

“Welcoming the Exiles Home”

Psalm 137.1–6 & Galatians 2.11–14

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 2 May 2004

This is Plymouth’s second annual celebration of Open & Affirming Sunday, a day on which we celebrate and renew our 2001 commitment to be a church that welcomes all persons into the life of the church, regardless of the race, gender, ethnicity, physical or mental ability, or sexual orientation.

More than once people have asked why it matters that whether we have declared ourselves to be an Open & Affirming congregation. A small number of people object to me welcoming all of you to “an Open & Affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ” at the beginning of each service. So, I’d like to explore that a bit, and then turn to some of the experiences of our GLBT sisters and brothers – and how people of all orientations enrich our life together.

First, the way we describe ourselves matters, both in terms of how the rest of the world perceives us, and how we perceive ourselves. If we say that we are Open & Affirming, that sends a message to the wider community, and it also instills in us a commitment to be who we say we are. And it also instills a clear, important message to our children that all are welcome here. My hope and prayer for my sons is that if either of them is gay, they will never know what it’s like to be excluded by a church. If you read this morning’s Coloradoan, you’ll see that homophobia is alive and well in the church. Some United Methodists are trying to assert that it’s not okay to bring the fullness of life into ministry...unless you’re straight.

There is a reason that PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians & Gays) meets here at Plymouth. There is a reason that the Lambda Center recently held two workshops on same-sex marriage here. It’s because we are Open & Affirming; we’ve said it, the community hears it, and we act upon it. When I looked into the eyes of some really wonderful people at that workshop last Wednesday, I had to look into the eyes of persons who have been deliberately or unintentionally hurt by being excluded from their faith communities.

One of the unfortunate things Christians have historically done is to judge people based on whether there were in the “in” group or the “out” group. Paul’s letter to the church in Galatia tells about the conflict that nearly ripped the church apart in the first century: whether (as Cephas, Peter, claimed) Christians had to be observant Jews first. Could they eat in the presence of (ritually unclean) Gentiles? Did Christians need to observe Shabbat on Saturday? Did they need to observe the kosher laws? Did men need to be circumcised as a sign of the covenant God made with Abraham? Paul, however was quite clear that the table was open to everyone and that Gentiles like us did not first need to become observant Jews as a path toward becoming Christians.

I’d imagine that there are some churches in our community where openly gay folks would not be welcomed, because some in those churches (as Peter did) thought that Christianity was about ritually purity and observation of the law, rather than about extending God’s shalom and the Kingdom of God here and now. But, if we shift the focus of our faith in the direction that Jesus points us, we move toward justice and compassion.

Now, I think being Open & Affirming is a good idea just for societal reasons. But, I also think it’s critically important for theological reasons as well. We cannot be authentically Christian if we bar our baptized brothers and sisters from the communion table or from any aspect of the life of the church. Exclusion is anathema to Christian faith.

I don't know if you've had a chance to visit our denomination's website (www.ucc.org) and see our new TV commercial, but it's terrific. It shows two beefy bouncers guarding the entrance to a church on Sunday morning, deciding who would be admitted and who would be turned away. The tagline of the commercial is "Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we." That's the heart of openness and affirmation.

I think it's an important theme for us, because we need to reach out into the community to persons who have been disenfranchised and hurt by the church. We need to do the work of reconciliation. At this workshop last Wednesday, I was talking about the religious dimensions of same-sex marriage. (As you may have read in the Placard, the ONA Committee, the Board of Deacons, and the Church Council all passed unanimously last year.) And I mentioned that the Church (capital C) has some repentance to do for our treatment of GLBT folks. As I said that, a man in his 30s, an ordained Presbyterian elder, responded with an affirmation so deep, so visceral, that I could tell it came from a place of deep hurt. My guess is that it comes from being told, "You don't belong," "You're not allowed to serve as an elder," "You're not ordainable," and ultimately "You're not loved by God."

And so, what we in the church universal have done is to send these messages that baptized Christians who are created with an extraordinary ability to love people of the same sex are sinful, and what we've done is to deny their personhood, deny their Christianity, and banish them.

