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CROSSFLIX SERIES – “8: The MORMON PROPOSITION”

July 17, 2011

Sermon by Rev. Kathy Cooper-Ledesma, Senior Pastor

Scripture: Galatians 3: 23-29

This morning we continue our Crossflix sermon series in which we look at faith in film. Today we are focusing on the documentary **8: The Mormon Proposition**. How many of you have seen it? I'm very excited to have our own Ben Patrick Johnson moderating the talkback after worship, with panelists Dustin Lance Black, who narrated the film; director Reed Cowan on speakerphone; and also joining us are Paul Katami and Jeff Zarrillo, the plaintiffs from the Prop 8 trial.

Many of you have posted or tweeted about how troubling you found this film on several levels, and I did too. Let me start with a personal story. Most of you know my family is from Alabama but I grew up here, in Southeast Los Angeles, in a town called Huntington Park whose claims to fame include having our own Ric Loya as mayor several times over; And, it's the city in which they filmed portions of Grease at my high school. Huntington Park is also the city in which Troy Perry began the Metropolitan Community Church in his living room in 1968.

Now, I have childhood memories of living in a corner house, and having lesbian couples living in two of the three houses that surrounded ours. But the other memory I have is of the preponderance of Mormon families that lived down the block, and how all us kids – Mormon or not -- would play together after school and in the summertime. I grew up with going to Mormon activities and dances with friends having Family Home Evenings and never felt pressured to participate; only welcome if I attended.

I'm quite sure that I don't know the ways in which the gay folks living around us, or in the city, faced discrimination and alienation. I'm only sure they did. But what I do know is that among the people on our block, there was respect if not acceptance of everyone who lived there. And that imprinted on me the need to respect and cherish all kinds of families.

Quite obviously, over the past 40 years that same imprinting hasn't happened across the spectrum of religious faith. Before seeing this film, I just couldn't understand the Mormon church's over the top opposition to a proposition that would help create more

families, officially; since the family is so central to their belief system, it just didn't seem logical to work to against them from being. Plus, of all the religions that claim the salvific power of Jesus Christ, frankly, the Mormon church has the market cornered on folks being persecuted because of their beliefs and practices of marriage.

This first clip gives us the theological context for the Mormon church's political involvement in the Yes on 8 movement, as well as why that same theology informed their historical support of polygamy. With a surprising twist.

Before I go any further, I want to draw some important distinctions. Neither the film, nor this sermon, is necessarily challenging the validity of Mormon theology. Our issue is not with the Mormon faith in and of itself. That brand of faith is not one to which I have been called, obviously; nor is the Mormon church generally considered "mainline" Protestantism because they have a second set of canonical scriptures – the Book of Mormon. That said, I believe there are lots of good hearted Mormons who love God and their neighbor and only want to live a life of holiness, as do United Methodists. It's important for us to respect the religious faith of any individual and his/her right to freely worship.....as long as that worship does not conflict with the rights of others. We'll come back to that point. But for now, it's important for us to know that as we draw distinctions between our faith and that of the Mormons, we are not judging or disparaging; we are examining and discerning.

And the second important point for us to remember is that people of faith have not just the right, but the responsibility to engage in civil discourse and advocate for public policies and actions that reflect their faith. Last week in my "from the pastor" email I talked about how eight years ago the homeless task force from this congregation led a coalition of churches and religious folk in Hollywood to convene a meeting with elected officials, business leaders, and government agencies on the need for permanent supportive housing in Hollywood.

Out of that meeting, held here in this sanctuary, we received commitments from the CRA and the local council offices, and come this November 69 new units of permanent supportive housing for formerly homeless adults and families will open on Gower Street. Amen?

The issue is not theology or the practice of one's faith in the public arena. It's not even about polity, the structure of the Mormon church. It's far more nuanced, in several ways. It's about how theology is translated into requirements for church members; its how church law, transmitted through the prophets, the leadership of the denomination, has an absolutist quality which cannot be questioned or denied even if its political bent is painfully obvious. It's about how an individual's practice of faith is seen as a mandate of obedience, and judged by the church as a condition of salvation, rather than a free will gift or action given in response to the grace of God. And it's about how offerings to the church are spent in the pursuit of policy agendas. All of these strands converged when it came to Prop 8, as we'll see in this next clip.

Our Scripture reading this morning, from Paul's letter to the early church at Galatia, deals with how the law – in this case, the law of the Torah -- is to be applied within new Christian communities. Paul is writing to a church that is conflicted and pretty strongly divided. The Jewish Christians were bent on making sure the Gentile Christians followed the rituals of old – handwashing, dietary prohibitions, circumcision, etc. The Gentile Christians said no, that's not part of our culture. Why should we have to follow Jewish law to be part of God's covenant people?

