



Sermon, May 2, 2021
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Junction City United Methodist Church

Sermon Series: "Parting Thoughts"

"Why I Love and Support LGBTQ Persons"

Scripture: Psalm 139

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³ You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.

⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"

¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

¹³ For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully
made.

Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.

¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶ Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written

all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.

¹⁷ How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!

¹⁸ I try to count them — they are more than the
sand;

I come to the end — I am still with you.

¹⁹ O that you would destroy any wickedness in
me, O God,

and that bloodthirstiness would depart from
me—

²⁰ any malicious speech and thoughts,
any turning my thoughts against you for evil!

²¹ Do I not choose against those who choose
against you, O Lord?

And do I not loathe those things that are
against you?

²² I choose against them in order to choose your
ways;

I count myself in your company.

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.

²⁴ See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting

As I prepare to retire in July, I have put together this final sermon series entitled "Parting Thoughts." Today I want to share with you "Why I Love and Support LGBTQ Persons." Ideally, this should be the shortest sermon

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in the world. I should simply say: “Because Jesus loves them as much as Jesus loves me.” Or I could deliver the quickest and quietest sermon ever delivered entitled, “What Jesus said about Homosexuality,” which is this:

{ _____ } (Yes, nothing.)

Seriously, Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as yourself, and love one another as I have loved you.” I should just sit down now.

But the reality is that there is much more to why I love and support LGBTQ persons, and it starts in my own family and in my own personal experience. In the larger extended family of my seven brothers and our families there are four persons who identify as transgender, one person who identifies as bisexual, one person identifies as non-binary and asexual, and many of us are dissatisfied with the constrictions that so-called “traditional” gender roles place upon us as intelligent, creative, and complex human beings. How can I not love my family members the same as I always have? How can I love any of them any less than any other?

LGBTQ issues are personal for me for a number of reasons. One has to do with the evolution and self-discovery of my own gender identity, sexual preference, and presentation of my self in the world.

During my early twenties, I had the interesting experience of being approached by Gay men in the way straight men often approach women. I thought to myself and wondered, “what is it about how I present myself that causes this? Do they perceive something in me that I don’t know?”

As I searched within my own internal sense of myself, I recognized that I responded positively to when women expressed attraction to me, but had to turn down the interest shown in me by Gay men. But I chose not to react negatively or shockedly, simply to say, “No, that’s not who I am.” Choosing how to respond in a way that acknowledged and affirmed who I am while simultaneously acknowledging and affirming who the other person was a profound process of learning for me. Their being who they were was not a threat to me, and my being who I was did not have to be a threat to them. My family members who are LGBTQ are not a threat to me, and I choose not to be a threat to them. I realize now, as I began to perceive then, that this was a profoundly spiritual act in and of itself. Over the years I have developed close friendships and working relationships with many LGBTQ persons who have taught me much about what it means to them to affirm

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who they are, and to be fully supported in their right to express who they are in all their human complexity just as I express myself in all my human complexity.

I have mentioned in the past about Phyllis Tickle’s presentation at Annual Conference in 2013, regarding her work on Emergence Christianity. She shared how we are in the midst, perhaps at the apex, of a vast cultural, political, social, and spiritual shift. These great moments come in 500 year cycles, in Phyllis Tickle’s retelling. In these 500-year upheavals, new things emerge that could not be predicted from previous historical trends and events.

These times of upheaval are ripe for human societies to be led into deeper and wider truths, if they are open to that leading.