The Psalmist sings it beautifully, the melancholy lament of a people in exile:

“1 By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
2 On the willows there
we hung up our harps. . . .
4 How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?”

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual folks have been a people in exile from the church, just as the Hebrews were exiled in Babylon. It is our calling, as an Open and Affirming congregation and denomination, to welcome the exiles home again, and to make sure that when we say that all are welcome and affirmed in this church that we mean it. It's time for the church universal to say, "The exile is over! Welcome home!"



The Lambda Center printed up several tongue-in-cheek cards with witticisms to disarm stereotypes about GLBT folks. One says, "GAY AGENDA: 1) Change oil, 2) Buy groceries, 3) Pick up daughter from school." (That must not be the same "gay agenda" Pat Robertson keeps talking about.) Another card says, "Gay Men: Good for more than fabulous window treatments." And I'd like to say "amen" to that!

Even if we didn't think that living Open and Affirming was the "right thing to do" for non-straight people, we could even do it out of a sense of self-interest. We here at Plymouth are enriched by the presence of our gay, lesbian, and bisexual brothers – beyond fabulous window treatments. If you don't believe me, take a look at the boards and committees of this church and see who is serving, doing the work of the church. But, there is also a less-quantifiable blessing non-straight folks bring.

Chris Glaser, a Presbyterian graduate of Yale Divinity School, wrote a fantastic book a few years back, called *Coming Out to God*, in which he writes, "Lesbian and gay Christians and those who love us have discovered that God has given us a special grace, a unique charism [or gift], to offer the broader church. Having been treated like strangers,

we know better how to make others feel welcomed. Our hugs become a sacrament of God's embodied love for Christians who are afraid to touch one another. Our ability to listen compassionately serves Christians who are afraid to express their emotional and sexual feelings. Our passion for justice prophetically troubles a church embarrassed by passion and fearful of conflict. The intimacy and celebration that characterize our worship reflect how, facing rejection, we developed a trust in the most intimate lover of us all: God."¹

So, to all the non-straight sisters and brothers in our midst: use your gifts fully! They are welcome here!

There is an amazing cadre of GLBT theologians in this country who are helping to inform the progressive theology espoused from this pulpit and many others in the mainline and Catholic traditions. Carter Heyward at the Episcopal Divinity School, Peter Gomes at Harvard, Joretta Marshall at Eden Seminary, Mary Tolbert at Pacific School of Religion – these scholars and many others are among the leaders of Christian thought today, and none of them is straight.



You know, there is something of a wonderful blend in the UCC. It's a blend like a really good cup of coffee: some strong, dark roasted beans from Ethiopia, some tangy, acidic beans from Costa Rica, and some beautifully rich beans from Sumatra, together forming a balanced and bright blend that sits just right on the palate. We have a fairly traditional form of worship here; it's the bedrock of what we do and who we are. Our music isn't trendy and vapid praise choruses; it's grounded in solid (albeit inclusive-language) hymnody, and we use organ accompaniment. The sermons are often fairly heady. Our clergy typically wear vestments. We have liturgical seasons and holidays and colors and candles. (I'll stop at the incense, thank you very much!) And it's that foundation that enables us to stretch and go where few others are willing to extend themselves: to act out for social change, to file an amicus brief on behalf of gay men in 1969 (before the Stonewall Rebellion), to ordain Bill Johnson (an openly gay man) in 1972, to declare ourselves Open and Affirming as a denomination in 1985 and as a congregation in 2001. This isn't to say that we're perfect or that we have more work to do. Yet, the UCC embodies a rare blend that enables us to welcome the exile home!

And to **all** people in this congregation – no matter what your race, your ethnic heritage, the language you speak at home, the range of your physical or mental abilities, your gender, or the type of person you're capable of loving – I have a message for you: there **is** a place for you here in the church. The exile is over! Welcome home!

Amen.

¹ Chris Glaser, *Coming Out to God*. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 119-120.