

“WHY ONA?”

**Readings: Micah 6:6-8
Galatians 3:23-28**

IT'S NICE TO be back in the “Land of Steady Habits,” and it's especially nice to back in Suffield, where I labored in the vineyard of the Lord from 1992-1997. To be here on the day of Anita's “enthronement” only makes it that much sweeter, so many thanks to Bridget and Robin Zatony for extending an invitation to return to the “scene of the crime,” so to speak.

In case you have been wondering what I have been doing with myself since my retirement two ago, the answer is, not much. I've been taking it easy along the coast of Maine, where we bought a condo in downtown Portland. So far my primary responsibility consists of visiting as many of the city's fine restaurants as I can, while serving as a docent at the Portland Observatory, a 209-year-old marine signal tower that features a commanding view of Portland Harbor.

But that's enough about me. What about you? What have you been up to lately? From what I can gather, you are still wrestling with the Open and Affirming issue, which is what brings me here this morning. Truth be told, I'm not sure how much I can add to a process that has already been underway for some time. Earlier this summer you heard from old friend, Dana Kling, who spoke eloquently about what it was like to grow up as a gay man in this congregation, as well as from Erica Thompson, my former colleague at Asylum Hill Congregational Church, who testified about the importance of being able to indicate to the wider community about where you stand on the issue.

And by the way, where do you stand? Knowing you the way I do, I can't believe there are too many members of the congregation who oppose being open and affirming strictly for prejudicial reasons. By now I think everybody either has a family member, a friend, or a co-worker who identifies as gay, so it's not like sexual diversity is any big secret. I suspect there may be a few people in the congregation who object to the idea on biblical grounds, which is certainly valid, valid that is until you actually take a close look at what the Bible has to say on the subject.

While it makes sense to turn to the Bible in search of insight into these matters, the trouble is that all too often we tend to use the Bible like a drunk uses a lamppost—for support rather than illumination. We use the scriptures to bolster the views we already have and to shore up the opinions we have made up long ago. The truth is that like everything else, mores, customs, and ethics evolve. What was not considered to be socially acceptable yesterday is very often considered to be socially acceptable today. The same Bible that referred to homosexuality as an “abomination” also said that the man should be the head of the woman” and that “slaves should be obedient to their masters.” Thankfully, women are now considered the equal of men, and slavery has long since been abolished. But if Christians had continued to adhere to the literal word of God in these instances

society would look very different than it does today, and I dare say, most of us wouldn't like it.

It should be noted that while the Hebrew Bible (particularly the Leviticus Law) has some stern words to say regarding homosexuality, Jesus himself was remarkably mum on the subject. Indeed, of all the pamphlets, tracts, and literature I've seen on the subject to date, the one I admire most was the one that said on the cover, "What did Jesus say about homosexuality?" The two inside pages were blank, and on the back of the brochure was written, "That's right, nothing!").

While Jesus had nothing to say about homosexuality, he did have a lot to say about things like "treating others as you wish to be treated," extending compassion to the outcast and the vulnerable, and treating all people with dignity and respect. All of which brings me to today's two scripture lessons. The first from the Prophet Micah, admonishes us to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly before God." The second, from the Apostle Paul, is an affirmation of diversity and a reminder that God's love encompasses all people, all races, all cultures, and all creeds.

If all that seems to have been good enough for Jesus, Micah, and Paul, then what, specifically, is holding us back? My hunch is that some of you may fear that by declaring yourselves Open and Affirming, you are making some kind of special allowance for gay people that elevates them above and beyond everyone else (similar to the debate about "Black Lives Matter," in which some people keep shouting, "All Lives Matter," which is of course true, but also misses the point).

I have two things I would like to say regarding that notion. The first is to remind you about the shooting this past June at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida. The club, a fixture in the gay community, was the victim of one of the worst hate crimes/terrorist attacks in U.S. history. 49 people were killed and 53 were badly wounded. The day of the shooting, Jack Perkins Davidson, Pastor of the Spring Glen Church in Hamden, wrote the following message for the Connecticut Conference weekly email:

To anyone who ever asked, "Why does my church need to become Open and Affirming when we are already so welcoming..." Today is why. If you belong to a church that preaches about LGBTQ people as inherently destroying the fabric of society, you are part of the violence. And if you are part of a church that preaches anything besides the absolute, unconditional love of God, any fine print or footnote or exception, then you are sitting on the sidelines letting this happen.