One of the huge cultural shifts that is occurring now has to do with our understanding of sexuality and gender. As human beings, our sexual preferences and expressions and our gender identities are central to our sense of who we are as a person in the world. They cut to the core of our being. In order to become whole and healthy human beings, it is necessary that we be allowed by family and society to express and be who we understand ourselves to be, including in terms of our sexuality and our gender identity. This is a profoundly spiritual process. One of the things our culture is coming to realize is that there is more to human sexuality and gender identity than two narrowly defined categories: male or female, man or woman. These categories have been defined almost entirely according to certain social norms, prejudices, economic and contractual needs and considerations, and so on. But there is a new truth emerging in this time of social transition in which more and more people are saying, “I want to define who I am myself, from the inside out. Allow me to express and be who I know myself to be on the inside. Allow me to love the person I love – not who you tell me I should love.” This is a startling proclamation in many ways, when you consider the implications. At root, it is a cry to live in the integrity of who each of us is. Living and walking in one’s integrity is the path of Wisdom that the writers of the book of Proverbs describe.

This is a highly contested and conflicted process in our society, and one of the chief battlegrounds is in the church. People all across the religious and theological spectrum have differing opinions regarding sexual expression and gender identity. Our own denomination has tried, for example, to

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declare Homosexuality to be “incompatible with Christian teaching.” But the one thing that we know about Christian teaching is that it has changed and adapted over the centuries. New expansive understandings of truth have been discovered as people seek to be led by the Holy Spirit. Time after time, consistently, these wider understandings of what is true, what is good, what is noble in human life have led to greater freedom, to liberation of people, to a wider inclusion of people into the circle of society.

From Walter Wink, “Homosexuality and the Bible”:

The crux of the matter, it seems to me, is simply that the Bible has no sexual ethic. There is no biblical sex ethic. Instead it exhibits a variety of sexual mores, some of which changed over the thousand-year span of biblical history. Mores are unreflective customs accepted by a given community. Many of the practices that the Bible prohibits, we allow, and many that it allows, we prohibit. The Bible only knows a love ethic, which is constantly being brought to bear on whatever sexual mores are dominant in any given country, culture, or period.

The very notion of a "sex ethic" reflects the materialism and splitness of modern life, in which we increasingly define our identity sexually. Sexuality cannot be separated off from the rest of life. No sex act is "ethical" in and of itself, without reference to the rest of a person's life, the patterns of the culture, the special circumstances faced, and the will of God.

The central issue has to do with the freedom of persons to self-express who they come to understand they are at a deep, inward, existential level. E.g., my identity: Cis-gendered (I understand myself to be the gender that the doctor assigned to me on my birth certificate at my birth), heterosexual male who seeks to express my full humanity, not simply a stereotypical list of supposed male attributes. In other words, a lot of the binary definitions of Male versus Female attributes and roles just don't work for me.

The writer of Psalm 139 reminds us that the search for identity and integrity of life is at the heart of the spiritual life. There is nowhere that we can escape from God. God is ever-present. God knows who we are even when we pretend are try to force ourselves to be something other than who we truly are. I've told the story before of how I heard the voice of Jesus speaking to me through the Holy Spirit up at Sawtooth Unit4ed Methodist Camp when I was a teenager saying to me, “Who do you think you're fooling, Craig

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Strobel?” I was trying to be somebody other than who I really was at my core. We can do all sorts of weird contortions and strange dance steps, hide out in remote corners of society, try to force ourselves into the little boxes that society says we have to fit into, but God will still search us out and say, “Who are you trying to fool? Who are you trying to please? To whose tune are you trying to dance?”

That is why I love and support LGBTQ persons in their quest and struggle to fully be who they are; to stop trying to fool themselves that they are somebody else, to stop contorting and forcing themselves to fit into only one of two little identity boxes. LGBTQ persons remind us that the quest to discover and embrace who we truly are is at the center of the spiritual life, and that it is part and parcel of the human quest to find God. And the culmination of that quest, is to discover that God has always and ever been finding us.

As a declared and avowed Reconciling United Methodist Church, may you continue to support LGBTQ persons in their growth towards human fullness in the embrace of the God who loves them just the same as God loves each of you: unconditionally, freely, fully, and gracefully. Seek to live out the Love that has sought you out, who knows you inside and out, and who will never let you go.