Sermon: 18 May 2025, Rev. jessica young chang

I read an article in *The New York Times* about the cross as a fashion accessory. The writer compared the press secretary of the current administration, Karoline Leavitt and queer icon and Grammy-winning singer-songwriter Chappelle Roan, as well as others who have been seen and photographed wearing the same piece of jewelry, the cross. Evidently, it's showing up everywhere, from press conferences to the red carpet. The idea is that people will know who you are and what you stand for if they see this charm around your neck. I had a crucifix growing up, and I felt both cute and smug wearing it. Only in the last ten years or so did I think about what it means to me to symbol of torture and execution from the Roman empire on a chain around my neck. The word Christian means many things these days, as it has for a long time, and I wanted people to look at me and see other things. I pay a lot of attention to what I'm wearing, how my body is moving, being read, and moving through spaces. Some days it's because I like to feel pretty. Some days it's because I want people to notice, or not to notice me in a particular way. I'm a queer Black woman: thinking this way has kept me alive.

So yes, what other people think of me does have some power over me. But one thing I've learned is that I don't need to know what people think when they look at me. Knowing what other people think of me is irrelevant. What others think of me, and what they think of you too, is none of our business. Friends, I feel some freedom in this, but I'm genuinely unsure if Christ would agree with me. Christ says so often, *I want people to know who you are–specifically, that you are a follower of Christ–based on what they see you say and do.* But is the accessory part of the message? Cross means Christian, right? But what does Christian mean? Is it the same as it ever was, or has it changed, in the hands and the voices with people who have more followers, more reach, more access than Christ did during Their ministry? In this passage in John, Christ defines it clearly: to be Christian means love one another. That's it. It doesn't mean love people who share your nationality, it doesn't mean love people who share your faith. It means love your neighbor, love your community. It means, love each other, without qualification or exception.

So if Christ commands that we do this, and other people look at us and think, *oh, those are followers of Christ!*, then how do we do it? Jesus has a really important

note on this question of how They say, “love one another as I have loved you.” Pilgrims, what have we learned from our reflection and consideration of Jesus’ relationships and ministry? The love of Jesus is compassionate: it is a love that feels with, even suffers with: the literal meaning of the word compassion. When students and followers came to Christ and said, my child is sick, my friend is dead, if I can only touch the edge of Their garment I’ll be made whole, all it takes from you Rabbi is one word, we know that Jesus said, your faith has made you whole; Jesus said, wake up, come forth; Jesus said, go, and live free from the harmful behavior that has held you back. Jesus *felt with them* their suffering and then freed them from it based on Their compassion with others.

The love of Jesus is countercultural: it does not attend to or abide by the conventions and taboos of gender, race, or class that governed Their society: Jesus offered the same wisdom to Nicodemus, an elder and teacher of his tradition, as They did to the Samaritan woman at the well; Jesus rebuked their disciples when Mary sat before Them and intimately, tenderly anointed their feet with nard; Jesus was humbled by a woman who chided him saying that even the scraps of Their teaching would be enough to heal her daughter. Jesus flew in the face of conventions, and modeled that no convention was so strong or so important that it was more important than Love. They kept company and ate at table with those who were marginalized, and with those who expressed a sincere interest in the justice and righteousness that Jesus was teaching.

Finally, the love of Jesus is well-boundaried or sustainable. Now, initially, I was going to write something like self-sacrificial, or unconditional, but I’m not sure these words get the exact fit of what I see Christ modeling for us. If a person’s love is self-sacrificial but not well-boundaried, that person will wind up giving and giving and giving from an empty cup, and will then feel resentful and angry. Jesus spent hours talking, teaching, playing, and listening to Their students and those in need, and they also… napped. Ate. Spent time alone. We see many moments in scripture where Jesus was less well-boundaried, where they snapped at the Twelve who didn’t understand the obtuse or inscrutable parables that Jesus offered. But as Jesus came to understand the true mission of Their life, the preaching of a Gospel that would put Them in harm’s way, would draw an unpleasant kind of attention, and would ultimately lead to Their execution, Jesus Christ drew up Their energy and resource so that Christ could get through

such an experience and could live again. They tended to their attention and energy so that They could do what They'd come to earth to do.

Loving how Jesus loved means practicing compassion & care with ourselves and with others–our neighbors, our friends, the strangers, even with those who would wish us harm; loving how Jesus loved means working with what we have, and working against the systemic and institutional structures that support class & caste systems whether they're rooted in capitalism, national identity, immigration status, gender, sexuality, race, ability, mental health status, family structure, or anything else. Loving how Jesus loved means knowing when we give the fullness of ourselves to the call on our life as followers; it means praying to God for the strength when we feel we lack that strength, and praying for the resource to be brave, to be principled, to be attentive and dedicated to what is just and righteous in the scope and the understanding of our faith and our God.

I had the privilege to sit at the feet of Cornel West while he was on faculty at Harvard University. I remember the way he talked about kenosis, the emptying out of Christ so that Christ could love, teach, heal, and die, and live again, as only Christ could. Cornel West said, "Love is justice in action." And so perhaps, it is important that we allow others to look at us, and to remember that they see Christ in what we say and do, because we are followers of Christ. It is important that we love as Christ loved; and not as makes us more comfortable to love, or as our ancestors might have taught us to love in a less than generous moment; or as the systems around us say we should love to be a good fill-in-the-blank. It matters how we love because in this one wild and precious life, the part of us that is the glory of God has put on the same flesh-suit that Jesus did and has stepped into time: our family, our identity, our placement on this planet in this century, in this country and in this time are all part of that, and how we love one another is us living out Christ's mission. God is bigger than that, bigger than us; but our responsibility as followers of the Way of Christ is to live fully into Christ's compassionate, countercultural, and sustainable love by loving one another here and now. May the Holy Spirit fill our hearts with love and fill our lives with those who need love. May we be brave enough to love with the joy, the intimacy, and the capacity that Christ loved. And when we struggle, may we reach out to God, and to each other, to be filled with God's love, so that we can continue to love.

Amen