Paul is distressed ...and so earlier in this passage, he reminds the Galatians that they received the Spirit by believing the proclamation about Christ crucified and not by doing works of the law (3:1-5).

Paul writes that "before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith." (3:23-24).

The word "disciplinarian," or tutor as Scott read this morning, was known to wealthy Greek and Roman families. This tutor was entrusted with the care and discipline of a child when the child was not in school, until the child reached the age of adulthood. The metaphor suggests that the authority of the law is transitory, lasting only until the fruition of the promise – "until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith." "But now that faith has come," Paul continues, "we are no longer subject to a tutor, to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith"

And brothers and sisters – all means all. We are all children of God no matter what – no matter Jew nor Greek, no matter slave nor free no matter mormon or Methodist, – or, how Marcus Borg has translated this passage -- no matter Gay or straight.

Paul reminds us that whatever human categories may describe us, they do not define us, "for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." All human categories are subordinate and ultimately irrelevant to our primary identity as members of the body of Christ.

Paul reminds us that the law is provisional and can never justify or save us. In fact, it can only imprison us. It is Christ who frees us..... and makes us children and heirs of God.²

Now that doesn't mean we live without order or structure. Believe me, Methodists have lots of order and discipline. But within that structure -- those general rules – do no harm, do good, stay in love with God – offer signposts for us to grow in faith freely, to challenge one another and the church on how God is calling us, and to struggle together to be faithful.

Mormons: obedience to the law of the church, and the way the law is interpreted by their prophet, is not a signpost; it is a mandate. There are plenty of other denominations where doctrine and order is proscribed and questioning is not allowed. If that is a source of comfort for an individual, and it doesn't affect others negatively,

God bless them. But when how we -- anyone -- worships, or practice our faith, affects others so extremely, when the church itself declares who is worthy of God's love instead of following Paul's direction to the Galatians, it tears me apart. We see that in this next clip, which talks about the first openly gay Mormon suicide of Stuart Mattis.

The great Methodist Georgia Harkness, first woman to teach in an American seminary, once said:

The tendency to turn human judgments into divine commands makes religion one of the most dangerous forces in the world.

Brothers and sisters, I am absolutely horrified that the Mormon church would use the specter of eternal damnation to cause parents to throw their children away, metaphorically and literally. And I am almost equally horrified that parents would do so. No child deserves that – gay, straight, transgender.

Any time the church – any church – demands a higher loyalty than loving your child for who he or she is – that's not God speaking. That's humans using the church in the name of God to advance a political or institutional position. And it's a sin.

Let me share some good news with you! Paul says, we are all one in Christ Jesus; but just because we are one doesn't mean we are all alike. Or should we be. Inclusivity does not mean conformity; being one in Christ Jesus means that we can and must be who God has created us to be – Jew, Greek, slave, free, man, woman, gay, straight – and there is nothing the Mormon church, the Methodist Church, or any church can say or do that will cause us to be anything but authentic to our loving God. We are all created in God's own image and God loves us all beyond measure. Amen?

So, as people of faith, who want justice and equality for all God's children, where do we go from here?

First, We need to claim the gospel as we know it: following Jesus Christ, how he lived and how he loved. Believing that the spirit is more important than the law. Understanding that we might have differences among us as Christians, but through our baptism we are all – all – without reservation or distinction – all beloved children of God.

Soren Kierkegaard once said: Mercy has converted more souls than zeal, or eloquence, or learning or all of them together.

Second, we must be that merciful, inclusive, dynamic kingdom of God that we have been called to be. We must not focus our energies on what happens in the next life; let that belong to God. Instead let us focus on what Christ calls us to in the here and now: to love God and love one another. To live a life of grace and forgiveness even when faced with inequality and prejudice. To change the world one life at a time so that our children grow up into a world of justice and peace, where all God's children find equality in civil society and in the church.

Finally, we must use all the tools at our disposal to help educate and move the church – not just the Mormons, but all who would seek to take away the God-given worth of LGBT folks – to a place of inclusive love.

In closing: put on FB page a news article about California becoming the first state in the nation to require the inclusion of the contributions of gay, lesbian and transgender Americans in school history lessons and textbooks. A childhood friend essentially said he thought it was unnecessary. My response in part: *I want my grandchildren to learn about Stonewall....to learn that the MCC was founded in our hometown.....to learn about Harvey Milk and what he stood for.....to know that if a historical figure has a "partner" and not a spouse, that partner will not be left out of the historical record. That's important not only for history's sake, but so that kids reading history will realize the diversity of our national history.*

He should have lived on MY block growing up. But, now it's up to us to live on his, and offer signs of hope.

We are indeed whole people, one in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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¹ Elisabeth Johnson, Commentary on Galatians 3:23-29, June 20, 2010, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=6/20/2010

²Johnson, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=6/20/2010