

"It Is Good: Family & Community In The Tradition Of Jesus"

A sermon delivered by [The Rev. Chuck Currie](#) at
[First Congregational United Church of Christ](#)
Portland, Oregon

Sunday, June 20, 2010
Pride Sunday

Based On Readings from [Genesis 1:26-28](#), 3 and [Mark 3:31-35](#)

We gather this Sunday, as is our custom, to worship the God who created us. With prayers, spoken words, and in song we give praise to Almighty God who once looked upon an empty void and brought forth the stars, the planets, and all living things. Reflecting on Creation in "the beginning," God proclaimed it "very good."

As this service ends we will together leave this historic church and join people from all walks of life in a celebration of one part of God's very good creation: the LGBTQ community. Some of us are here today because we are part of that community by birth and others are here as allies. As the Pride Parade, celebrating its 40th anniversary, winds through Portland those participating will serve as witnesses that, in the words of the founders of our Republic, all are created equal. As Christians, we too share that sentiment, but our presence will testify to something perhaps even more significant: we will march as a symbol of God's unyielding love for all Creation.

We will march together as family. Not as a biological family, though some such families, like my own, are present here today; but as a family united by the teachings of Jesus. We march as Christians. There is little that is traditional about our family gathering this morning but family we are.

As both local and national, and even international, events unfold around us in the struggle for equality it is important to reflect on the role we have to play in the fight for justice and on the importance of what it means to be family in the Christian tradition. Let me give you a hint: it isn't about being the "traditional family" so many tell us we must protect.

To begin with, however, let me acknowledge the context in which this year's pride celebration takes place. Two incidents of reported gay bashing in Portland have the city's LGBT community on edge.

Christians have a special responsibility for speaking out against such bias crimes. Holy Scripture has been misused to dehumanize gay and lesbian people and that sinful behavior has helped to create a climate where violence against one who is "other" is acceptable. Even today those in the far Religious Right - in groups like Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council - promote active discrimination against the

LGBT community nationwide by fighting for the reversal of federal hate crimes laws and other civil rights protections using language that is comparable to language the Nazi Party used to dehumanize Jews.

The Oregon Family Council - a conservative Christian political group - further helped to divide Oregonians with their anti-gay Measure 36 in 2004 (one of a series of anti-gay measures placed on the ballot here in Oregon since 1988). These different groups share responsibility for the increase in hate crimes over the years. Jesus said: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are my family, you did it to me (Matthew 25:40 NRSV)."

Those who help or hurt another do it not just to the one rescued or victimized but to God. These recent incidents in Portland must be condemned by people of faith in the strongest possible terms. As Christians, we must add our voice to those praying for justice and healing. If we remain silent we also bear responsibility for the climate in which such crimes exist.

We also gather in the wake of closing arguments that were heard this week in a federal courthouse concerning California's Proposition 8, a constitutional amendment that banned same sex marriages. If the court rules that Proposition 8 is unconstitutional the impact for gays and lesbians could be as significant as Brown vs. Board of Education was for African-Americans.

Law, not theology, will decide this case. But the proponents of Proposition 8 have been aided greatly in their efforts by conservative Christians who have argued that gay marriage is an affront to God. A moment ago I mentioned the Family Research Council. This organization is one of the leading groups of what is often termed the Religious Right. Listen to what they have to say about Holy Scripture and gay and lesbians:

An honest reading of Scripture will always lead one to acknowledge that homosexuality is a sin and is condemned by God. Before we look at the primary verses regarding the sin of homosexuality, read this shocking list of some of the words the Bible uses to describe this sin: a "grievous sin" (Genesis 18:20); a "wicked thing" (Genesis 19:7); "detestable" (Leviticus 18:22); one act of homosexuality meant "they must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads" (Leviticus 20:13); homosexuality is caused by "shameful lusts," is "unnatural," an "indecent act," and "perversion" (Romans 1:26-29); those who practice homosexuality will not "inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). How any honest person could say that the Bible affirms or even allows homosexuality is beyond reason. The testimony of the Bible is simply overwhelming.

This view, articulated by the Family Research Council, is shared by many. A minority viewpoint comes from the General Synod of the United Church of Christ, which in 2005 endorsed marriage equality using these words:

The message of the Gospel is the lens through which the whole of scripture is to be interpreted. Love and compassion, justice and peace are at the very core of the life and ministry of Jesus. It is a message that always bends toward inclusion. The biblical story recounts the ways in which inclusion and welcome to God's community is ever-expanding – from the story of Abraham and Sarah, to the inclusive ministry of Jesus, to the baptism of Cornelius, to the missionary journeys of Paul throughout the Greco- Roman world. The liberating work of the Spirit as witnessed in the activities of Jesus' ministry has been to address the situations and structures of exclusion, injustice and oppression that diminish God's people and keep them from realizing the full gift of human personhood in the context of human communion.

The statement went on to say:

The language of covenant is central to the message of scripture concerning relationships and community. Both in the message of the prophets and the teachings of Jesus, covenant relationships are important, taken seriously by God and are to be taken seriously by God's people. The overriding message of the Gospel is that God calls God's people to live fully the gift of love in responsible, faithful, just, committed, covenantal relationships of trust that recognize and respect the image of God in all people. These Gospel values are at the core of the covenantal relationship that we call marriage.

