

# “Jesus Has a Demon! ... and other fake news”

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Mark 3:20-35 NRSV

Guest speaker: Robbie Walker  
Wall Street United Church

Wall Street United Church! Happy Pride! My name is Robbie and I'm honoured and humbled to be here with you today for the first time. I wanted to thank Pastor Kim and Laura Tobin and company for their invitation and trust on your behalf. Now all I have to do is make sure I'm preaching the Gospel! No pressure!

I'm a mostly cisgender gay guy who lives with cerebral palsy. I grew up among Evangelicals and Pentecostals, and then the Holy Spirit dropped me into the Anglican tradition. (Don't try to tell me she doesn't have a perverse sense of humour.) I came out at 22 after a long struggle with God, Scripture, the Church and myself, but I'm still deeply in love with Jesus. I also love preaching, and as you might imagine, I grew up in traditions that like to shout the preacher down if they are doing a good job (or not), so feel free to be as responsive as you please!

Especially as we're barely begun cooling down from the recent election cycle here in Ontario, and given that many of us look with bewilderment at the Trump presidency south of the border, I am glad to be reminded by our gathering as Church and by the Scriptures that there still is such a thing as Good News. And as strange as it sounds, I think today's Gospel is a perfect Pride text that challenges all kinds of "fake news." I'm just gonna go right in, are you with me?

One. Jesus has a demon is fake news. The religious leaders from Jerusalem, these "scribes", arrive to shut down this wild exorcism-like ministry that Jesus is doing in the countryside—healing bodies, driving out demons, feeding the poor, stirring up hope that the Commonwealth of God is better than Roman occupation. They immediately go for the jugular. "He's got a big scary demon—Beelzebul. Don't be fooled – the only reason the lesser demons are taking a hike is because the Greater One is scaring them off. This man is dangerous!"

As it was with Jesus, so it is with us queer folks. Some Pentecostal Christians of my upbringing told me that that homosexuality and transgender experience is caused by literal evil spirits. I've had some crazy experiences in my life, so I have no problem affirming the existence of angels and demons. But if I can offer an opinion as one who has been accounted trustworthy: I don't think there's any good evidence to suggest that human differences in sexual orientation or gender identity are caused by sickness or by demonic forces.

You don't need to believe in literal angels and demons in order to affirm the existence of the demonic, because all of us, I'm sure, can think of examples of diseased spirituality or politics that causes destruction far beyond the sum of the parts. Things like misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism, environmental devastation...

If you are a queer person who has ever been accused of being sick or having a demon; if you've ever been told that you obviously love sin more than you love Jesus; if your opinion has been dismissed or your contribution refused because of your sexual orientation or your gender expression, I hope you will listen from your heart when I say: I AM SORRY. Your sexual orientation and experience of gender is not fake news; your life is not fake news; *you* are not fake news.

But my goodness it's easy to demonize in our culture, isn't it? When did it become easy to tailor our Facebook feeds so that we could talk only to our own kind and call everyone else crazy and dangerous? When did it become appropriate to call a White woman from rural Ontario with a Master's degree an "uneducated red-neck" because voting Conservative made sense to her? When did it become a mark of Christian purity to dismiss people because they are "liberals" or "evangelicals"? Actually, examples like these happen all the time, right? And I wonder if it's because we've become afraid to offer each other the gift of compassionate curiosity. But it's that kind of gift that might be the beginning of hearing the Good News.

Two. "Jesus is a family values guy" is fake news. Bad enough that the institutional powers that be want to wipe Jesus out, but his family thinks Jesus has gone insane! But Jesus is too busy fulfilling his calling to be distracted, and he radically reconfigures that nature of family. I grew up in a "family values" fundamentalist household as part of the Canadian religious

right—in other words; Jesus wants everyone to be productive citizens and good capitalists who form heterosexual nuclear families. Of course, fundamentalist inflexibility and weird certainty doesn't only happen on the right, does it?

Many queer people have fraught experiences of biological family—parents and other family who seemingly refuse to understand, some of who kick their children out of the family home (demonization again). Some of us queer folk are survivors of “ex-gay” therapies, whether secular or religious, that promised us a cure by prayer, psychotherapy, or other methods even more extreme and bizarre.

