

“Extravagant Love and Welcome: Uniting All in One Community”

*(Part III of V in sermon series,
“Extravagant Love and Welcome:
Uniting All in One Community”)*

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 15

*Isaiah 56:1,6-8; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32;
Matthew 15:21-28*

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 20, 2017, Proper 15, 20th Sunday of Ordinary Time, dedicated to Jill Ford who passed to eternal life on Thursday, August 17, to Angela Trautman on her baptismal day, to all the young people considering confirmation for 2018 and always to the glory of God!

*“Loving and Welcoming ALL Sexual Orientations and Ethnic and National Background”
Part III of V in the sermon series:
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*Isaiah 56:1,6-8; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32;
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Today, we come to the third of the sermon series on *“Extravagant Love and Welcome: Uniting All in One Community.”* Let me just say a few words...as I walk through my reflections on “Sexual orientations, ethnic and national backgrounds” I cannot possibly capture all the meaning and depth which these words grasp and encapsulate in our ONA statement in a matter of minutes. I see these words as I see the words at the base of the Statue of Liberty:

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

“The New Colossus,” written by Emma Lazarus in 1883.

By declaring we are open and affirming our congregation wants to lift the torch for all to see. We want to say, “come here if you don’t feel safe, or wanted, or embraced by others and by God’s love. If you yearn to breathe free – come here.” Perhaps this week, of all weeks in our 15 years of extravagant love and welcome, these words speak most fully. I hope so....

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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SEXUAL ORIENTATION:

On December 18, 2011, following our glorious Service of Lessons and Carols, I was greeting people in the Narthex by Broad Street, when I saw someone I had not seen in years. She had been a member at North Congregational Church,

where I had served as senior pastor from March, 1989-early January, 2000. She approached me, we embraced, wished each other Merry Christmas and then she said, *“I need to talk with you after everyone is gone.”* She patiently waited and when all had taken off into the cold air of that December night, we sat down together in the sanctuary.

She opened her purse and pulled out a sermon I had offered almost 20 years earlier. It was worn and torn but somehow still barely held together by a single staple. She gently put it in my hands and said, *“This sermon saved my life.”* It was a sermon on “Homosexuality and the Bible.” It was the first sermon I had ever preached on the topic.

She preceded to tell me that she had made a plan for suicide because she could no longer bear the judgment and hate she felt as a Lesbian in the “Christian family” in which she had been raised. In deep despair and as a last-ditch effort, she came to church. She had planned to end her life that afternoon. On that Sunday, I preached a sermon of extravagant welcome for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons. For the first time since childhood, she felt loved by God. She saw this as a sign from God to live and for the past 20 years she done just that. She said, *“You need to preach that sermon again. That sermon saved my life. Perhaps it could save someone else’s life,*

too.” As a result, I preached two sermons in February 2012. It has been a while since I have preached “that sermon.”

To all who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender persons, I am truly sorry for the ways in which the church throughout your life has hurt you. I am ashamed of Christian houses of worship that judge, condemn, demonize and destroy lives of children, teens, and adults because of their sexual orientation and/or sexual identity. I am so sorry. It is my hope and my prayer that you feel welcome and safe at First Church. It has been our practice and policy (through our ONA Statement) to truly welcome all people. But, we can only guess and imagine all the wounds you carry into this Cathedral of Grace. Please know, we are genuine in extending our love and welcome to you. God loves you. I love you. We love you.

We have a way to go and grow in our ONA statement. Since September 2002, much has happened with research, knowledge and education about sexual orientation and gender identity. Particularly in relation to Transgender and Transsexual persons, we have learned a lot and the language and welcome to the “Trans” community has deepened and grown. I would like us as a community of faith to revisit our ONA statement **this** fall and adjust it the times in which we are now living. While conservative Christians, in the name of Jesus, are trying to shut doors and pathways to the “Trans”

community, we need to open doors and have open minds. Such openness will show us our ONA statement is lacking a full and extravagant love and welcome to “Trans” members of our greater Columbus community. A simple example would be our statement that God created us “Female and Male.” If we simply said, “God created us” – period – that would be MORE inclusive. We could also speak more completely to what it looks like for us to be more welcoming. In a great document entitled, “Transitioning to Inclusion,” we can discover ways to more completely embrace Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning youth and adults in our faith community. Even though we may not understand the design and beauty of God’s creative ways, we need to agree that God doesn’t make mistakes. So, let’s explore this together and rewrite, rework, and then renew our commitment to extravagant love and welcome in the coming months.

