

Sermon 092516 Open and Affirming
Scripture- Ephesians 4:14-16
Sermon Title- A Welcoming Congregation

Union Church is embarking upon a program of ‘church vitality.’ Our Moderator, Jamie Mitcheson is leading the program. This is designed to raise the spiritual life of our church as well as attract new members. We are anticipating that the program will have many aspects to it. I’d like to talk to you today about one aspect of the program. After worship and some fellowship time, we will do a sermon talk back so we can get your thoughts on this sermon and the topic.

There has been a movement among so-called mainstream churches called, ‘open and affirming.’ Open and affirming might be described as radical hospitality. Let me read for you one paragraph of the open and affirming paragraph from Christ Congregational Church UCC in Brocton MA:

As we seek to live out our mission to live Christ’s compassion and promote justice, healing and wholeness of life we welcome into our community persons of every gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, mental and physical ability, age, race, nationality, economic and social status, faith background, marital standing and family structure.

The umbrella of open and affirming is that all are welcome. The core of it is that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are welcome. The open and affirming movement started in the UCC in MA

in 1984. Today, over 1,300 UCC churches are ONA (acronym for open and affirming) and around 220 UCC churches in MA are currently ONA. Many churches have discussed and prayed on this issue and have taken partial measures but are not full-fledged ONA.

Our denomination, the United Church of Christ (UCC) is out front on this issue but it by no means alone in the ONA movement. Over 40 denominations in this country are part of the ONA movement. So you see, by opening this discussion now, we are really at the tail end of this issue. Of course, 'gay rights' is not just in churches. American society has been moving away from discrimination of people with alternative life styles for quite a while. The prejudice has largely eroded.

In 2004, MA was the first state to legalize same sex marriage and last year the United States Supreme Court declared same sex marriage legal for the country. It is long past being a hot button issue.

Union Church has, from what I have heard, a somewhat painful history with this issue. Some 12 years ago, a beloved pastor here used an accelerated process for an ONA decision. Some folks who were not ready were upset, I'm told, so a vote was never taken. There was a same sex marriage performed in this sanctuary, however. So it seems that Union Church is, to borrow an old phrase 'betwixed and between' on the issue. I'll pretty much guarantee to you that our young people are thinking, 'What are you talking about? Why is this an issue here or anywhere?' Like their capabilities with technology that we lack, young

people have lived with acceptance of different lifestyles their whole lives.

Today, I am opening this issue to you, Union Church. It is a complicated issue that involves people's emotional selves and sexual selves. 'Gay rights' is a national political issue. It involves people's religious views. It involves the Bible. Open and affirming is way too big a deal to rush a vote. We open the discussion today with this sermon and the sermon talk back after worship. We have planned after worship sessions the first Sundays in October, November, and December. There will be teaching about ONA and LGBTQ. We plan to bring in folks who are part of local churches that have become ONA so you can hear what their experience has been. Your thoughts are necessary for this to be done properly. If we feel the need, we will add additional meetings. You can expect a vote on open and affirming at the Annual Meeting.

Please hear me clearly on this. This is a time of thought, discussion, and prayer. Nobody knows if Union Church will go ONA until there is a vote. If you strongly oppose opening and affirming, it is crucial that you come to the meetings so that your voice will be heard. If you strongly support ONA, it is crucial that you come to the meetings so that your voice will be heard. If you don't know where you stand, it is crucial that you come to the meetings to listen, learn, and ask questions. We must respect each other's views and respect each other.

I can assure you of one thing. There will be no attempt to force ONA like what was attempted 12 years ago. This is a time for us to speak our truth in love. The discussions must be safe for all to be heard and all questions asked. My experience in the three years as your pastor is that Union Church is good at disagreeing without being disagreeable. This issue may be the most emotionally charged issue we will ever deal with. Let us explore these issues with love in our hearts.

I'd like to pause to talk about this speaking your truth in love idea. As I mentioned, we will be having a sermon talk back after worship. At that time and during other meetings, there will be likely a show of hands. If you don't raise your hand, I implore you not to judge the people who do raise their hands. If you raise your hand I implore you not to judge the folks who don't. This church needs to be a safe zone for everyone. We do that by treating each other with respect and kindness. Speak your truth in love and listen with loving ears.

