
Protective Declarations

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Throughout June 2019, my congregation hosted a series of educational events and discussions in preparation for a vote on whether we should become a Reconciling In Christ congregation, with an official statement welcoming members of the LGBTQIA+ community to share fully in our worship life. Most members of the congregation who had serious doubts about the process simply chose not to attend the events, but there was one couple in particular who, while clearly uncomfortable with the idea, did come to most of the Sunday afternoon and Thursday evening discussions, and raise their worries in front of the group. In particular, during the presentation addressing what the Bible itself says or doesn't say on the subject of gender and sexuality, the woman raised her hand and asked specifically about Lev 18:22 ("You shall not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination.")¹ She wanted to know how there could possibly be any interpretation involved in the reading of that verse, given that its meaning was "pretty crystal clear."

I remember being struck by that phrasing, since there really isn't much in the Bible that I would describe as "crystal clear," and looking back, I remember noticing a pattern in the way she spoke. When she was about to ask a question or raise a concern, she always started it with a declaration, usually about herself. She would say things like, "I'm an open-minded person," or, "I've got a thick skull, it takes things a long time to get in there." They were all statements of absolute certainty—they were just the way she *was*; there was no room for her thinking to change based on the situation. She *always* spoke her mind. She *always* took a long time to understand. It was hard to miss; every time she had a question or a concern, she first felt that she had to make a statement about her own personality or skills, even if the statement directly contradicted whatever she was about to say.

It reminded me of a phrase that used to really annoy me: the phrase "I'm a hugger." Before I came out publicly as a transgender man, I was uncomfortable being touched at all, by anyone, and hugs from people I didn't know very well were a deeply stressful experience, but sometimes people would approach me with the phrase "I'm a hugger" and open arms, and I would see red. Because a hug is a two-man operation! A person can't "be a hugger" *alone*, they were asking something from me that I didn't want to give, but they weren't even phrasing it like a question; they didn't leave any room for me to *not* be a hugger. They were making a declaration when they should have been asking a question.

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It's an easy habit to notice and criticize in others, but I know I'm not immune to the allure of a good self-declaration myself. I am intimately aware that when faced with a hard decision, it is an immediate and immense relief to have a statement ready that means you don't have to think about it anymore. When my anxiety disorder was first diagnosed, it felt amazing to answer all requests for favors with, "sorry, I have anxiety," instead of actually deciding whether or not I could or wanted to do whatever they were asking. As a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, I love labels. Labels mean that enough other people share my experience that they had to come up with a name for it. The problem arises when I start to take what is simply a fact, like the statement "I'm trans," and draw unequivocal conclusions from it. A popular joke in the LGBTQIA+ community is saying, "I'm gay, I can't do math." I don't know what the actual correlation between queer identity and math anxiety is, but I do know that looking at an equation and deciding whether I actually know how to solve it is a lot harder than seeing numbers and immediately excusing myself because I have declared myself unable to do math.

At times, though, these statements I think of as "protective declarations" can sneak in even more insidiously, disguising themselves as reasonable questions. A friend who worked in food service once told me that whenever the restaurant where she worked seated a large group of people with "What Would Jesus Do" bracelets, she knew to brace herself for the worst, because they were always the rudest, most entitled customers, and the worst tippers. I believe she even said such a group had written a Bible verse about not loving money on the receipt in lieu of a tip once, which is mind-blowing, to put it politely. It seems to me that rather than actually asking the question, "What would Jesus do about this?" these people were treating those bracelets as a declaration of "I Am Like Jesus," which is a very different thing.

In the seventh chapter of Matthew, Jesus says, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are

1. New Revised Standard Version.

ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.² I think that second sentence there is vitally important. When deciding whether you as a person bear good or bad fruit, it is tempting to think of your intentions as your fruit, since they feel more directly under your control. But if you pick and eat an apple and it poisons you, it doesn't matter whether the tree itself likes you or not, or if the tree was *trying* to produce edible fruit, or if the tree was having a really bad day. No one would suggest that any of that was more important than the fact that you were poisoned. Your intentions are not your fruit, your words and actions are, and you yourself will never be the ultimate judge of whether they are good fruit or not; only the other people you affect as you move through the world can decide that.

"Protective declarations" are an attempt to work backward, to proclaim that because you are a good person, your fruit must be good fruit. If I say, "I am generous," I am hoping to re-frame my actions, however tight-fisted they may be, as the actions of a generous person, whether the person I'm interacting with has a better life after meeting me or not. When those restaurant customers declared, in so many words, "I do the will of Jesus," and then left a passive-aggressive note instead of a tip, it seems impossible to me that they were asking what Jesus would do in any kind of good faith. Instead, they were making the mental equation, "I am a person who does the will of Jesus Christ, and I am leaving no tip; therefore, leaving no tip must be the action of a person who does the work of Jesus Christ." If that sentence seems needlessly complex, it is because it is representing a difficult little piece of mental gymnastics that we as humans are unfortunately often very adept at.

