose exceeds the number of deaths we saw at the peak of the AIDS epidemic, can’t you hear that same Christ saying, “I was in danger of infection with HIV and Hepatitis C, and you gave me clean syringes. I was overdosing and you gave me naloxone. I was shooting in a filthy alley, and you gave me a place where I could inject safely. I was alone and afraid, and you embraced me without judgment and helped me to find my way.”

I am not the one challenging the Church to do this. It is the call of the Christ. And many of you have heard that call before. You saw people who were hungry and without food. So you set up a food pantry or a meal program. Faith-based institutions have led in the fight against hunger, and even today operate more than half of all food relief programs in this country. You saw people homeless on the street in the dead of winter. So you opened up

your doors and began to offer shelter, and even more, you began to demand programs to address homelessness and housing dislocation in your community. Now you are being called to address the opioid epidemic.

Even as we speak, there is a regulatory package sitting on the desk of the Governor of the State of New York. These are things that he can do with the stroke of a pen, without having to go to the State Assembly or Senate for approval. The package includes expanding the number of entities that can distribute clean syringes beyond the current twenty-eight organizations with specific approval, to include any non-profit service organization, including churches and other faith-based groups. It includes full decriminalization of syringe possession so that people don't share their drug paraphernalia to avoid the risk of being arrested for holding illegal syringes. It includes the operation of pilot-supervised consumption sites where people are assisted to use their drugs safely and at the same time get the help and medical care that they need. And it includes permission for those pilot programs to test the chemical composition of the drugs people are injecting so that they know what they are putting into their bodies.

These four regulatory reforms, among others, need to be proclaimed from the pulpits of churches as we carry out our prophetic ministry. We need to urge our parishioners and congregants to speak out in support of them. And then there is our ministry of service. What better sanctuary could there be to receive clean needles and life-saving naloxone, and even to safely inject and receive care and assistance into treatment than the Church, called to embrace and serve "whosoever"? And what better message could the Church send to the world than to embrace people who use drugs and to embrace their families as well?

"Whatever you have done for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." Amen.

About the Author

Rev. Charles King is President and CEO [Housing Works, Inc.](https://www.housingworks.org/) in New York City.




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