

WELCOME

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

June 25, 2023 – Sunday Morning Worship

OPEN AND AFFIRMING SUNDAY!

Text: Matthew 10:29-31;34;40-42

Welcome to our second annual ONA Sunday 2022 here at UCC Westerly! Since becoming an official ONA (Open aNd Affirming) congregation of the United Church of Christ in 2017, we have marked this occasion in different ways. Of course, two of those five years fell within the confines of the Pandemic. This year we were able to participate in Westerly's first ever PRIDE event on June 3. PRIDE in the Park was held at Wilcox Park and organized by the Wilcox Library Teen Librarians. We were the only church present and were one of their first invitees, so our place in this community as a safe and welcoming place for LGBTQIA+ folks locally is well known. That, dear friends, is quite an accomplishment and one we should be very proud of. However, our work and ministry in this regard is never over as is all too apparent with local efforts at book banning in local schools and libraries. Likewise, open hostility to the trans community in general and the LGBTQ folks generally is simmering just under the surface. For example, while Stonington High School's PRIDE group was well represented at PRIDE in the Park, there was absolutely no one there from Westerly High School or Middle School. This broke my heart, and I am sure the hearts of many teens and their families who must surely feel invisible in this community.

This is why our rainbow flags, our new welcome flags with the trans colors and the PRIDE banner hanging outside in the Welcome Garden means so much. We are known as the church with the rainbow flags in the gardens. Our flags have been referenced in Facebook posts this past school year as mean-spirited efforts to remove certain books from school and public libraries appeared to

gain steam. I personally have heard from so many who found hope and encouragement just by seeing our flags and our unique PRIDE banner which hangs outside, in our Welcome garden. The banner was designed by Christina Brummund to incorporate both our love of the LGBTQIA+ community and our commitment to loving Creation through the care of pollinators exemplified by our Pollinator Gardens which were then in their development stage. The theme of our PRIDE banner is therefore “Bee Welcome” and since that time, and perhaps even before, bees have become a symbol, of sorts, of our striving to be a truly welcoming church. That banner is an incredible symbol of who we are as a church and the call from God we attempt to live into reality every day. It’s also a lovely reminder of the amazing and eye-opening experiences we had at Rhode Island PRIDE several years ago and again this year at Westerly’s small but hopeful event.

When we made the decision as a congregation to become an official ONA church within the United Church of Christ, there were some in the congregation who did not understand why we needed to make our welcoming stance official and formal within the denomination. I am guessing there are some who still wonder about that. I understand that because we have always been open and friendly to everyone. Through our year long process of drafting our ONA Statement, led by our ONA Committee, we realized that answering this question was key to the whole endeavor. The committee knew as we began our work that it mattered very much for one reason – our ONA Statement is not for the people who are already here in the church. We know who we are, have always been and will always be, a place welcoming to all people. The ONA statement is instead a tangible witness written for the people *outside* the church, the people who feel marginalized and unwelcome in far too many places in this society dominated by too many unwritten rules and

sentiments that benefit some at the expense of others. Our ONA statement, therefore, is our ongoing challenge to ourselves to be who God calls us to be every day – a church who loves God with all that we are and all that we have and who loves others as much – and I would argue in some instances – more than we love ourselves. This, dear ones, is not always easy. It’s one thing to make this declaration to ourselves and even to publicize it within the community. But it is an entirely different thing to take it to the heart of who we are as we are trying to do.

This became crystal clear to me this past fall when, as some of you may remember, I wrote an Op Ed piece which appeared in the *Westerly Sun*. It was my response to what I considered to be a hurtful and unnecessary letter published earlier in the paper by a group of local priests, at the urging of a small but very loud local group of people who are on fire to get books they deem inappropriate out of school and public libraries. The books in question are graphic novels – a relatively new literary form that most of us who are of a certain age are not too familiar with. Graphic novels are essentially books which combine prose writing with cartooning to tell stories in powerful and evocative ways. This genre is not written with older adults in mind. Instead, its appeal is intended for young adults and teens. The drawings which are so integral to these books are much more than illustrations. They tell the stories as much as the words on the page. For kids who have literally grown up in front of screens, this form of literature is transforming the way older kids approach reading. The books identified as “pornographic” in the letter from the priests have certainly caused controversy because some of the illustrations in these “coming of age” books can be quite graphic in their depictions of human bodies. Definitely not something folks of a certain age are used to. Yet, these books have become a lifeline to

many kids experiencing the kind of angst you and I can only guess at as they ponder who they are in our rapidly changing world. These books have literally saved lives, I have no doubt. Why? Because they make it clear that asking questions about your body is normal and part of growing up can include questioning your own sexual orientation and gender identity. I get that these kinds of topics NEVER came up at all when many of us were in school, and most certainly were not in curriculums or library books. I am equally sure that I lost friends to alcohol, drugs and suicide because they did not have access to anything that would allow them to feel not so aberrant. These kids when we were in school would have felt so alone and despised just because of who they thought they might be. All this overt questioning and conversation about gender identity and sexuality are powerful reminders that indeed it is a brave new world. So, it is perfectly understandable that folks who do not have any firsthand experience with gay or trans or bi kids are completely confused by the entire situation. That only makes sense. But – and this is the important thing – we *need* to understand them because we need to be able to offer our love and support to these kids and their families because they are already right here in Westerly-Pawcatuck. Dear ones, we talk a lot about being welcoming in our church, but it's time to really work on figuring out what that actually means and how we can make a real difference in our community.

