

In June of 2019, a Finnish grandmother walked through her hometown with her six year old grandson. As they walked past the country's largest rainbow flag flying in the wind, the grandson asked her, "Has somebody occupied Finland?" He continued that the flag certainly wasn't Swedish because he recognizes the Swedish flag.

It is a sad reflection that a child could confuse a rainbow flag for the flag of a nation. Finland's national flag features a white background with a blue Nordic cross. It's called the Nordic cross because the Scandinavian countries all feature this same pattern with different colors. The cross pattern represents their connection to Christianity.

That same month, the Finnish grandmother tweeted on June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019, "The church I am a member of has announced that it is the official partner of Helsinki Pride 2019. How can the church's doctrine be compatible with an ideology, which raises what Bible calls sin and shame as a matter of pride?" She then included a picture of Romans 1:24–27 **"Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error."**

This tweet resulted in a citizen filing a criminal complaint against her. Alongside this, other charges came from a pamphlet she published in 2004, "Male and Female He Made Them: Homosexual relationships challenge the Christian concept of humanity." A third charge came based on comments she made on a radio program on the topic, "What would Jesus think about homosexuality?"

This was no uneducated peasant who published these things. Päivi M. Räsänen published these things. Päivi is a medical doctor and was a Member of Parliament from 1995–2015. She was the minister of the interior from 2011–2015. The minister of the interior in Finland is in charge of internal security including counter terrorism, policing, fire & rescue, and border control.

This woman who was once essentially the national commissioner of the police was then summoned to be interviewed at the police station. By her accounting, she was interrogated on separate occasions for a total of thirteen hours. The joke became that off she goes again to have Bible study with the police. Despite the police's recommendation to the courts not to prosecute her, the government went ahead anyway.

Päivi M. Räsänen and her bishop Juhana Pohjola were in the news in the past few years over this trial. Perhaps you have heard their stories. Pastor Juhana Pohjola and Mrs. Päivi M. Räsänen are the Christians whose witness we will be examining tonight as they fight for the Church of the Marriage.

The theme verse for the second half of our sermon series is a portion of Revelation 19:9 **“Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.”** The return of Christ and the resulting new heaven and new earth are pictured as the marriage supper of the lamb. How can we understand this picture if we don’t understand the Bible’s teaching on marriage? How can we understand who we are as humans if we don’t understand God’s plan for marriage?

It was a great privilege to see Pohjola and Räsänen at Synod Convention last Summer in Milwaukee. They both were given the opportunity to tell their stories. Their accounts are included in the 2023 Convention Proceedings document that you can download online, but I printed a few hard copies in case you wanted to take one home to read yourself. Much of the source material for this sermon has been taken from reviewing these primary documents.

Three things we can learn from the example of Pastor Juhana Pohjola and Päivi M. Räsänen. First, I. God has a plan for you, including your sexuality. The pamphlet published in 2004 authored by Räsänen is titled, “Male and Female He Made Them: Homosexual relationships challenge the Christian concept of humanity” This isn’t just an issue about a legal case or who can sleep with whom, this is a matter of who humans are and even who God is.

To quote Pastor Pohjola directly: “However, I am convinced that this is not only a legal case nor a cultural battle but a spiritual one. The pamphlet addresses specifically the question of homosexuality, but that is not the real issue. It goes deeper to the question what is marriage and even more what is a human being and eventually who is God. Not only every individual human being, body and soul united, is an image of God, but marriage reflects the equal and complementary loving union of the Holy Trinity. The question is who is the Incarnated Son, true God and true man with soul and body united in one person. The Gospel of Christ is at stake! Mrs. Räsänen writes in the Booklet: “The Church is guilty of discrimination against homosexuals if they are not allowed to hear the full truth of the Word of God, which includes both the Law and the Gospel.” We all need in our broken sexuality to hear the Law and the Gospel of forgiveness of sins! We are called to share the wonderful news that we have our true identity as baptized children of God! But we see how the rainbow flag divides church bodies one after another. We must understand how this great deception wipes over whole Christendom and act accordingly and be ready to pay the price joyfully. So dear brothers and sisters in the LCMS: Stand firm in Christ and in His Word!”

God's plan is for men and women to get married and express their sexuality in the bounds of marriage. This is supported by many Bible passages.

Second, II. Christians teach all humans have dignity. I often hear from you guys the phrase, "Love the sinner, hate the sin." The prosecutor in Räsänen's case found "Love the sinner, hate the sin" as insulting and defaming because you cannot make a distinction between the person's identity and his or her action.

Räsänen's counterpoint is that all humans have dignity apart from their actions. Yes, we're sinners, but we are also created in the image of God and have equal value. Just as you don't stop loving your children when you they misbehave and you have to punish them, so too, in the justice system, even the ones committing atrocities still deserve human dignity.

The truth of universal human dignity is not something discovered by the French Revolution or *Communist Manifesto*. Modern philosophy has no way to convincingly assert that humans are valued. Human dignity comes from God's Word alone. It comes from a passage like Genesis 1:27 "**So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.**" It is in the same passage that we hear that God created humankind in His image that we also hear that He created male and female. To blur these distinctions while maintaining human dignity is like using a chainsaw to saw off the branch of the tree on which you're sitting.

This image is damaged by the fall into sin, but we as Christians are called to proclaim that we live in a world tainted by sin, but we have a Savior even greater who restores humanity to who they were meant to be in Christ Jesus.

Third, we learn III. Persecution is an opportunity to witness. I know that I'm sounding like a broken record at this point in the sermon series, but I think it's important to understand that despite all the persecution the men and women have faced in this sermon series, God uses this hardship for the benefit of the church.

Hear a selection from Isaiah 41 verses 11–13 "**Behold, all who are incensed against you shall be put to shame and confounded; those who strive against you shall be as nothing and shall perish. You shall seek those who contend with you, but you shall not find them; those who war against you shall be as nothing at all. For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, "Fear not, I am the one who helps you."**"

The refrain of Pastor Pohjola and Ms. Räsänen is that these trials have been a blessing. They were an opportunity for the Church to come together to support them. They were an opportunity for them to confess the truth before kings, governors, and rulers.

The enemy seeks to silence us out of fear, but may we be bold to proclaim the truth to any and everyone who would hear. Let us be encouraged by the witness of these Finnish Christians and many others throughout the world.