

Great Love

John 14:15-21

Our society has come a long way in its understanding and embrace of gay and lesbian relationships. Back in 1964 President Lyndon Johnson signed the historic Civil Rights Act banning discrimination based on one's race, religion, sex, or national origin. Yet, at the same time the Civil Rights Act was unfolding the U.S. government was conducting a massive effort to eliminate gays from working in government agencies.¹ Simply stated, the belief was that gays were immoral, emotionally unstable and were therefore national security risks.² Sadly gays and lesbians were understood to be sexual deviants. In the late 1950's and early 60's the FBI spent significant resources hunting for gays who either worked in our government or in academia. The government strategy was to unmask them (out them) and then force them to either resign or be fired. In 1957, for example, a Harvard educated Ph.D. astronomer Frank Kameny was summarily fired simply because he was gay.

¹ Matt Apuzzo, "Uncovered Papers Show Past Government Efforts To Drive Away Gays From Jobs," **The New York Times**, Wednesday, May 21, 2014. P. A14.

² Ibid. p. A17

Kameny, a World War II veteran, who served in the U.S. Army in the Netherlands and Germany, went on to become one of the pioneering voices for gay rights in America. Kameny soon realized that the American Psychiatric Association had contributed to this injustice by classifying homosexuality as a “sickness.” Through continued advocacy, education and commitment that began to take hold during the early 1970’s, a clearer understanding of homosexuality emerged that eventually led healthcare agencies and mental health professions to shift completely away from the view that homosexuality is a sickness. Today being gay is considered a normal variation in sexual orientation much in the same way being left-handed is simply a variation in a mostly “right-handed” world.

On Tuesday of this past week Judge John E. Jones, a Federal Judge appointed by President George W. Bush in 2002, struck down the 2006 Pennsylvania law banning gay marriage. Pennsylvania now joins eighteen other states in having legalized gay marriage. Placards with the message reading “Love Wins” was how supporters of gay marriage responded to Tuesday’s ruling.

A different response came from Roman Catholic Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, of Philadelphia who called Tuesday's ruling "a mistake with long-term, negative consequences."³

Churches and church bodies have differing views on homosexuality and gay marriage. Some churches and church bodies condemn homosexuality as a perverse sin. Gay marriage therefore is not only unacceptable in their view, it is morally wrong. Other churches and church bodies are affirming of gays and of gay marriage. Our larger church body the United Church of Christ is one of those ecclesiastical bodies that has discerned through prayer and the spirit the dignity and welcome of all people regardless of their sexual orientation. There are yet other churches which, for a lack of a better way to describe it, are "don't ask-don't tell" churches. A kind of silence on the matter of gays and gay marriage describes their church culture. Sometimes the people in churches of this type say "everyone is welcome here."

³ Erik Eckholm, "Judge Strikes Down Pennsylvania's Gay-Marriage Ban," **The New York Times**, Wednesday, May 21, 2014. A17.

The challenge for these churches however is how to get their message of welcome out to the gay community which often believes churches are not so welcoming.

Given our deeper cultural understanding of those with differing sexual orientations, I do not believe we can be a church that stands by with nothing to say about gays and gay marriage.

As a deeply devoted Christian, I fully believe that God embraces, welcomes, cherishes, and views every person regardless of their sexual orientation as sacred. I do not believe being gay is a sin. I do not believe being gay is wrong. I believe in that God and in the path of Jesus' love.

As a fellowship rooted in Christ, I believe we are at a moment when we are being called to discern where we find the mind of Christ to be in our community on the matter of becoming outwardly open and welcoming to the gay community.

This kind of discernment doesn't happen in one or two meetings. It doesn't happen by proclamation or by tirade or through the twisting of arms. It doesn't happen by haphazard and irresponsible talk and actions.

Clarity does and will emerge through sustained engagement with one another; through patience, painstaking listening, openness and prayer. I would like us to begin a process around seeking to become an “Open and Affirming” congregation in the United Church of Christ. I think we will all grow through the process. I realize that for many folks the culture in which you grew up taught you that homosexuality was simply wrong. The church, for its part, has often been silent on the issue or concurred with the cultural understanding that homosexuality was wrong, that is was a sickness. Sometimes churches have tried to look at scripture as the sole key factor in deciding the appropriate way to understand gay relationships. In the same way the Bible has been used to support slavery it can also be used to condemn homosexuality. I’ll never forget an Old Testament (Hebrew Scripture) professor who suggested that the prohibition against homosexuality in ancient Israel may have had a lot to do with a struggling nation of Israelites who needed to bolster their population and fighting force given the enemies that constantly threatened their existence. Homosexuality then was prohibited on the basis that it could not produce able fighting men.

In the New Testament the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans is often cited as a clear indication that homosexuality is wrong. However, upon closer examination, some argue Paul was arguing against a cultural reality in antiquity in which same-sex relationships were often based upon exploitation and not upon mutual agreement between partners. So the sin is about unstoppable sexual indulgence linked to exploitation; and not homosexuality in the way our culture has come to understand a committed same-sex relationship. There is no ancient word in Greek that corresponds to our modern use of the term homosexuality.⁴ Terms like homosexuality and heterosexuality are modern constructs. So even though we get prohibitions regarding homosexuality from scripture, the prohibitions are based upon understandings of sexual behavior that differ from a current understanding of same-sex committed relationships. Jesus has nothing to say about same-sex relationships in scripture. But he has a lot to say about love and a lot to say about acceptance.

⁴ Jeffery S. Siker, "Homosexuality," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary Of The Bible: D-H, volume 2* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007) p.883.

He also tells us that there will be lots of circumstances in life in which we have to rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us in our making sense of life and our situation. There was a time when things like slavery and child labor were accepted cultural realities. Interpreting the Bible for a simple yes or no answer did not change those realities.

What changed those realities was the Holy Spirit breathing life into those scriptures and into the people who looked to those scriptures for new light, new insight and new ways of seeing. That is what makes our God so exciting. God's Spirit, the same spirit that is in Jesus, is alive and engaging us as new realities and new challenges unfold.

My prayer is that our community of faith would be so bold as to ask the Spirit, the helper, the advocate whom Jesus promised to us to come and guide us to a place where we might be able to proclaim our welcome and embrace of all people, regardless of their sexual orientation. That's an important calling for a church in a world where hostilities against gays still exist and where the church is often viewed as inhospitable.

It is quite possible that our pastors will at some point be asked to officiate at a same-sex marriage here for a member or friend of Immanuel. I'd like to be able say to that couple that our congregation will support you in the same way we are called to support with our love and prayers those whom we baptize. It's all about orienting ourselves around a gracious love that is far beyond anything we've ever imagined, the love God has for each and every one of us. And that is Good News!

Dale Davis

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