

Sermon Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Radical Welcome

3rd Sunday after Pentecost

June 29th, 2025

We are nearing the end of Gay Pride month – and today, many churches in the UCC observe Open and Affirming Sunday. Is there anyone here who doesn't know what Open and Affirming is about? It is about the radical welcome and inclusion of anyone who seeks God in our midst – and this welcome is especially extended to members of the LGBTQ+ community – God's children who often are not welcomed in churches, because their sexual orientation or gender identity is perceived as an unforgiveable sin.

Now I know Old Steeple officially is not an 'Open and Affirming' Church. Gail filled me in a little bit about what happened when Pr. Ann brought up the issue here. I'd like to learn more about it at some point...

Now you probably know that a church doesn't become an 'Open and Affirming' congregation overnight. There is a certain process, it takes a while. I happen to know, because my husband Fred (who is also a pastor) went through the process with both the Church in the Gardens in Queens (which he is serving now), and the last church he served, Hillcrest Congregational in Pleasant Hill, California. It may seem cumbersome, but he also experienced it as rewarding – because it involves deep reflection, prayer, and conversation. And, by the way, ELCA Lutherans have a similar thing – it's called 'Reconciling in Christ', and I was blessed to lead a congregation back in California through the process of becoming a 'Reconciling in Christ' church.

No matter what you call it, the idea behind it is to signal to members of the LGBTQ+ community: we believe that God loves you. That you are fearfully and wonderfully made, the way you are. That God wants you to be part of this beautiful tapestry of humanity we call the church, with all the gifts you bring.

Now I know Old Steeple is extremely welcoming. You know that. But the community out there probably doesn't know. So there's something to be said for officially becoming a church that signals, 'No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.' You are safe here. And I know it's on our website – which is great – but people have to read. We live in an age of emojis and

tweets and short reels. Having the rainbow colors represented somewhere would make it so much more obvious that we, indeed, welcome everyone. But that's a conversation for another time.

Now I have a confession to make: it took me a while to accept LGBTQ+ folks as equally beloved people of God. Like probably most of you, I grew up in a 'traditional' family. I played 'father, mother, child' with the other kids in my neighborhood – that was the ideal we all aspired to at that point in our lives. I was raised to believe that there is a norm when it comes to gender expressions, gender roles, and sexuality. And to accept that this 'norm', which is heterosexuality, may include infidelity, addictions, and abuse (things I experienced in my extended family). And I grew up with a stepfather who wasn't shy to express his disgust for anything or anyone gay. I was conditioned to see anything veering from heterosexual standards as 'abnormal'.

And as I grew up and became more aware of the people around me, I remember being very confused whenever I encountered LGBTQ+ folks. And I remember keeping my distance from them. I just didn't know what to do with that – what to do with them. And maybe there was this fear of the 'other' that let me keep my distance.

And then I married my first husband, whose mother had come out as a lesbian later in life. And I moved to San Francisco. Talk about a crash course in LGBTQ+ related matters! I could tell you many a story, but there's no time for that.

Now the interesting thing is that I met a lot of gay folks in the church circuit. People of faith, faithful people, who love God and their neighbor and share their wonderful gifts. And I believe to this day that God sent these siblings into my life – to help me overcome my prejudices. To teach me to expand my love. To realize that they share in my and anyone's humanity, with joys, sorrows, and dreams. That they are beloved children of God, fearfully and wonderfully made, just like anyone else.

And I listened to their stories. Let me tell you, I haven't met anyone yet who was like, 'Yay, I'm gay,' when they first realized what's going on. On the contrary: members of the LGBTQ+ community usually think that something is wrong with them, because they veer from heterosexual or gender 'norms'. There is a lot of self-hate at first, and guilt, amplified by a society – and many churches – that see members of the LGBTQ+ community as deviant, even as an abomination. It is no surprise that LGBTQ+ youth are more than 4 times as likely as their non queer

peers to commit suicide – or at least attempt it. There is a lot of suffering in that community. And even if we don't attack LGBTQ+ youth directly – our silence, our refusal to stand up for them and support them is hurtful and harmful as well.

Back in San Francisco, I ministered to and with quite a few people of the LGBTQ+ community. And I made some wonderful friends who are gay or lesbian. People, who have so much to give. And I am yearning for the day when sexual orientation or gender identity doesn't matter anymore. The day when we truly believe what the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, that 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ' – a new creation.

And Paul's vision of a new creation in God is supported by the teachings and actions of Jesus Christ. He doesn't ask people about their sexual orientation before he heals them or feeds them. He heals the servant of a Roman – pagan – centurion, even though this 'servant' was probably the centurion's lover.

God's kingdom, the new creation, is about radical welcome of all who are fearfully and wonderfully made. And this is reflected in the scripture lessons we just heard.

Here, Jesus sends out 72 disciples –and, by the way, we can assume there were women among them - to go ahead of him, in all kinds of towns and places to announce the kingdom of heaven come near. And the instructions Jesus gives them are quite interesting. He doesn't say, "Go and seek out the extra pious folks, those who live according to the Law and widely accepted conventions," no, he says, "**Whatever** house you enter"– Jew, Greek, Roman, slave free, man, woman -, "first say, 'peace be on this house.' And if there is a person of peace, your peace will rest on that person," whoever they are. So for Jesus, what matters is that there are people who are people of peace – people of shalom, and shalom means so much more than just peace in the sense of the absence of war or conflict – shalom includes healing, wholeness, and goodwill.

And Jesus goes on, "Whatever people offer you to eat, eat!" That is quite a radical concept, because there are quite a few Jewish laws concerning food, to this day. In our neighborhood in Queens are many food vendors and restaurants which are certified kosher – because that's important to many siblings of the Jewish faith. So Jesus is breaking down barriers, emphasizing that having table fellowship with people of peace, of shalom, is more important than the food that is shared. Again, this is quite radical.

Jesus ends his sending speech to the 72 with the words, “Whoever listens to you listens to me.” **Whoever.** Just recently I saw a reel on Facebook showing an African American preacher who was saying, “Jesus is a DEI specialist!” And this works, whether you interpret DEI as diversity, equity, and inclusion, or as the much more derisive ‘didn’t earn it’. But I just think it’s brilliant. ‘Jesus is a DEI specialist. You can’t claim to love Jesus and then exclude all those he includes.’ Jesus invites anyone and everyone to be part of the inclusive kingdom of God movement – a movement of peace. A movement where anything that separates us is overcome. A movement where we share freely of our gifts and of ourselves with one another. A movement where we sit at a table with all kinds of people – fellow children of God, our siblings, fearfully and wonderfully made – and where love conquers all. It’s a movement that embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion. It’s a movement that is open and affirming: whoever – whoever you are, you are fearfully and wonderfully made. And no matter who you are and where you are on life’s journey – you are welcome here.

May God give us the love, grace, and courage to fully be a part of this radical movement. Amen