

Rainbow Ready

A Message on ONA Sunday

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

June 27, 2021

Text: Acts 8:26-38

This has proven to be a more difficult sermon for me to write than I would have imagined. I write and preach upwards of 40 sermons a year, and generally love doing it. I often say to folks new to the profession that preaching is the icing on the cake of ministry – the extra sweet treat that is the reward for all the endless hours of meetings and worrying about budgets and drips in the sanctuary and termite shavings in the hallways. Preaching is a gift to me, a gift that encourages me to do my very most favorite thing in all the world which is to talk about my faith, about my relationship with God and Jesus and how it makes a difference in my life. Truth be told, my faith has made ALL the difference in my life. I am who I am because of the gift of faith my mother gave to me so very many years ago when she taught me to fold my hands to say grace at dinner and “Now I lay me down to sleep...” at bedtime. I am who I am because I dared to believe – and act on the belief – that God was calling me to ministry. First, that call was to the ministry of word in the teaching ministries of the church. Then, as I matured in ministry, that call changed to ordained ministry in the local church and here I am today, more than 10 years in to this phase of my call to preach and teach and live the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So, why has this sermon been so difficult for me to formulate?

Why? Because it is so very, very personal for me to stand here in this pulpit and preach on Open aNd Affirming Sunday, the one Sunday each year in the United Church of Christ where we pause to remember and celebrate our commitment to be a church where all God’s people are equally welcomed, equally loved, equally valued. “No matter who you are or where you are on your journey of life and faith,” the Deacon offers in our greeting at the beginning of each service. This is the service where that takes on new meaning. This is also a painful reminder for me that this is one area where the promise and hope of the United Church of Christ fell short for me and my family when my daughter Amanda came out as lesbian in her first year of college.

I have been in ministry since Amanda was 5 years old so she grew up as a “PK” in every way that matters even though I was not ordained until she was in law school. I began my career as a minister of education in a large multi-staff church on the outskirts of Providence. In that role, which expanded as the years

went by, I supervised an educational program that literally encompassed “cradle to grave” ministry since I oversaw everything from nursery/child care to adult education. I led one of the three youth groups regularly and also convened and led what became a legendary women’s group called the “Bad Girls.” I preached on summer Sundays when my ordained colleagues were off. I visited certain folks that my male colleagues tended to shy away from for various reasons. In short, I was an integral part of the ministry and life of the church, or so I thought. My children grew up under the same spotlight as the other ministers’ kids did which was sometimes a good thing and other times, not so much.

This church where I served watched Amanda grow up from a little girl in blue jeans and fly-away blond, curly hair to high school standout in music and academics to a top student at Brown University, the school she was attending when she came out to Peter and I as gay. I still remember that day. She asked me to meet her for breakfast so I drove over to campus and picked her up outside her dorm and we drove to a Bickfords Pancake House back across the river in East Providence. We hadn’t been talking for long and I could tell she was really nervous so I wasn’t surprised when she said she had something to tell me and she was afraid of how I would react. I reassured her there was nothing she could tell me that should cause her to be afraid of how I would react. And then her words tumbled out – “Mom, I’m gay.” The words just landed on the table top between our coffee mugs like a soft thud. I honestly don’t remember what I said in response. I think I stupidly said something like, “so that means Sam isn’t your boyfriend – he’s a boy who’s a friend.” “Yes,” she said, still nervous. “And, by the way, Sam’s gay too.” Oh well then. My head was swimming by this point. I wasn’t upset she was gay and I remember telling her that over and over again. I told her that all I wanted, all her dad wanted, was for her to be happy and healthy and live a good life. Gay, straight – it didn’t matter. She matters, whoever she understood herself to be.

I should stop and say here that I was not totally surprised when Amanda came out to us, but I wasn’t not surprised either. Amanda had never been a girly girl, to put it mildly. She was always her own unique person. She lived in baggy jeans and overlarge hooded sweatshirts. She hated dressing up. She hated dances in high school and only went to the prom because I made her, a decision I regret to this day. What did strike me in this moment was how afraid she was that telling me she was gay would change how much I loved her, how much Peter loved her. I told her this and she cried. She cried as she told me through tears

how many LGBTQ kids she knew who had told their parents and been kicked out of the house or worse. She cried also because she knew what being gay would mean as she grew up and she was terrified she would have to face all that alone. When I assured her there was nothing she could do, nothing she could say that would make us love her less, she cried again. And I cried too. There were a lot of tears that day and in the days and weeks that followed as Peter and I tried to figure out just what all this meant. I had always been an advocate for LGBTQ folks before Amanda came out to us, but it was different somehow when my own daughter was in the mix. We knew right along with her how difficult, and painful, moments in her life would be because of this reality and we felt absolutely powerless to do anything about any of it – except to love her, and that we did. That love got us through many a challenging moment during college and early adulthood as she tried to figure out who she was and we tried to figure out who we were in relation to her. It was complicated! It was scary. It was also amazing and wonderful. It was, and is, a tremendous blessing.

But how did the church let me down when it comes to all this? It didn't let me down directly but it dropped Amanda like an anvil crashing through a wooden floor and I never saw it coming. This church I had been serving for so long decided to begin the Open And Affirming process and Amanda, who was out in church by then, was asked to serve on that committee, something she quickly agreed to even though she was living at college at the time. As the process wore on, it became clear that she had been asked to serve on the committee only to be a representative of the LGBTQ community – to defend it against horrendous attacks and insulting innuendos. This young woman who hadn't even been out for two years was submitted to a tongue lashing at every meeting and, worst of all, my colleague the senior pastor just sat there and let it happen. He witnessed people say horrible things to her, and said nothing. She would come home and throw up. She had splitting headaches and couldn't sleep. She was suffering yet she hung in there because this was her church. These people helped to raise her. These were her friends in youth group. Maybe she could reach them! I called my colleague and met with him but he refused to intervene saying as pastor he had to remain neutral. He let them browbeat her and never so much as asked her once if she was okay as the meetings broke up. And when one of the worst of the people attacking Amanda tried to have me fired for raising such a sinful daughter, my colleague said nothing to me. I found out from the lay people on the committee who told me what was going on.

