

On Gay Marriage

A Sermon by the Rev. Pat Nicholas
Congregational Church of New Fairfield
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As you know, on the first Sunday of Lent, I took questions from the congregation, and I've been answering them more fully in sermons the past few weeks. I've covered just about all of them so far, creation vs. evolution, why bad things happen to good people, the differences in the Lord's Prayer, and on Wednesday night there will be an opportunity to discuss the Mel Gibson movie, "The Passion of the Christ" which was what a number of the questions were about.

There is really only one question remaining – the questions about gay marriage. I thought for a bit that I would get out of answering this one directly, since I wasn't suppose to be here this morning. I've been with the Confirmation Class this weekend on retreat at Silver Lake and intended to stay with them until the end of the retreat this morning. But due to a slight glitch no one was available to fill in –so here I am.

I didn't realize I would be here this Sunday until the beginning of the week and then I was in such a rush to get the bulletin put together, I figured that I would just do the lectionary scripture, which is the one that Janice read this morning. But as the week went on the two questions that were asked "Does the UCC have a position on the controversy of gay marriage? And Is the Bible for or against gay (same sex) marriage?" kept nagging at me – and by Thursday – I knew that I couldn't ignore answering them.

It's a topic that is in the national media, sparking debate, demonstrations, and emotions like few other issues. It's a subject that is dividing people and splitting churches with people from opposite ends of the debate digging in and taking unbendable

stands with a passion that often turns extremely hurtful and ugly. As I said originally as far as the UCC goes the opinions span the gamut from far right – to far left. From the Biblical Witness Fellowship - to the Coalition of Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgendered Concerns.

The UCC has a history of taking stands for the inclusion of all people – and on the National level has been a strong supporter of equal rights for homosexuals, including being one of the few denominations to have a process for churches to intentionally identify themselves as Open and Affirming, which means that all people, including homosexuals are welcomed, as well as designing ceremonies of Holy Union for same-sex couples. This type of radical stand is not new to the UCC – they were the first denomination to ordain women – it was way back in 1853 the Congregational Church ordained Antoinette Brown was ordained in the Congregational Church in 1853 and they were the first to ordain an openly gay man, when Bill Johnson was ordained in 1972.

What is unique about the UCC is that unlike some of the other denominations, that have split, or exploded over this issue – for over 30 years we have lived by our motto “In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things charity” and we have engaged in debate, lived with the tension, and agreed to disagree while still hanging in there - together as people of faith. Given the passion and violence that this particular subject generates that’s a fairly remarkable accomplishment in itself. But even with this long-standing history – the new initiative to allow gay couples to marry has ratcheted the intensity of the debate to a new level even within the UCC.

Just this October at the Ct. Conf. Annual meeting a resolution came to the floor in support of gay marriage. Instantly the room was charged and words got heated – battle

lines were drawn. Until Bill Hawley got up at a neutral microphone. The moderator had a hard time even conceiving what anyone was doing standing at a neutral mike. When Bill finally got to speak he described himself as an evangelical ordained UCC minister from Gordon Conwell, a conservative seminary, but he also explained that during his journey to ordination he had received a great deal of support from members of the gay community of faith. Then he stopped and said, “and this is breaking my heart.” The room went silent – and the discussion shifted. He asked that the resolution be tabled for a year so we would have time to talk to each other – to really talk and to really listen.

I would venture to guess that there is as wide a range of opinion right here in this sanctuary as there are within the UCC. And when the discussion about the differing views begins someone usually points to scripture and states: “Well, it says in the Bible --” Which brings us to the second question that was asked, “Is the Bible for or against gay marriage?” The short answer which I gave a few weeks ago is that the Bible has very little to say about the subject and Jesus has nothing at all to say on the subject. Once again we are back to the discussion about how one reads the Bible. Many of the opponents to homosexuality are quick to quote chapter and verse. But it’s always interesting to see the ease with which some people will pick particular passages as ‘proof positive’ taking the stand that if it’s written in the bible that’s all that needs to be said while at the same time totally ignoring other passages without seeing any irony at all.

Invariably the scripture that is first pulled out is from Leviticus ‘The Holiness Code,’ which states that you shall not lie with a male as with a woman – naming it an abomination, however, these same people would hardly condemn those who have tattoos, eat rare meat, wear clothes of blended threads, cross breed livestock, eat seafood, or sow

their fields with two kinds of seeds – all prohibitions on that same list – and they probably would condemn polygamy, which is perfectly OK according to the same Holiness code.

The biblical arguments against homosexuality and particularly gay marriage also center around the book of Genesis and the declaration that marriage is defined as being between a man and a woman, people often cite this text as proof that homosexual relationships are unnatural, yet most of us agree that the story of creation can't be taken as scientific fact. And even if in the Garden of Eden a man and woman may have been the ideal, we didn't get to stay in the garden very long – and our world is far from 'ideal.'

