

# If Just One Person Believes in You

November 3, 2024

## If Just One Person

When the great Jim Henson, the creator of both the Muppets and Sesame Street, died in 1990, there were two memorial services, one in New York and another in London. Though his death was sudden and unexpected, he had written a few funeral instructions a few years before, when he turned 50, as many people are wont to do, including that no one was to wear black. Both services included both hymns and songs offered by the Muppets themselves. And, because of the admonition not to wear black, the congregation was a veritable sea of canary yellow, cookie blue, and piggy pink.

If you ever need a good cry, search for the video of Big Bird processing slowly down the aisle wearing the bib of a tuxedo shirt unironically singing Henson's signature song, "It's Not Easy Being Green." Big Bird had to sing it, because Kermit wasn't there. In the video clips of the celebration, you can see these foam butterflies on 8- and 10-foot thin wire poles that the Muppet Workshop had fashioned and handed out to mourners to waive above their heads.

You might have imagined the service ending with "The Rainbow Connection," or if the planners were being cheeky, maybe, "Movin' Right Along," but they didn't. No, both memorial services ended with one voice and one Muppet singing, "If Just One Person." The lyrics begin:

If just one person believes in you  
Deep enough and strong enough, believes in you  
Hard enough and long enough  
Before you knew it, someone else will think  
"If he can do it, I can do it"

Making it two whole people who believe in you

And if two whole people believe in you  
Deep enough and strong enough, believe in you  
Hard enough and long enough  
There's bound to be some other person who believes in making it a threesome

Making it three people you can say "Believe in me"

As our church celebrates 25 years of being officially Open and Affirming, this song comes to mind.

If just one person is Open and Affirming,  
if just one person recognizes the innate human dignity in everyone,  
if just one person affirms that ALL human beings are made in the image and likeness of  
God, it can inspire another,

or, as the song goes,

"Before you know it, someone else will think 'If he can do it, I can do it.'"

## **The Scriptures**

Originally when I was planning today's worship, I thought that today's service combining recognition of our church's 25th anniversary of becoming Open and Affirming with the lectionary Gospel of the Greatest Commandment would be warm and fuzzy, maybe even a little self-congratulatory. We could pat ourselves on the back and say, "We've done it," or, if I wanted to be more au courant, "We understood the assignment." But then I read last month of the decision of my alma mater and our neighbor, St. Norbert College, choosing to revise their gender policy to state that the college recognizes that there are only two genders.

This decision floored me. Perhaps it's because I'm an alum, and my experience of being an LGBTQIA ally started coming into its own on that campus. Perhaps it's because of pastoring here and at Plymouth United Church of Christ in Milwaukee, the two oldest Open and Affirming Churches in the State of Wisconsin. Probably it's because I have become the go-to pastor that Green Bay funeral homes call when a trans person dies and their families' pastors won't celebrate their funeral. Say it with me:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart  
and with all your soul  
and with all your mind  
and with all your strength  
and love your neighbor as yourself."

Notice, Jesus doesn't say, "Follow your religious leaders." He doesn't say, "Make sure to keep all 613 commandments of Jewish law." He says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself."

What's interesting here is that Jesus offers the Greatest Commandment in response to a question by someone steeped in the faith, someone whose livelihood depended on the faith. A scribe was someone who would copy religious literature onto papyrus scrolls. In responding to the scribe's question of which commandment is most important, Jesus isn't talking with someone who doesn't know the faith. He's talking with someone who is a practitioner of a version of the faith that has become so enamored of itself that it no longer serves God nor humanity. It's not that the tradition doesn't have enough laws, it's that the faith has been so distorted, so contorted, so convoluted, that it is now being used to hurt the very people it is intended to heal, to exclude the very people it is intended to redeem, to demonize the very people it claims are made in the image and likeness of God. Jesus offers the Greatest Commandment as a corrective to religious zealots who cannot see the forest for the trees. Love, love, love. Love is all you need.

## **Conclusion**

Some of you know that I'm on the Advisory Committee for the St. Norbert College Masters of Theological Studies program. I was brought in along with another Protestant clergyperson a few years ago in an effort to help the program branch out and try to be more ecumenical. My first instinct after reading about the college's new gender policy was that I needed to resign, both as an act of protest and also because I couldn't lend my name or energy to an institution that is actively and officially anti-trans. I wrote my resignation letter, full of vim and vigor (and not without a bit of finger pointing), and asked some church leaders to process it with me. Both responded in a similar fashion. They affirmed the letter and my resignation if that was what I truly wanted, but also reminded me that resigning would be my last chance to have a seat at the

table, my last chance to be a prophetic voice for love in a system that is doubling down on law. And so, over the course of the week, my resignation letter morphed into an open letter to the president and board of directors, laying out that their new policy to acknowledge only two genders is not only biologically untrue, it is also morally unconscionable.

Among other things, I cite a 2020 peer-reviewed study published in the Journal of Adolescent Health that found that transgender and nonbinary youth were 2 to 2.5 times more likely to experience depression, seriously consider suicide, and attempt suicide compared to their cisgender LGBTQ peers, not because being transgender and nonbinary is inherently depressive, but because of the social stigma their very existence carries. If for no other reason, the college's new policy is unconscionable because it is deadly. What's more, as an institution that claims to have Jesus at its core, they are following the path of the scribes and Pharisees, giving precedence to human law over and above God's law of love.

I started out my reflection today with the image of the final song at Jim Henson's Memorial Service, in which one Muppet began singing, "If just one person believes in you." As the song goes on, the one voice is joined by another, then another. They sing:

And if three whole people  
Why not four?  
And if four whole people  
Why not more, and more, and more...

Why not more? That's really the genius of church, of being Open and Affirming. It is life altering to have someone believe in you, to have someone love you. It's empowering to have two people believe in you, to love you. AND, it can be prophetic, even revolutionary, when a whole community actively, publicly, and proudly believes in you, loves you.

Why be Open and Affirming? Why be part of a church? The answer is really the same. When we pool our energy together, its effect doesn't simply add, it multiplies. There is more good and more hope and more love and more justice when we band together.

Jim Henson's song "Just One Person" concludes:

When all those people believe in you  
Deep enough and strong enough, believe in you  
Hard enough and long enough  
It stands to reason  
You yourself will start to see what everybody sees in you  
And maybe even you  
Can believe in you too

Friends, we're heading into a scary week, and I'm not talking about the Packers-Lions game. JOSHUA is holding a prayer vigil at 6:30 a.m. on Tuesday at City Hall to pray for election workers and the democratic process. I'll be serving as a Poll Chaplain all day, positioned outside of some polling places as a calm, non-anxious presence amidst the fear. The idea is that simple presence of clergy can be calming and mitigate chaos.

I know a lot of you are scared. In the midst of this, we are committed to the God of love. And so, like any good teacher, I'm giving you a lot of homework. First: vote! Vote like your life depends on it. Because someone's does.

Second: as you feel your anxiety building, read and re-read our scriptures for today, both the Psalm that Christie read and our Gospel. Re-center yourself in the love of God and what that looks like. We don't know how Tuesday's election is going to unfold, but we do know that the arc of history bends toward justice and as followers of Jesus it is our responsibility to be part of facilitating that bend.

Third: be love. Do something this week to put flesh on mercy or justice or compassion or grace, and there's extra credit if you do that for someone who is particularly vulnerable. No matter what, if we center ourselves in love, if we put ourselves into the service of love, Jesus will assure you like he did the scribe, that you, too, are not far from the Kingdom of God.

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**Psalm 146, Mark 12:28-34**  
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