Later in the book of Matthew, Jesus will speak of the Son of Man sorting the people into Sheep and Goats, at his right hand and his left, based on how they treated "one of the least of these who are members of my family;" whether they fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and imprisoned.³ When Jesus pronounces his judgement, the reactions of both the Sheep and the Goats amount to a confused "Lord, when was it?" In other words, the Sheep sound just as surprised by Jesus' judgment of them as the Goats do. This makes it seem unlikely to me that the Sheep fed, clothed, or visited any of the "least of these" just on the off-chance that one of them might be the Son of Man wearing a cunning disguise. More likely, they saw people who were hungry, and they gave them something to eat, because they wanted to help, or because they had extra that week, or because they were bummed out seeing hungry people, or a dozen other reasons. I suspect, personally, that lots of the Sheep had dumb or selfish reasons for helping some or all of the people they helped. Similarly, maybe some of the Goats had perfectly legitimate reasons for passing over "one of the least of these." Maybe they were worried the person wasn't really as "least" as they said they were; or maybe the extra clothes they had were really fancy and they thought the

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naked person would not appreciate them to their fullest extent. Jesus doesn't say a word about intention here. Why a Sheep fed a hungry person doesn't seem to matter to Jesus nearly as much as whether or not a hungry person got fed.

In the same speech as the good and bad fruit, Jesus also makes the loaded statement, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."⁴ He says that on "that day," many voices will cry out, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" "Can't you see this bracelet I wore into every restaurant?" they will presumably say, and Jesus will reply, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers." Jesus is not specific about what these people did before "that day" that was not the will of his Father, and I think that is because what they did or failed to do in the past is not the point; the problem is what they are saying on "that day" itself, while talking to Jesus. These people can apparently see and speak to Jesus from where they are standing; they have an opportunity few of us have ever had to say, "Jesus, we were trying to do what you asked us. How did we do? What kind of fruit did we grow?" I wonder how different Jesus' answer would be if they asked a real, good-faith question. What they do instead is start off on the defensive. "Didn't we do everything you wanted?" they demand. "Wasn't all that good enough for you?" As a trans man, I know very intimately the difference between, "Can't you see how hard I'm trying?" and "I'm trying very hard; how am I doing?" They may sound similar, but they're worlds apart. These people may have invoked Jesus as they did their "deeds of power," but only He can decide whether those deeds were truly in His name.

I call these statements we all make about our natures "protective declarations" because they are based almost entirely in fear. We fear we will be called bigots, we fear we will make the wrong choice, or we fear we will have to admit that we have made wrong choices in the past. We seem to believe that if we can just speak fast enough, state who we want to be before people have a chance to judge us, we can control how we are perceived by oth-

2. Matt 7:15-16.

3. Matt 25:31-46.

4. Matt 7:21.

ers. People don't start sentences with "I'm not racist, but..." if they aren't worried that what they're about to say is, in fact, racist. There are a couple problems here, though. First and foremost, that is not the effect protective declarations actually have. At the R.I.C. meeting, when someone started their question with "I'm a very open-minded person," I exchanged a look and a sigh with every queer person in that room, because we knew exactly what was coming, and that it was not going to come from a place of open-mindedness. Declarations like that never serve their intended purpose, and I think most of my queer friends and I might even be more annoyed when someone adds "I'm not homophobic" than if they had just gone ahead and said the homophobic thing. But that isn't the only problem with labeling yourself that way. When you declare, for example, "I am an ally," you don't leave yourself room to make mistakes. And you *will* make mistakes, both because you're learning about people's experiences secondhand, and because you are a human being.