Does this proud church, which has been serving the community and the world since 1698, really want to be sitting on the sidelines?

The second point I want to make about the fear of singling out gay people for “special treatment” is simply to relate what happened at the church I went to after I left Suffield, The First Church in Windsor. Like Suffield, Windsor went through the same kind of process that you are now going through. That is, they formed study groups, brought in speakers, and read books. They too, had many of the same concerns this congregation has, so one thing they did was to broaden their Open and Affirming statement to include all historically excluded groups. Taking a cue from this morning’s Epistle Lesson in which it says, “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female,” they enlarged their statement to read as follows:

We, the First Church in Windsor, following our Lord Jesus Christ, declare that we welcome all to share in our community of faith. We acknowledge our diversities, and our welcome is to all people without regard to their race; nationality; age; marital status; gender; mental, emotional, or physical challenges; economic status; or sexual orientation. We affirm that all are children of God.

That, it seems to me, is a message that is consistent with the Gospel, and constitutes the kind of Open and Affirming Statement that everyone can adhere to.

The truth is this is not time to be playing it safe and living by the words of the Eleventh Commandment—thou shalt not go out on a limb. Besides, as Will Rogers once quipped, “Why not go out on a limb? After all, that’s where the fruit is.”

And what are the fruits of publically declaring yourselves to be Open and Affirming? Well, for one thing you will be sending a message to the gay community that you mean it when you say on the front page of your website, “We joyfully and freely offer hospitality by opening our hearts, hands, and doors to all.” And “We affirm that we are enriched and strengthened by our differences.”

But perhaps just as important as letting the gay community know where you stand, is letting yourselves know where you stand. In a sense, you are coming a little late to the party. For example, Windsor declared itself Open and Affirming in 1994. There are currently 85 Open and Affirming congregations in the Conference, so you certainly won’t be standing alone. Besides, it’s not a matter of when you join, but if you join. As The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once pointed out, “The time is always right to do what’s right.”

Some of you may be wondering if the vote in Windsor didn’t cause a rupture in the church membership. The truth is some members did leave over the vote, although not many, and a few of them even came back later after they realized the church had not really changed, but was just living out what they had believed all along. But the other side to the vote was that new people began to come because the church *was* Open and Affirming. It’s not that the church was suddenly flooded with new gay members, but rather many people who had a gay brother, sister, or friend, felt that they had finally found a church that was

sensitive and supportive of someone who was very near and dear in their lives. I'm honored to report that as a result of my experience in Windsor, I was asked to assist three other churches who were going through the Open and Affirming process—First Congregational Church in Greenwich, The First Church of Christ in Simsbury, and the Congregational Church of West Avon. I'm pleased to say that all three congregations subsequently voted to declare themselves Open and Affirming communities.

To return to my experience in Windsor for a moment, I think the best thing about their becoming Open and Affirming is that it gave them a theological insight into who they were and how they wanted to live together as a community of faith. It simply got to the point where they believed that all people really were children of God, and that anyone who was willing to try and follow Jesus was welcome to join the journey.

I'm not here to say that there might not be times when even the most loving congregation finds itself having one heart and two minds over an issue, but in my opinion, being Open and Affirming isn't one of them. After all, marriage equality is now the law of the land, discrimination in the work place is banned, and to young people particularly, the idea that gay people might not be accorded the same rights and privileges as the rest of society seems ludicrous.

I don't know whether I have helped or hindered your process, but I do want you to know that you will continue to be in my thoughts and prayers in the days that lie ahead. I commend you for your willingness to undertake this significant endeavor, and by way of conclusion, I want to end with the following story. Some years ago, I was invited to preach at the Temple in Ocean Park, Maine. To me this was a big deal because the building holds a thousand people and many of the summer parishioners were my former seminary teachers. Before I went off to lead the service, Susan said to me, "Look, Rick, don't try to be witty, erudite, or profound. Just be yourself."

In the end, that's all that our gay brothers and sisters want too—they just want to be accepted for who they are. They are not trying to take over the church. They are not asking for any preferential treatment. They just want to be accepted for who they are and for the way God created them, and they think that if anyone can understand and accept that it should be the church of Jesus Christ, a worldwide fellowship in whom there is neither "Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus."

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