The attempts to remove me from my job didn't work and in the end the verbal attacks on Amanda made no difference. The church ultimately did vote to become ONA. But, Amanda's friends in the youth group deserted her. Not one phone call. No wedding invitations as the years went by and one by one this close knit group of a dozen kids got married and neither she nor I was invited to one bridal shower, not one wedding. So, the damage was done. Amanda left the church and to this day feels uncomfortable coming into any church. She chose not to get married in a church but I am grateful that she and Jenny wanted to baptize Reese here, so I have hope that someday the church will be part of Amanda's life again. One thing I know for sure and that's if she does come back, it will be because she misses God in her life. It will be because she is finally able to forgive how she was treated by so-called Christian friends and by the very people who promised to love, support and care for her when she was little and then did anything but. The church she was raised in broke trust with her, and with my entire family, in the worst possible way and that will remain with her always, just as it does with me.

I have one more observation to share about this church which did eventually vote to become ONA. They wouldn't fly the rainbow flag. They wouldn't because they were afraid of what it would say to the community. "We don't want to be the 'gay church' in town," was their reasoning. That was years ago. That church now has a gay pastor, and a small gay flag out front, right next to a huge rainbow doors installation saying "our doors are open to all." The new pastor has had some horrendous battles there as that church was called upon to put what it preached into practice. A lot of people left. New people have come in. New ministries are evolving there. But to this day, when I drive by, all I can see is the church that told my daughter it loved her – until it didn't.

So, dear ones, this is why the rainbow flags we fly in our gardens are so very important to me. They make clear that anyone like my Amanda who sees them as they drive by or come to a yard sale or the bazaar will be more than welcome here. They will be safe. Now that's not to say we're perfect when it comes to our welcoming efforts. We do the best we can and I am well aware that we fall short. I don't do the whole pronouns thing (when you list your preferred pronouns anytime your name appears in print) although I am giving that some serious thought. And I do think sometimes our LGBTQ members here get asked some awkward questions from time to time. I thank them most profoundly for their patience. We are still learning how to live into this reality we claim as our own

and it's not always easy! But we are committed to working at it, to deepening our understanding and making our welcome truly mean something to the LGBTQ community around us. We are exploring ways to do that more effectively, especially with regard to trans folks and trans kids and their parents who are under attack in some quarters these days. We see you. We love you. We want to be here for you. Be patient with us as we figure out how and know we'd sure love your suggestions!

Before I close, I do want to take a moment to explain my scripture choice for this morning – the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch from the book of Acts. I confess this was not the text I had originally planned on which was something pretty saccharine about love. Then I came across the *Still Speaking Devotional* this past Tuesday written by Kaji Dousa. She is the Senior Pastor of the Park Avenue Christian Church in New York City, a Disciples of Christ and UCC church. Kaji used this text from Acts for her devotional and entitled it “Their name was Bachos.” She explains that our text does not record the name of the eunuch in this story but the Ethiopian church the eunuch went on to found does, and it was Bachos. Kaji refers to the eunuch as “they” because as a eunuch, they were not considered fully a man. As such, they would have been automatically excluded from certain elements of worship in the Temple which is why they had come to Jerusalem in the first place. So, they did not find what they were looking for at the Temple and were on their way home when the encounter with Philip happened.

A couple of things to note here. First, Kaji's naming of the eunuch as “they” was mind-blowing to me because, of course, that's the eunuch's truth. Neither male nor female but somehow both and neither. “They.” The terminology didn't exist back then but it does now, praise Jesus. Second, the text is very clear that it was an angel of the Lord who told Philip to head out on that road where he encountered the eunuch. God sent Philip to meet Bachos. God knew who Bachos was and God wanted, intended, planned, arranged for Philip and Bachos to meet. God wanted them to meet. God wanted Philip to talk with Bachos and fill up the empty place inside where they had hoped to find God in the Temple and didn't. God guided them by the water where they asked to be baptized and Philip said yes and baptized them. *God* made all of this happen! It is right there in the Scriptures! And I never saw it before. God knew Philip as Philip and Bachos as Bachos. God knew Philip as him and Bachos as them and God loved them both. In one shining moment, God met Philip's need to teach and baptize and Bachos'

need to be seen, and loved and baptized as they were. This whole pronoun thing? It's been right in front of me all along. God truly does love everyone, every single person, in God's Creation for it is surely God who has created each and every one – Lesbian, Gay Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, and so on – to be exactly who they are. We may not always understand it, but God does. And that is truly all that matters. We are called by God, just like Philip was, to respond to each person God puts on the pathway in front of us from a place of love and acceptance, from a deep belief that we can accomplish so much more together than we every could if we remain separated by differences that just don't matter to God.

So, dear ones, when you see our rainbow flags blowing in the breeze in our beautiful pollinator gardens, I hope you will remember the ancient story of Bachos and the angel God sent to answer a lifelong desire to belong to fully to God's people. I hope you will also remember that pronouns don't matter to God but they can matter a lot to certain of God's family and God gets that. We should too. With the grace of God, let's do our best. Amen.