

Good morning, thanks for letting me come home today and I apologize for not being dressed for the occasion. School's out and I think I got a little excited to hang up the button-downs.

When my father asked if I could speak to you today, my first thought was why would anyone want to hear about my faith journey? Then, being the teacher that I am, I did some research. ONA. Open And Affirming. Y'all have a strange way of making your acronyms. So, I Googled it and read the "short guide" to the ONA process online. Good heaven's, I'm afraid to click on the TOOLKIT icon.

The past few weeks of thinking about what I would say has been more difficult than I imagined because the best part of my Christian faith journey is that I have taken it for granted. It wasn't until I started living in the South that I understood just how lucky I was and am. Don't get me wrong, I was raised right by a Southern Woman (and a Yankee engineer), and sweet tea courses through my veins these days, but as my favorite short story teller Flannery O'Connor once said, "The South is not so much Christ centered, it is Christ haunted," and she was a Catholic.

Nearly fifteen years ago, I'll never forget driving to my high school that first morning and encountering two billboards on the drive that read something to the effect that "Sunday was the day of the beast," and that Jesus's wrath was a welcoming fire. And I thought Atlanta was hot. Driving by those billboards that morning, I was really struck... and I certainly made sure I used my turn signal. I thought – wow – in New England, we do this church thing a bit differently and I felt a little self-righteous about all the self-righteousness surrounding me. Then I started teaching American Literature in earnest and had to present a few of Jonathan Edwards's sermons. Clearly, the South wasn't the first to tinge the rhetoric with such brimstone. I forgave the billboards their silliness, but forgiving what such in-your-face-rhetoric has done to many of my friends and students is a bit harder to forgive.

Getting back to aspects of my life that I consider "settled law," as the Supreme Court might say. I'm a gay man and saying it out loud doesn't seem any stranger to me than telling you that my eyes are blue; I have to forcibly remember what it was like I was struggling with it. It was pretty rotten – actually terribly miserable, actually – but there were two supports in my life that – even at rock bottom – I knew wouldn't turn from me: my family and my faith. And that made all the difference.

I don't know how old I was, but I wasn't very old as I remember I still had to physically look up to my parents, and I remember Tom Walter praying for gay people – not that they be cured or changed, but they be accepted. I don't know why I remember this, but certainly, I am glad I do. I remember in Sunday school – I think it may have been middle or early high school, Jeff Dowd had us read some amazing open and affirming articles. I certainly cannot remember a time in this church when gay people were officially condemned, and I have taken that for granted. I guess what mesmerizes me now is that it simply wasn't an issue. And believe me, I've seen it be such an issue for so many of my friends and former students.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention how important music has been to my spirituality and again – I have this church to thank for that... really, all of that. Carol, Pilgrim, Bethany, and handbell choirs. Music for me has been the most consistent conduit to my faith and its foundation was laid here at First Church. A bit over a decade ago, I found my church home in Atlanta, and I got there by hearing its music. It was a struggling church and I'm proud to say that its music and its embracing of an open and affirming spirit has seen its membership grow from just over 100 members to nearly 400 active members.

Each year I have my students – as exercise – write an introduction or poem about themselves. This is part of mine, and it has resonated in my teaching and in my life.

I'm from a church that taught and teaches
That Jesus loves everyone – and that we should, too...
That *that* is all we need ever know or do.
And thank God for that.

And I thank God for First Church of Suffield. I hope you continue to move forward with this covenant process. Every human being deserves a place to feel loved and accepted. And everyone should have a sanctuary filled with that wondrous and unearned grace that Jesus modeled for us. Thank you for your time.