We are the only ONA church in Pawcatuck-Westerly. The only one. We have sister churches in the UCC in Peace Dale and Kingstown, RI and others in Mystic and North Stonington, CT but we are the only one right here in this immediate area. If I had any doubt about how important our presence here is, they were wiped away in the aftermath of my Op Ed being published. It touched off a firestorm within the Westerly-Pawcatuck Clergy Association which I never saw

coming. We had always had an “agree to disagree” pact on certain theological issues and, up until this point, it was fine. But my letter? Oh, that was a step too far and folks I thought were my friends were quick to condemn. After several months of trying to find my way through it all, I realized it just wasn’t worth it. If I couldn’t be my authentic self and live out my faith as I believe God is calling me to do and still be the president of the clergy association, then it was time to step aside. So I did. And it was the most freeing thing I have done for myself since becoming pastor here. I learned first hand that it does no one any good if you believe something “personally” but are not willing to stand up for it publicly. Most of my colleagues felt this was the only route open to them, if I can believe that’s really how they feel. I’m not sure I do. What I do know is that there are several churches in this community where it would not be safe to be a gay teen and it would be positively dangerous to come out as trans. I know there are churches, some quite prominent, where gay folks are “welcome” to participate in worship – but not in leadership in the church in any form. They are not permitted to be a reader on Sunday morning. They are forbidden from becoming Deacons or Trustees or Sunday School teachers. I mean, actually forbidden. I know this because the pastors of these churches have told me this themselves. They feel “bad” about it, or so they say. But not that bad. Not hardly.

So, yes it matters that we are a truly welcoming church, and, yes, we are really the only one in our two communities that is. At this moment in history, we have literally put ourselves out there to be a beacon of hope to one of the most maligned groups in our nation, never mind in just this community. LGBTQIA kids are THE most vulnerable groups today. I won’t even quote the statistics about the suicide rates among these kids because they are just too overwhelming. Anyone who is LGBTQIA – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,

Transgender, Queer, Intersex or Asexual – knows what it is to feel fear and loneliness. They know what it is to wonder if your family will still love you if you are honest about yourself; if you will ever be able to live the kind of life you’ve always wanted. These young people, dear ones, and the families who love them are who we are reaching out to with our arms of welcome wide open. We especially need to be here for those kids whose families will never accept them as who they are. Let’s remember we’re also welcoming to adults of all ages, some of them finally finding the courage to come out of closets they’ve been living in for decades – often a whole lifetime. Imagine feeling like it’s not safe to be who you are – who you know God created you to be. My heart aches for anyone of any age who has faced this challenge and wondered if life was worth it. Our witness of welcome – God’s welcome and our own – can and does make a real difference in these lives and that is no small thing.

That’s why I chose these verses from Matthew for our reflections this morning on what it means to be an ONA church. They are part of what Jesus is teaching the disciples as he prepares to send them out on their first trial run being “on the road” by themselves. He is warning them about different things they will encounter even as he encourages them to share the Good News they have learned from him with the world. He knows they are anxious about what he is asking them to do so he tells them not to be afraid because God is always with them, accompanying them through everything they will face. “Even the hairs of your head are all counted,” he explains. But he also knows that they will encounter hostility as well as enthusiasm. Jesus knows his message of God’s unconditional love will provoke anger in some who choose to believe that God only loves the “right” kind of people. These folks become angry at the whole idea of God loving everyone. This is precisely why Jesus also tells them, “Do not think that I have

come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Yikes! That doesn’t sound like Jesus. But he understands what happens when you try to upset the status quo – like we are doing with our overt welcome of the LGBTQIA community. People get angry when things change, and they don’t think they should.

We need to remember that Jesus didn’t end his instructions to the disciples on this worrisome note. He understood that telling folks things like “God loves everyone just the same” can make some folks very upset, even angry. But, this is still the truth Jesus called on his disciples to teach, and us too. God’s unconditional love for everyone is what we are called on to make real in our church, to the best we are able. And what does that look like? Jesus tells us, right in this text from Matthew: “Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.”

Think about that! Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me. Dear ones, Jesus himself is telling us that every single person we welcome into our church – into worship, into events we host, into the 12 step group that meets here on Tuesdays, into the Operation Fresh Start offices downstairs– every single one of them we welcome means we are welcoming God’s own self. We are welcoming God!! Gay, straight, or whatever. Faithful or questioning. Old or young. Healthy or not. Poor or financially secure. Every single person we welcome reveals how we welcome God into our lives. God’s own self is walking through our doors with all these people who come here. God’s own self is also in all those people outside our doors who don’t know we’re here, who might love a church like ours, who don’t even know what it means to come to church, who are quite literally afraid of church. These are the folks who need our welcome too. Imagine what our church could become if the welcome we know to be crucial to our brothers and

sisters in the LGBTQIA community could be extended – really extended as in stretching ourselves to do it – to everyone! We could do that, couldn't we?? Let's figure out how together, okay?
Amen.

Read "*ONA Statement*"