And that:

It is essential to note that the Gospel values of covenant do not come from the practices of marriage, which change and evolve throughout the history of the biblical story. Indeed, it is not possible to rely exclusively on scripture for understanding marriage today. For example, biblical texts that encourage celibacy, forbid divorce, or require women to be subservient to their husbands are not considered to be authoritative because they are primarily expressions of the cultural norms of the ancient Middle East. At the same time, there are also many biblical models for blessed relationships beyond one man and one woman. Indeed, scripture neither commends a single marriage model nor commands all to marry, but rather calls for love and justice in all relationships.

These are two very different views of Scripture. How do we discern which is right?

Oregonians have also passed a Constitutional amendment banning gay marriage and soon an effort will be launched to overturn it. The coming campaign will require for us as a state to wrestle with the law, with what family means, what marriage means, and for many people where they (or we) hear God's call on this issue. If these competing

statements from the UCC and the Family Research Council are an indicator there is very little middle ground on which we can find common ground. We can expect a divisive debate.

Earlier we heard Jesus talk about family. In the passage he disowns his biological family in favor of those that walk the same path he does - the path dictated to him by God. Pretty counter cultural, if you ask me. If Jesus is the one we should model ourselves after - and I believe he is - nothing he does is traditional. He doesn't take a wife, he hangs out with a bunch of men that sometimes seem a cross between the Village People and a bunch of frat boys (and professes his undying love for one of them on the cross...the "beloved" disciple, a man whose name is erased from history just like the names of many women are erased), and doesn't honor his father or mother (though at some point reconciliation occurs).

In response, his own community members questioned his morality and even his sanity (does this sound familiar to any of you?). But Jesus was just being who Jesus was called by God to be.

Matthew 3.17:

And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved,* with whom I am well pleased.'

None of this will matter, of course, to those who argue for an orthodox reading of Scripture. At least not right now. In the future? Well, things might change.

Not too long ago a Portland area pastor named Greg Harris, the founder of the 900-strong Household of Faith church, suggested on Willamette Week's blog that I was, in his words, a "useful idiot in the hands of Satan."

This accusation forced me to reflect on my life. What had I done what was so out of bounds that I had become a tool of Satan. After all, I'm married, legally, to a woman. We have two kids.

The Oakland North newspaper reported this week that in his closing arguments in support of Proposition 8 attorney Charles Cooper said:

"The marital relationship is fundamental to the existence and survival of the race..." Same sex marriage "represents a threat to society's interest," he said, and (he) asserted that ultimately marriage should be about procreation—and, inherently, same-sex couples cannot procreate.

Liz and I, therefore, have done our part to, you know, save the human race.

Really, I'm pretty normal. It would be hard to argue that anything that I am or that I've done would be a work of Satan...except....

Alright, we're all family here. I can come out, so to speak.

I'm left-handed. There, I've said it. Now you know someone who is left handed.

Right now you're asking yourself: has Chuck lost his mind? What does being left handed have to do with anything?

Well, being left handed has been seen throughout history as being a sign that you are in league with the devil. During the Salem witch trials, for example, it has been reported that evidence of being left handed was used as proof to convict people of evil sorcery. There are numerous passages in Scripture that suggest the right hand is preferable to the left hand.

Listen to Matthew 25:31-34, 41

31 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 41Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;

Passages like that, my brothers and sisters, were enough to have left handed people put to death in centuries past. How we read the bible matters.

What caused Pastor Harris to suggest that I was an agent of Satan, however, wasn't which hand I used to write with. I'm clearly joking about that. No, it was my theology. He was upset that I said things like "how we read the bible matters."

It is interesting, isn't it? Jesus preached a message of love and inclusion. All were welcome at God table. But nearly ever since then we've been trying to draw lines and say these people are in and these people are out.

Those of us in the United Church of Christ like to think we're above all that. We're more evolved, better educated, we hear God still speaking while those around us aren't listening. "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome in the United Church of Christ." At our best, we mean that with sincerity.

But I got this e-mail from a UCC pastor the other day:

I sure as hell didn't feel welcome at general synod (the 50 yr one). Or at least able to voice my feelings w/o feeling that I would be shouted at or

spit upon. Mind you I really don't care about the whole gay marriage thing at all. My daughters godfather is gay.... But anyway I most certainly did not feel welcome at gen synod if I was not a radical left (winger) esp. at the cheering when a right wing thing was voted down, yeah real welcome.

The Family Research Council doesn't know it yet but the issue of gay rights has already been decided and inclusion and justice will win the day. It's just a matter of time. When Dick Cheney and Laura Bush defect to our side of this issue you know the battle is won - even if we aren't quite there yet. It will take another generation but we're near the mountain top.

The challenge for us becomes how to interact with people like this pastor who wrote me. He is God's child too - a member of our family.

In 1 Corinthians Chapter 12 we hear Paul speak of the church as being the body of Christ and he says concerning conflict among members and using the analogy of the body:

21The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' 22On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; 24whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, 25that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

Our challenge is to build up the Kingdom of God, a place where harmony and justice reign. We must meet that challenge but recognize that those that oppose us on issues of equality are God's children too, that they are also welcome at the table, and that we cannot as Christians ever say of another "I have no need of you."

No one ever said living as a Christian would be easy. Being part of a family can be pretty hard.

Amen.

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