

March 1, 2020

Acts 10:9-35

Our sermon series, Living a Just Peace Life, began last week with the focus on accessibility. This was an easy topic to begin with, because initially it was about making our building physically accessible. The topic became a little harder to accept when our definition of accessibility got widened to include being open to learning about and from those, with whom we disagree. Still, A2A is not necessarily felt viscerally; felt in our gut. We hear the words “accept those with different opinions”, but we are able to push it away fairly easily.

Today we lift up our church’s commitment to being Open and Affirming, known in the UCC as ONA. For many people this is more visceral, more controversial. They feel it in their gut. We have been taught by society and by the church for a millennium, and more, that homosexuality is wrong, is a “sin”, that it is a mental illness. Yes, listed as a mental illness, Ego-syntonic Homosexuality, in the United States until 1973.

Still today, many people, who classify themselves as heterosexual, especially men, find homosexuality abhorrent. There is a fear there. What exactly is feared, I cannot name. But I remember my own feelings around this issue in my youth. I would label my young self as being homophobic, even though, at the time, this was not a term in use. What changed me, slowly and over time, was my friendship with gay men. The relationships, the friendships were key to the lessening of my discomfort, as well as growing my anger at a society and a faith tradition that vilified my friends. This anger energized my desire to change an unjust society and church.

I am proud to say that the United Church of Christ has been a leader nationally and internationally for decades in changing hearts around issues of sexuality. The UCC’s “Still Speaking” campaign played an important role in the Supreme Court’s ruling on Marriage Equality. The tagline for the campaign is:

“Never place a period, where God has placed a comma. God is still speaking.”

We have made progress on this justice issue, but we are still on the journey to being fully Open and Affirming, to being ONA, as a society and as a church. By removing our blinders around homosexuality, we allowed ourselves, without knowing it at the time, to put a large crack in a binary system that defined sexuality, as we knew it. This opened up a conversation about sexuality and what it means to be human. Today, in our society and in our church, we are asked to reexamine who we are and how we define ourselves relationally.

For some people, this is threatening, because it seems to them that all hell is literally let loose. I get it. I remember vividly the spring morning in my last year in seminary, when walking down the steps of the union building, a “crossdresser” was coming up the steps. I attended a liberal seminary that pressed the limits. The crossdresser pressed my limits. But I knew even then, this was my problem, not the problem of person walking up the steps. It was, in language I have just recently acquire, “a part of me that I did not yet know.”

I could accept that difference then, and new differences now, because of my seminary faith training and my life experiences. Not everyone is accepting. There are plenty of church leaders and people of faith, who cannot accept people who define their gender identity and sexual preference differently than that of the societal norm of the 1950’s. As long as we refer to people as “gender non-conforming”, there will be people who are singled out and abused. This is why ONA is a justice issue and why we are called in Jesus Christ to be in relationship with those who are singled out by a “normed” society; in relationship with the “non-conforming”; a relationship that seeks to understand who they are and who we are, so that together we might help the world grow in its understanding and acceptance of people who are different than oneself.

One of the biggest obstacles to our society's being ONA is people of faith. Like slavery and the role of women, people use the Bible to justify their opposition. They find verses in the Bible that speak out against homosexuality and include in that all the gender non-conforming people under that rubric. This is a misuse of the Bible.

Since the Reformation, and the clarion call of Sola Scriptura, the Bible has become God. Oh, it is called the Word of God, but it is used as God (at least the parts one wants to use).

This is wrong. The Bible is the witness of God acting in the world. In the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures we are told the story of how God has acted in the world. For Christians, Jesus Christ is the Word of God. John's Gospel refers to Jesus as the Word made flesh. The scriptures document, record, bear witness to the words and deeds of Jesus and how these words and deeds affected his followers.

In the UCC we refer to three "Testaments": The Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures; The New Testament, or the Christian Scriptures; and The Continuing Testament, which is the witness of God still speaking and acting in the world since Jesus' resurrection.

The Bible is authoritative for me, because it reveals to me how God was experienced, was known, how people in the past lived out their relationship with God, and were guided by God in their relationship with their neighbor. This guides me in my living today in relationship with God and my neighbor.

We see this in Jesus. The Hebrew Scriptures were authoritative to Jesus. Jesus saw them as an important guide to live by, but open to interpretation, open to new understandings. That is why Jesus butted heads with the religious authorities of his day. For them the scriptures had become God. Jesus offered a view of God that burst the traditional, acceptable scriptural understandings.

Jesus' message freed his followers to find new ways of living in relationship with God and their neighbors. The words and deeds of Jesus, as well as the movement of the Spirit, informed the faith growth of Jesus' followers. That is how Simon Peter was able to go against the scriptures of his faith (and Jesus') and be in relationship, be in community with Gentiles. Jesus didn't say this was acceptable in any of the Gospel stories I have read. Jesus healed people of other faiths, based on their trust in him, but he did not expressly say, "Go. Be in relationship with Gentiles."

Peter's knowledge of Jesus' teachings and his knowledge of the words of his fellow believer, John, that God is love, led him to state: God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.

This changes everything. It is the equivalent of the Apostle Paul's throwing the Law out. If God is love, then those whose actions are loving, whose actions are done to benefit another, are in God, acceptable to God.

Love is never wrong.

In just a little while, Bente will be offering a training to help us better understand the issues involved in the breaking down of the binary system. I want to encourage you all to stay for the training. I am convinced that this will not only help you understand someone different from yourselves, it will help you better understand yourself. I firmly believe (although I have yet to be trained) that this learning will be a type of liberation for myself, which will then allow me to be more fully and authentically in relationship with my neighbor. This is important because being in relationship is the only way for anyone to live into a just peace life.

As we seek to live and embody God's love, may God bless our relationships, helping us to be open and affirming, especially of those different from ourselves, and leading us into a just peace life. Amen.