

Silent No More (9/20/98)

I wrote this sermon at the end of May when I was reading about and contemplating the meaning of our faith as it pertained to the issue of homosexuality in the institutional church. It reflected the place where I was at the time. Most of my information came from study and not from real life experiences. Much has changed since then which has deepened my conviction. Join Deborah and me in the parlor in the back of the sanctuary after the service for coffee and conversation. We will share some of our experiences and answer questions about Open & Affirming churches.....

The search committee completed our church's profile in June following much discussion of who we are and what we are about. But this congregation is silent on, arguably, the most insidious and pervasive area of prejudice and discrimination in society and church culture today. Most of us would rather not think or talk about the challenge that was given to us in 1985 by the 15<sup>th</sup> General Synod of the United Church of Christ when our denomination voted to become Open and Affirming to all persons regardless of sexual orientation. Since we are a church with no centralized authority imposing a form of worship or doctrine and recognize Christ alone as the head of our church, it is left to each congregation to decide how it would walk in the footsteps of our Lord.

We all carry prejudice and attitudes about some of our neighbors that we have carried throughout our lifetimes. Some are the result of stereotypes we have learned to accept as fact. If we are honest, we

all would admit we have very definite ideas on the subject of homosexuality. None of us are ambivalent about feelings we have regarding our gay and lesbian neighbors, but discussion about those inner thoughts is difficult for us. Isn't it interesting that we are able to embrace new ways and thinking and discard old ideas about so many things and yet some areas remain off limits to question?

We come from a tradition in this denomination of standing up and speaking out for the oppressed. Most of us in the United Church of Christ believe that the bible is not a static document and that truth continues to be revealed to us in many different ways. We believe the bible is dynamic and subject to interpretation as we apply its truth to new knowledge and the issues and concerns of today. The bible was used to justify slavery until the civil war in this country. The Congregationalists of that time helped change attitudes and stood tall in the fight against slavery when they affirmed that there was another message of justice and freedom. This message of freedom is clearly stated in Luke 4:18, but then, as it is today, other biblical passages are used to justify sins against humanity. In other times, the bible has been used to justify segregation of African Americans and the dominance of men over women. Indeed, it is used these days to justify hate and discrimination against the gay and lesbian community.

All of us like to believe we are fair and unprejudiced. However, if we engaged in a conversation it might sound something like this. What! Me prejudiced? No way! There isn't an unfair bone in my body! Why, I know several people who are homosexuals. In fact, some of my best friends are gay. They are welcome to come to my church and worship with me anytime... Oh really! When was the last time you

worshipped in their churches or invited them to join you in ours. When was the last time you talked with them. I mean really talked with them; not frivolous blather, but engaged in conversations of substance about personal concerns and feelings. Have you invited them into your own home? OK, OK! Enough already! Maybe I do feel a little more comfortable when I am with people who look, act, and think the same as I. Is that so bad?

Yes, it is that bad if we are to call ourselves Christians. Christians try, fail, and try again to live life as Jesus taught us. We aren't perfect, we stumble often. We are human, after all, subject to all of the imperfections and blemishes that curse everyone. We say hurtful things to our families and friends. We spread gossip among ourselves. Worst of all, we carry attitudes and prejudices throughout our lives without really examining them. Yet, as Christians we are charged with living according to the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. Most of us want to measure up; so we pray that we may be better people. We pray for our stricken. We pray for world peace. We pray for justice. We pray and pray and pray some more, but that is not enough! Christianity is not a passive activity. Let me repeat that: Christianity is not a passive activity. Christianity is not simply talk. Living the life of a Christian means we work in our daily lives at the activities of reconciliation, love, justice, acceptance, forgiveness, and helping those less fortunate than we.

It's about Baptism. Baptism is a sacrament of absolute equality under God. In the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, Peter is made to realize that divine favor is not limited by man's prejudices. Paul, expresses this insightful

thought in Galatians 3:27-28 "when he exults that those baptized into Christ have transcended human distinctions." During the sacrament of baptism we pledge to nurture, love, and support the children in the family of God for the rest of their lives. At what point does it become OK to withdraw our solemn promise made in the presence of God?

The religious right has declared war on homosexuals in the name of Christianity. Pat Robertson made a speech for the 700 Club in June declaring that God would bring down his wrath on Orlando, Florida because Disney World allowed a gathering of gays to congregate in their park. Not only would God smite the city with natural disasters, but he suggested he might have a little help from his earthly friends in the form of terrorist bombs. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott said that he believes homosexuality is a sin and that gay people should be assisted in dealing with it "just like alcohol, or sex addiction, or kleptomaniacs".... Never mind the consensus opinion of modern psychiatry and science to the contrary. Modern psychiatry after decades of research declared in an official paper from the American Psychiatric Association in 1973 and echoed by the American Psychological Association in 1975 that homosexuality is not an emotional or mental disorder. Subsequent scientific study has affirmed their position.