ETHNICITY

There is a reason why the Kirwan Institute for Race **and Ethnicity** has its name (NOTE: Brit Kirwan was a member of First Church when he was President at OSU). It is not enough for us to address racial issues in our nation and world. We must also and always look at Ethnicity as well. In a wonderful piece by Kwabena Agyeman, Graduate Research Associate at the Kirwan Institute, Mr. Agyeman writes:

“In the light of the current political upheaval in Kenya, it is important to shed some light on the role ethnicity plays in instability, civil conflict, and poverty in Africa. Ethnicity is a very broad term which can be defined in different ways depending on the context. However, in this context, I am borrowing Crisford Chogugudza’s definition which states that ‘ethnicity is defined as a shared cultural identity involving similar practices, initiations, beliefs and linguistic features passed over from one generation to another.’

The paradox is that while politicians in Africa characterize ethnic rivalry as a colonial tactic designed to ‘divide and rule’ and keep them under subjugation, many of them continue to use ethnicity to promote themselves and inflict maximum political damage on their opponents. The situation in Kenya today is evidence of how far politicians are prepared to go in using the ethnic card in politics.”

Let’s be clear. Ethnicity can be a beautiful thing. The feelings of cohesion and love felt in ethnic community can be a real blessing. However, using Ethnicity to divide people and nations is one way we separate and deeply hurt people. As Mr. Agyeman points out, people who wish to divide (and conquer) nations, states, tribes, and people, will call on the ethnic origins of people to separate them from others – often calling on the worst nature of people to do this. As a nation of global

immigrants combined with slaves brought from all sorts of West African and Southern African nations and tribes against their will, the United States is truly a beautiful quilt* of vast and various ethnicities and nationalities. It is easy to tickle the ethnic nerve and fiber in each of us to bring out a certain response.

But, I think Ancestry.com and other DNA tests have been good for us. We have found that we are Not simply German, or Irish, or Kenyan or Cuban or Filipino or African-American. We are not from one island or one nation in one corner of the world. Many of us (most of us?) are a beautiful mix of races, ethnic and national origins. We are families that reflect the nature of humanity much more than the focused nature of one group of people.

Ironically, this is probably also true as well for people and nations where ethnic wars and “ethnic cleansing” has brought on bloodbaths of human devastation. They are more mixed than those who seek to divide them will admit. At First Church, we continue to believe and always will that ALL ethnicities and nationalities– whatever our blend of beautiful humanity – is welcome here.

NATIONALITIES

In an article appearing in Today's Sunday New York Times, "What White Nationalism Gets Right About American History" R. Derek Black, the child of white nationalist parents (whose godfather is David Duke), write:

"My dad often gave me the advice that white nationalists are not looking to recruit people on the fringes of American culture, but rather the people who start a sentence by saying, "I'm not racist, but ..."

He continues, *"The most effective tactics for white nationalists are to associate American history with themselves and to suggest that the collective efforts to turn away from our white supremacist past are the same as abandoning American culture. My father, the founder of the white nationalist website Stormfront, knew this well. It's a message that erases people of color and their essential role in American life, but one that also appeals to large numbers of white people who would agree with the statement, "I'm not racist, but I don't want American history dishonored, and this statue of Robert E. Lee shouldn't be removed."*

In addressing white nationalism, Mr. Black says that those with whom he grew-up counted as a huge victory, Mr. Trump's words that "good people on both sides" were at Charlottesville. He points out that, in fact, the rally was a White Nationalist Rally celebrating White Supremacy. No one there, says Black, had any illusions about a statue in a

park. They were there with the explicit purpose of “Making America White Again.” Continuing, he writes that Mr. Trump completely validated them in their efforts with his words.

“On Tuesday afternoon, the president defended the actions of those at the rally, stating, “You also had people that were very fine people, on both sides.” His words marked possibly the most important moment in the history of the modern white nationalist movement. These statements described the marchers as they see themselves — nobly driven by a good cause, even if they are plagued by a few bad apples.”

Do you see where nationalism is the slippery slope of believing your nationality (as you define it) is superior to others? Nationalities, like Ethnicities, can be a blessing when pride is placed in the right perspective. It can be a curse when it dominates all your transactions and interactions in life.

To welcome all ethnicities and nationalities to First Church is not a statement in favor of any ethnic or national agenda. Quite the opposite. It is a welcome of an inclusivity agenda — one which welcome all the vast and beautiful varieties of our ethnic and national origins and mixes. I am reminded of the Apostle Paul’s words to the Galatians, [Galatians 3:28](#): “*There*

*is neither Jew nor Gentile, **neither** slave nor **free**, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*

As the prophet Isaiah has said, “we are a house of prayer for all people.” As we, who are ONE in Christ, are called beyond the things that separate us, let us dig deep to make our house of prayer a safe house for ALL people who pray. And let us confess what we have done to cause any pain and separation in the body of Christ and ask for God’s amazing grace and healing – so that we may be part of the healing of the church and the nations in our day and time. May it be so as we live and grow in the love of Christ – a love that is unconditional and filled with grace! Amen.

- In the original sermon, I called us a “melting pot.” Bruce Panek convinced me in the greeting line, to change it to “quilt.” A better image. I have also heard “tossed salad.”

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