That, of course, is why I think this is ultimately good news, despite all the "every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire"⁵ and the "go away from me, you evildoers."⁶ It might sound scary to say that your intentions are not your fruit, since we tend to think of our intentions as something we control, while how others react to us is something we have no say in. However, this is the best lesson I ever learned in therapy: people don't control their feelings. As my therapist puts it, feelings are data. In the past, if I got angry about something, I would then spend an hour worrying that feeling angry about something I had no "right" to be angry about made me a bad person, but that isn't really how feelings work, it turns out. Passing judgment on a feeling has never made it go away, in my experience; thinking "I shouldn't be angry about this" generally either does nothing or transfers my anger to myself instead of the other person, which isn't actually better, contrary to popular opinion. All feelings are useful, even ones we've been trained to think of as inappropriate, because they give us information about ourselves and the situations we are in. If I'm angry in a situation where I don't feel like I should be angry, figuring out why I'm feeling that way often gives me very useful information, but I can't do that if I'm too ashamed of being angry to admit that's what I'm feeling. I would put "intentions" firmly in the category of "feelings;" people often feel guilty about them, but they are by and large not actually under our control, and usually, the only thing accomplished by judging our intentions is that we end up lying to ourselves about them, and losing an opportunity to learn about ourselves in the process.

Of course, the truth of being human is that sometimes we do the wrong thing, whether intentionally or not, and in particular, trying to bear good fruit in our interactions with other people is often unknown territory that we tread clumsily. Whenever we are acting as allies, and trying to empathize with people whose experiences are different from our own, we are likely to make mistakes,

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sometimes compounding the suffering of others when all we want to do is help. The good news here is that if we stop making protective declarations that tangle our entire identities up in every action we take, we can focus more on whatever problem we're actually dealing with at the time, without getting so distracted by how it makes us look.

I've always been a bit baffled by people with the WWJD bracelets, because it seems like a really hard question to answer, with too much guesswork involved. It's no wonder they got it so wrong with regard to my friend's tip; Jesus spends almost none of the four Gospels in fast-casual dining establishments, so they didn't have any explicit guidance on how Jesus would tip. I think these verses speak to how much guesswork is involved in trying to do what Jesus would do in all situations: the people who call out "Lord, Lord" tried their whole lives, and whatever they did, they got it badly wrong. However, Jesus does give some fairly explicit examples of how He would like us to behave; among many others, "as you did to the least of these" leaps immediately to mind. The specific examples Jesus offers in Matthew 25 are feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and imprisoned, and I think they offer some questions that are much easier to answer than the rather nebulous "What Would Jesus Do." It is much more helpful to ask, "How can I feed the hungry in this situation?" "How can I uphold the safety and dignity of this person?" "How can I offer comfort to the afflicted?" When wondering about the treatment of waitstaff, it is often quite obvious how to answer these questions. In many restaurants, waiters are paid very low wages in the expectation that tips will form the rest of their wage; thus, a good tip will keep them fed and clothed a lot more than a verse implying they are greedy and love money, for example.

Of course, it isn't always obvious what will help a person who is dealing with a situation we personally have never dealt with—indeed, at times what seems the obvious solution is either a temporary measure or outright insulting. In these cases, it is our responsibility to ask people what they need, and then to believe them when they answer. This is a difficult one, because it often makes us feel vulnerable to being taken advantage of, or encouraging bad behavior, or a dozen other things. But I truly believe that part of treating people with dignity includes believing that they know what will help them better than I do, especially if what they need help with is a situation I am unlikely to ever have found myself in. I have never been homeless before; I didn't know that many homeless shelters require a fee to get into until I was told

5. Matt 7:19.

6. Matt 7:23.

by multiple people who *had* experienced homelessness; all I had in my head was warnings from other people who had never been without a home that I should never give them cash because they would just use it to buy drugs.

Asking people what they need is an extremely important step, but there's also internal work we can do. Here's how I've been working on it. Let's take for example a phrase I often catch myself thinking when I'm stressed about an interaction with another person: "I'm a good person." That's an unequivocal statement; it attempts to reframe however I act as "good," with no input from the person I might have hurt. If I catch that phrase in my head, I make a specific effort to think instead, "I'm going to be good to this person right now." It's a simple change, but it's important. First of all, if I'm thinking "I'm a good person" in the first place, it's because something I'm doing or not doing is making me worry that I'm *not* a good person. "I'm a good person" carries with it the implication that whatever I do must be good, no matter what anyone else says, because *I'm* good. "I'm going to be good to this person right now" gives me room to decide what the best way to be good to them is. It also focuses my attention away from what my actions are communicating about my quality as a person, and back to what would help the person I'm talking to. Second, "I'm going to be good to this person now" is specific. I have control over how I treat this person, now, in this situation, and listening to what they're saying about how what I say and do affects them is a manageable and measurable task. It focuses on the present moment, instead of getting my self-worth and self-perception all tangled up in this one interaction. Perhaps most importantly, "I'm going to be good to this person now" emphasizes that I am making a choice. Love and kindness aren't identities, they're actions. "Good person" is a nebulous and subjective label, but usually, I can find out a big part of what being good to one person in one situation means just by asking them, and listening to what they say.

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