I'd like to talk a little about some questions that arise in ONA discussions. We have the benefit of some history, now, so we can see what other church's experiences have been. There are churches that have lost people who cannot accept people of alternative life styles in their church. Mostly, church populations increase when they become ONA. That is why we are folding it into the vitality program. Strait people, particularly younger families, often join ONA churches because they want a church that exercises radical hospitality. People wonder if

their church will be known as ‘the gay church’ and will be overrun with flamboyant gay people. That doesn’t happen.

There is a history of Christian churches being hostile to people with alternative lifestyles so there is a degree of suspicion and skepticism about how welcoming even ONA churches really are. Churches with openly gay clergy are usually better at attracting members of the gay community than churches with strait clergy. Usually, ONA churches attract new and energetic contributors to the life of the church. One thing that often happens is, and this is important, that people who are already in the church, come out to the church. We want everyone to feel safe here.

A question at Union Church might be, “We are already welcoming; why do we have to do all of this?” The answer is that many churches, including the dominant denomination in our area, have rejected homosexuals and people who think churches don’t want them need to be reached out to. The world still thinks that Christian churches are hostile to LGBTQ. By becoming ONA, we are telling the world that we are a welcoming congregation.

People ask, “Isn’t the Bible against homosexual activity?” This is something that requires time in these sessions that we will hold in the Fall. I will say a few things here, though. It appears that there are sections of both the Old and New Testaments that oppose homosexual activity. But, the nature of homosexual activity in the days that the

Bible was written was vastly different than what we think of as homosexuality today. I'll give you an example. There was a custom in that world, not among Jews, but among gentiles in which a man would buy a boy to serve him as a slave. That boy would be required to do whatever the man wanted, including sexual activity. What the Bible writers were against doesn't exist anymore, hopefully. Also, the Bible appears to condone slavery, subservient women, and a man having more than one wife. There is a verse in the New Testament that says that women should be silent in church. Meg is away this weekend, but feel free to ask her about her thoughts on that passage. The Bible was written between 2 and three thousand years ago. That was then and this is now.

One thing we know. Jesus Christ never made the slightest reference to homosexuality in the gospels. Also, when we cover the Bible in the sessions, I promise, there'll be no lame jokes like there was a misprint in the Bible... Adam and Eve were actually Adam and Steve. Don't worry, that won't happen.

I want to talk a moment about the role of the pastor in a process like ONA. Even though I will not lead the process, the pastor shepherds the congregation. It is the pastor's responsibility to make sure everyone is well informed. It is crucial that everyone is heard, every viewpoint explored. It is the pastor's role to bring you all to a fair, well-informed vote. The process must be done thoughtfully, prayerfully, and faithfully.

I feel that the right thing to do is kind of come clean and be honest with you about my view on this. I can't be totally objective. I can be fair, but still hold my point of view. Here it is. I hope Union Church becomes open and affirming. I have gay loved ones in my family and in Meg's family that are in my heart. I have known a lesbian couple for decades that raised two wonderful children in maybe the healthiest household I've ever witnessed kids to grow up in.

As I've said, the role of the pastor is to shepherd the church through the process; to teach and make sure the process is done fairly. Everyone will be heard, and all people and views will be respected. But let me tell you why I hope ONA passes.

I mentioned earlier that Jesus said nothing in Scripture about homosexuality. But central to his ministry, was reaching out to the disenfranchised. Jesus calls us to reach out not just to the poor, but those that have been rejected by society. Jesus said, "Love your neighbor." He did not say, "Love your neighbor, except..."

In order to be a church worthy of the name Jesus Christ, we cannot just tolerate people that are different from us, but welcome them into our midst with open arms. Open and affirming is not about welcoming people because they are lesbian, or gay, or bi-sexual, or transgender, or whatever. It is welcoming people because they are children of God and it is the right thing to do. It is to worship with them, pray with them,

sing with them, break bread with them, and do God's work with them side by side.

In my own ministry of three years with you at Union Church, I have tried to communicate one thing above all to you. I say it now: "God loves you. God loves you. God loves you. God loves you who have had to hide your secrets from others. God loves you who think there is something wrong with you. God loves you who are outside our doors. God loves you who thinks that he or she is not welcome in Christ's church. God loves you who do not have God in your life. God loves you who yearn for God in your life. God loves you." You and me, with all of our own oddness, brokenness, pain, worries and woes, faithfulness and faithlessness share something... we are God's children and we are loved by God not matter what. Remember our greeting in virtually every worship service, "No matter who you are, no matter where you are in your journey of life, here you are welcome." AMEN