It seems I read almost daily of some new assault either on the freedom or physical well being of gays and lesbians inspired from the pulpits of the religious right. Apparently, they believe persons born gay or lesbian will be condemned to eternal damnation. John 3:16

says "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall have eternal life." What part of whomever don't they understand? They would have you believe they speak for all of us. Certainly, they believe they know what is best for us. I chose the term religious right very carefully because they are not preaching a message of love, understanding, compassion, and acceptance. I can't bring myself to call them the Christian right because the Jesus I know... loved and accepted all people. If Christians want to truly follow God's will as revealed by Jesus, we must stand with all of our brothers and sisters ..... Not just those who look and live the same as we.

It should come as no surprise that suicide among young gay and lesbian people is over three times that of the general population. The rejection felt by gay and lesbian people as churches, society, and families try to fix that which is unbroken... leads to the despair that has caused so many tragic deaths. Think of the joy we could bring to the families of gay and lesbian children if we embraced all of God's diversity and celebrated the differences! Just imagine the impact it would make in the lives of all persons who were created by God to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. All people need to feel loved, accepted, wanted, and needed.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus purposely chose to show that it was only the Samaritan who exhibited love and compassion for an injured traveler. In those days, a Samaritan was unworthy of respect and was reviled and despised. Certainly no good people would associate with a Samaritan. If Jesus were alive today right here in

Everett, he might have substituted a gay man for the Samaritan when asked "who is my neighbor." Certainly his message of neighborly love would be the same.

The subject of the sermon today is very difficult for many people to think about, especially, the image we conjure up in our minds of a physical expression of love between a same sex couple. We need to get past our sophomoric, almost voyeuristic, obsession with how people express their physical love. All of us need the physical touch and intimacy that is a part of a loving, caring, and committed relationship between two people in love. What happens in private between consenting loving adults of any sexual orientation is just not our business. Indeed, the fixation we seem to have in this area only gets in the way of really knowing the gifts and talents our gay brothers and sisters bring to us.

Jesus ministered to all people. He accepted everyone who would love God. He associated with and ministered to the most scorned and lowly persons of his time. Many of these people had chosen or found themselves in occupations or activities disdained by most of the people.

They had made lifestyle choices that put them in disrepute. If he would love those who lived in unpopular circumstances created by their own free will, wouldn't he have loved those born with identities beyond their choice? I think so! It was never recorded how he felt about homosexuality. We can only guess how he felt based on the inclusive message of love and acceptance in his ministry. In a world forever full of violence and hate, how could he not fully accept his brothers and sisters living and loving in committed same sex relationships?

We all would love to live in a world free of hate and discrimination. Right here in Everett, today, most of us would say, of course, anyone who wants to worship with us is welcome. Then why do mainline churches need to have labels like the Open and Affirming of our UCC, Reconciling Congregation Program of the United Methodists, Reconciled in Christ of the Lutherans, Welcoming & Affirming Baptists, etc.? Why can't we simply be judged by our actions and forget the labels?... The reason is we must have the courage to say to those outside our church and within our own community that not all Christians are exclusive; not all Christians are judgmental; not all Christians discriminate and preach hate. Our church, the First Congregational United Church of Christ of Everett, celebrates our human diversity. We believe in social justice. We need to tell our message loudly and clearly to our neighbors.... And, sometimes, we need to remind ourselves just what we stand for.

I submit to you... the very foundation of our faith has been challenged! We are challenged every time we hear the words of hate and rejection from another pulpit. We are challenged every time a politician panders to the intolerance of their constituency. We are challenged every time new referendums are proposed and laws passed which would limit the freedom of persons based on their sexual orientation. We are challenged every time a gay or lesbian is injured or killed in a crime of hate. We are challenged every time some lonely tormented soul, unable to cope with the shame and isolation of rejection, puts a gun to his head. The Challenge is clear. Will our message of love and acceptance be a beacon of hope...or will our

silence be just another insult? Unconditional love of all people is our charge as we walk in the path of Jesus Christ.

I sat on my hands and did nothing in the 1950s and 60s when the great revolution for civil rights got underway. Oh, I thought the cause was just. I agreed we needed to change. But where was I? I wasn't speaking out. I wasn't writing letters. I just wasn't involved.

Where was I during the Vietnam War? Did I question the rhetoric coming from our government? Did I study the issues? Why didn't I speak out? I came to know this was a war we shouldn't be waging. Still, I did nothing. I let others carry the banner for peace. Once again I was a spectator.

Perhaps, you too recognize a little of yourselves and the level of your involvement as society and the church confronted the issues of war and racial intolerance in days gone by. But, this time I will not be still. I will stand hand in hand with my gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. I will open my mind and heart welcoming them to the table of Christ. I will speak out against intolerance. I will not let others speak for me.....Can any of us do otherwise?.....

One: The grace and peace of Christ Jesus be with you.

People: And also with you.

All: Amen