If you have ever had a cruel conversation with a family member, and reconciliation has been slow or impossible; if you've ever been kicked out or made homeless because your family wouldn't accept you—I am sorry. If you are a survivor of “ex-gay” ministries—I am sorry. If people wonder whether living with mental illness is caused by your queerness—I am sorry. Your pain, your experience, your need for healing of a very different kind is not fake news. You are not fake news.

I also believe that being queer is a calling—a specific and divinely sanctioned way of being in the world. And queers who are also Christians are in for a wild ride—because if you want to be the apprentices of Jesus the Christ, God as a human life, then you will constantly have the strange experience of being told by a great many voices and forces that the Gospel is fake news. But oh my goodness, if it's true that the life and death and resurrection of Jesus has done for us everything the New Testament claims, this is the queerest and least fake news the universe has ever known.

Three. “God is easily offended” is fake news. I've talked about demonization and how it causes us to hunker down and refuse to listen. I've talked about the destructiveness of “family values” and how they mostly exclude and harm queer people. If we're listening carefully, it might seem—with Jesus talking about “the unforgiveable sin”—that God is easily offended and maybe even capricious.

But I'd like to linger for a few final moments on Jesus' strange image of “the strong man” guarding his house. It seems to me that this “strong man” (perhaps Satan himself) is a mercenary, someone who does injustice

for their own gain, or perhaps for a government or corporation. This “strong man” is proud of how deftly he steals, kills, and destroys property and lives.

I think Jesus is the one who binds the strong man – he is not a thief taking treasure that isn’t his, but a liberator who returns what was stolen to its original owners. Think about that for a second—you are so precious to God that God is willing to wade through all the blasphemies and injustices, whether human or demonic, tie up the strong man gloating over us, and restore us to Godself, others, and even ourselves. And if that’s not what the Cross and Resurrection is about, I don’t know what else to say.

The brilliant and witty theologian Rowan Williams puts it like this: **“God loves us the way that God loves God.”** I don’t know what the “unforgiveable sin” is, exactly, but I believe as far down as I can reach that it wrenches the heart of Jesus when he offers us his love and we seem to say, “I can’t accept this radical and dangerous love. Fake news! You must be trying to manipulate me.” “I think God may send me to hell, but I’m turning my back because I can’t change who I am.”

Oh beautiful queer person, whom God loves as Godself: if you have ever heard that you are going to hell; if you’ve ever felt the need to choose between your sexual orientation or gender experience and your faith; if you’ve ever felt shunned or dismissed because you can’t quite believe that Love wins: I am sorry. Your questions are not fake news, your wonderings are not fake news, even your doubts are not fake news, because *you* are not fake news.

Why do we do Pride? On the one hand, it’s because we are protesting against and resisting fake news. We are resisting demonization. We are resisting a harmful definition of family values. And we are resisting the idea that we should go away just because people are easily offended. On the other hand, I believe that Pride celebrations might be one major way to embody the Good News. You are called and equipped to make a difference in God’s world. You have found a household far larger and more inclusive than anything you can imagine. And you are infinitely precious to the One who has demonstrated a fierce and promiscuous and fiercely faithful love for us in Jesus. Fake news says: You are unloved. Good News says: Surely Goodness and love will pursue you all the days of your life. Fake news says: Queer communities have nothing to offer the world. Good news says: “once we were not a people, and now we are the people of

God—once we had not received God’s mercy, but now we have received it.”

And for my straight, cisgender friends in Christ: Fake news says you must always come first. Good news says: The first shall be last and the last shall be first. In this month of Pride, I thank you for willingly making yourselves last for a while so that queer people can experience the grace of being first.

About our speaker:

*(Thank you to Robbie for being our guest today. Robbie is from Toronto and has founded an organization called \_\_\_\_\_. Their goal is to listen and promote conversation and open communication among differing belief groups. May God continue to bless Robbie on this journey of bringing the good news of God’s love for all of us.)*

