

SERMON – Gorgeously Various and Beautifully Unique

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Is this a gay church? What would your answer be? Is this a gay church and a straight church, a church where everyone's experience is cherished, where all the various aspects of ourselves are bound in unity?

As much as I would like to answer, "YES!" What I must say is, "I have hope that it will be." The Welcoming Congregation Group also responds, not with a resounding YES, but with a hopeful, "Not yet."

As much as many of us want to be, we are not yet as open and affirming of non-heterosexual people as we could be. To be a welcoming congregation is to be intentionally welcoming to people of every sexual orientation, to make it abundantly evident that such folk are welcome here, to learn about and to support various lifestyles, to reach out into the community to help where help is needed, and provide a religious home for all who need our loving and hopeful religious way.

Unfortunately, our society and culture do not give us much help in being as open as the imperative of our religious way shows us we can be. Very few people of any sexual orientation get accurate information as curious youngsters. Fewer still are affirmed in a non-heterosexual orientation. Most of us grow up to be adults who have a lot to learn about the various ways of love.

Understanding the various ways people express their sexuality occurs on several levels, and people who wish to work on understanding often pass through stages of personal growth.

Our Welcoming Congregation materials identify four stages:

Repugnance, in which we may see gay and lesbian people as perverted and unnatural;

Toleration, where we may feel that we can live with their presence as long as they don't flaunt it or make us uncomfortable;

Acceptance, when we live and let live and are OK with gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender people as long as too many do not show up lest we become the "gay church," and finally;

Affirmation, when we embrace and celebrate the unique gifts that bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender people bring to our midst.

It takes a lot to move us from ignorance to understanding, from repugnance to affirmation. It is courageous and arduous work. If love is really the doctrine of this church, we owe it to ourselves to do what ever is necessary to move ourselves, one step at a time, and with intention, toward becoming a congregation that is truly welcoming and caring of all kinds of people.

The truth is that there is often a lag between what we know and understand intellectually and how our emotions move us to respond. It is called **heart lag**. We need to be gentle with one another as we encounter our heart lags. We need to realize it is Ok to be nervous or uncomfortable while at the same time being willing to work on our discomforts and learn to become more generous and loving.

Heart lag is real, but when our hearts catch up with our heads, an amazing transformation occurs.

Some time ago, when I was in seminary, as an intern, I led a group through the Welcoming Congregation program. One of our exercises was to wear one of the many buttons we had accumulated that showed support for gay/lesbian/bisexual and transgender people. and report back what response we got and how we handled it. I chose a button with a pink triangle and the slogan, "I'm straight but not narrow." I thought this was terribly clever, and looked forward to wearing it to see what response I would get.

I proudly showed off my button to a lesbian friend, and as I watched her face, I realized what a horrible mistake I had made. There was no consequence to me as a heterosexual person in declaring my orientation, but what consequence might there be to her if she wore a button that said, "I'm lesbian but not narrow?" I took off that button realizing that openly declaring my sexuality to strangers was in no way helpful to the people who couldn't. I vowed to be more sensitive in the future, and moved along the continuum from acceptance toward affirmation.

Which comes first, changing attitudes or changing behavior? This is a perennial question, and while we may work on changing our attitudes, which include our emotional responses. It might be more effective to start by changing our behavior and letting our hearts catch up when they can.

A good place for me to begin is with language. There are lots of unflattering and degrading labels that have been put on non-heterosexual people, but there are accepted terms for the various ways sexuality is expressed. To be inclusive, as we like to be, it is good to speak all these names together and take the risk of tripping over that mouthful of syllables, but I figure if we can say Unitarian Universalist without tripping up, we can say gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender.

Sometimes I practice—“**gay lesbian bisexual transgender.**” Come on now, practice with me!! Or for those in the know, GLBT saves time.

Confucius taught that the “rectification of language is the beginning of wisdom and it is essential to putting human relationships on a proper footing.” Our denomination did a great deal of work in years past to make our hymnal and other worship materials gender inclusive. We can do the same to create a sexual orientation inclusivity as well. Here are some things we can do:

Give examples of family life that speak of the variety of configurations that families can take;

We can use GLBT people as examples in the stories we tell;

We can teach our children that being who you are is important;

We can speak of partners, committed relationships or spouses and include all the various couples among us.

Using inclusive language can feel awkward at first, but we can surely deal with that. Soon it will become second nature.

Which comes first, attitude or behavior? I’ll accept either one. If we can behave as if our attitudes have already changed, lo and behold, we are transformed. Something wonderful will happen, and our goal of an inclusive open, welcoming congregation can begin to become a reality.

I want to do this work for all the people who need a church like ours, who have been ridiculed and abused for being who they are, who have been cut off from family, who have been prevented from supporting partners in hospital who are ill or dying, who may not inherit property or have the rights that other committed couples have. I want to do this work for those who have lost jobs, friends and community, who have been beaten and even killed for no reason other than they are the human beings they were born to be.

And I want to do this work for all of us, that we may become the people we say we are, people who love and work for justice. I want us to show the world our support for the gorgeously various and beautifully unique people we are. I want to live as well as teach the doctrine of love.

The most effective thing that we can do as Unitarian Universalist people who teach the primacy of love, is to acknowledge that there are many ways to be human and THAT we love is more important than WHO we love. When we stand on the side of love, the end is already the beginning of a new way of being.

We on the Welcoming Congregation Committee have made a commitment to “Stand on the Side of Love.” I invite the committee members to join me here. We are standing on the side of love. We are behaving as if the world were different. We are acknowledging that we have some heart lag, but we want that to change, so together we stand, and we invite you to stand with us in love.