When I look at the biblical rationale against homosexuality – I am always amazed at how tightly those few passages are held – and how quickly some of the other laws and restrictions of the bible are completely dismissed. For example, we don't turn divorced people away from church, we don't condemn them, we understand and accept that divorce happens, and know the harm that is often done to couples and children who are forced to stay in unhappy marriages. Yet divorce is one of the social issues that Jesus personally talks about. We know that according to the law in scripture if someone divorces and remarries - they commit adultery – and we know for certain that “Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery” is one of the 10 commandments. But we haven't seen –nor should we see – demonstrations – and hate crimes directed at people who are divorced and remarried. We also know that there are many, many references in the biblical text that reinforce the institution of slavery – but we have no doubt that slavery is wrong and no one today (at least not any sane person) would use those texts to try to defend the institution.

Besides Leviticus the other biblical passages that are cited are Romans 1: 26, I Corinthians 6: 9, and 1 Timothy 1: 9 and while opponents insist that these are passages that refer to homosexual activity as perverse and are clear evidence of God's displeasure they don't allow that at the time that those texts were written there was no concept of sexual orientation as we know it today.

Not only is the primary focus of these passages about a variety of activities that had connection to the pagan culture, the specific charges of homosexuality in context refer to conduct associated with male temple prostitution and pederasty - the practice of older men keeping young men or boys – for their sexual pleasure. In the passage in 1 Cor. & 1 Tim the exact meaning of the words translated as 'homosexual' are not even known with certainty. And let's not forget that it's Timothy who prohibits women from coming to church with their hair braided, or wearing jewelry or expensive clothes – he's also the one who does not permit women to speak in church.

Today we have scientific data that sexual orientation is not a matter of choice, but a matter of genes. As stylish as the new wave of TV shows have made being gay seem – few people would willingly choose that lifestyle – especially given the intensity of hatred that is generated against them in so many places. It's not about making choices but about being who God has created them to be. I watched two friends of my daughters in high school struggle not to be gay. These two young men fought mightily against even thinking it to themselves. We knew it from the moment they came to the house at 14 and 15 years old. One of them was constantly harassed and abused by other kids in school, called a fag, and queer. He was 22 years old before he could finally admit it to himself.

He was surprised that no one else was surprised when at 23 he finally told people he was gay.

Sexual orientation can't be separated from who we are as people. When a baby is born the first question that is asked is not what is the name – or how much is the weight – but is it a boy or a girl. We were created as sexual beings – and who we are sexually is an integral part of our identity – one that we just can't deny.

The concept of same sex couples and gay marriage is an extremely difficult one to come to grips with in our society. But it's not the first such concept to seem so totally foreign or radical to our sensibilities – for instance - until 1967 marriage between a white person and a person of color was still illegal – considered a crime- in at least 20 states.

The current argument against gay marriage seems to be that same sex marriage threatens to destroy the institution of marriage. I have a hard time trying to see how allowing same gender couples to establish legal committed relationships has anything to do with harming marriage. In a society where over 50% of marriages end in divorce, where the number of single parent households is on the rise, and where Brittany Spears' 55 hour wedding is viewed as a media joke. It seems to me that so far, we have done a fine job of that without any help from the gay community.

As you can tell, I'm probably standing to the left of many people here, I'm going out on a limb and I don't expect everyone to agree with me – and that's OK – that's what I love about the UCC. I have struggled with the concept of homosexuality and gay civil unions and marriage for quite a while – and I'm not entirely comfortable with it, but then again my comfort level has little to do with what is just. What makes the discussion so difficult is the intensity of emotion and often hate that so often flairs quickly to the

surface. It's a hard subject to talk about (trust me)– one that I was hoping to avoid – but one that has to be discussed and it's important to open the discussion in the church – to be able to share our thoughts and opinions no matter what side we stand on - in the context of our faith. Above all I believe that no matter where we stand in the conversation that we need to listen and speak in love remembering that this is not an abstract debate but an issue that concerns real people with feelings and emotions – Like my good and respected friend Bill said, It's an issue that is breaking people's hearts.

Contrary to what many believe those on the liberal side of the debate are coming from just as biblically based a perspective as those on the far right. The difference is in how scripture is read and where the emphasis is placed.

For me the bible is a living text – the life giving word of God – not to be read literally – but as fundamental truth. The passages that I hold on to are the ones that speak of God's love that is bigger and broader and wider than our tiny intellects allow us to comprehend. When I read the gospels I see in Jesus an example of a God whose love is not limited, but instead reaches out to those who are on the margins. I trust in the Jesus who eats with sinners, tax collectors and women - the Jesus who challenged those who were without sin to cast the first stone – who touched those who were unclean from leprosy – and who continually rebuked the righteous religious leaders of the time for their obstinate refusal to change the status quo and their failure to meet the needs of the people.

The passages that I hold onto are those also found in Lev., Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Romans, Galatians & James the ones that speak about God's love and command us to “love your neighbor as yourself” – remembering the story that Jesus told that of all the

righteous people who passed by the man lying on the road it was the Samaritan – the outsider – the alien - who stopped to help –who was the true neighbor.

I hold onto the concept that in Christ we are given a new covenant - a covenant of grace that not one of us is worthy of – yet is poured out for all. I hold onto the quote from Galatians that says “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.’

Most of all I cling to the ideal that the gospel is good news – for all people.