

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Transfiguration Sunday, February 19, 2012, dedicated to the memory and honor of all pastors and lay people who have welcomed GLBT Christians and their partners, families and friends, and always to the glory of God!*

# **“Homosexuality and the Church: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Transfiguration Story”**

***II Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9***

***(Part II of II in the sermon series “It’s About Time”)***

Last Sunday, I addressed the Bible and homosexuality. I said the Bible is not that interested in homosexuality. It is not Holy Scripture that creates hostility to homosexuality, but rather hostility to homosexuality that drives all too many Christians to cite a few passages from the Apostle Paul and otherwise discard Jewish law codes as a way to push gays out of the church. In relation to the Bible, *“There is much ado about nothing.”*

Today I would like to address the church and its relation to homosexuality. While the Bible (at best) contains seven passages - or less than 1/10 of 1% about same sex relations - the church universal is composed of 1.5 billion people. Add to the 1.5 billion thousands of denominations and traditions and millions of congregations, we have a vast range of opinions on homosexuality (and everything else) formed **not from scripture**, but from experience, tradition and reason, as John Wesley says.

While it is relatively easy to address seven of anything and nearly impossible to address 1.5 billion of anything, I will do my best to call the 1.5 billion to higher ground in relation to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) persons. I have five principles, which I believe can move us from war to peace in relation to LGBT persons.

The church must change. It is a matter of life and death in a growing number of cases and places. We need to choose the side of life. I begin with one story - the story of 14-year-old Justin Aaberg. 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.*  
++++

In April 2010, Justin Aaberg of Anoka, Minn., came home from school and found his mother at the top of the stairs, tending to the saltwater fish tank. "Mom," he said tentatively, "a kid told me at school today I'm gonna go to hell because I'm gay." His mom replied, "That's not true. God loves everybody. That kid needs to go home and read his Bible."

Justin shrugged and smiled, then retreated to his room. It had been a hard day – the annual "Day of Truth" had been held at school, an evangelical event then-sponsored by the anti-gay ministry Exodus International, whose mission is to usher gays back to wholeness and "victory in Christ" by converting them to heterosexuality.

The “**Day of Truth**” has been a font of controversy that has bounced in and out of the courts; its legality was affirmed last March, when a federal appeals court ruled that two Naperville, Ill., high school students' Day of Truth T-shirts reading **BE HAPPY, NOT GAY** were protected by their First Amendment rights. (However, the event, now sponsored by Dr. James Dobson’s Focus on the Family, has been renamed

"Day of Dialogue.")

Local churches had been touting the program, and students had obediently shown up at Anoka High School wearing day of truth T-shirts, preaching in the halls about the sin of homosexuality. Justin wanted to brush them off, but was troubled by their proselytizing. Secretly, he had begun to worry that maybe he was an abomination, like the Bible said.

Justin was trying not to care what anyone else thought and be true to himself. He surrounded himself with a bevy of girlfriends who cherished him for his sweet, sunny disposition. He played cello in the orchestra, practicing for hours up in his room, where he'd covered one wall with mementos of good times: taped-up movie-ticket stubs, gum wrappers, Christmas cards.

Justin had even briefly dated a boy, a 17-year-old he'd met online who attended a nearby high school. The relationship didn't end well: The boyfriend had cheated on him, and, compounding Justin's hurt, his coming out had earned Justin hateful Facebook messages from other teens – some from those he didn't even know – telling him he was a fag who didn't deserve to live. At least his freshman year of high school was nearly done. Only three more years to go. He wondered how he would ever make it.

So goes the story found in last week's *Rolling Stone* magazine entitled, *One Town's War on Gay Teens*. (*Rolling Stone*, Feb. 16.

<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/one-towns-war-on-gay-teens-20120202#ixzz1mmwohlOF>)

The story chronicles the gay bashing and the seven suicides in the Anoka-Hennepin School District in 2009-2010. Sadly, at the center of this story were conservative evangelical Christians who were leading a campaign of bullying under the guise of "saving" gay teens. Several months after this "Day of Truth" sponsored by local churches and through which their

teens were trained to “out” students and chastise them in local Anoka schools, Justin Aaberg took his life.

Based on the number of LGBT persons in the general population, there is no church in America today that does not have LGBT men and women worshiping Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior - although in most churches, they are closeted and have not come out to themselves, let alone others. Some would say at least 10% (or more) of every church is gay which matches the percentage of GLBT persons in America. Nevertheless, somewhere in the Christian church today someone is enduring a gay-bashing sermon - a sermon that is judging them and is spiritually cutting them off and casting them out of the body of Christ. This Christian man or woman may be a pastor, a church musician, a deacon, the leader of the women's fellowship or a young teenager who is just discovering his or her own sexual orientation. Whatever the case, they love Jesus and they love His church.

In each case, they will leave church today wondering (like Justin) if they are an “abomination.” They are wondering how and when they will return. They are seeking to find their breath, having come out of a suffocating encounter within their own community of faith. They may act out or retreat deeper into the closet of their fears and anonymity. Coming out may seem like an impossibility - especially in the church. As Mel White writes in his 1994 autobiography, *Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America*, "As a teenager, since I couldn't convince my Baptist parents that it was all right for me to go to a dance, how was I ever going to tell them that I was gay?"

The Church of Jesus Christ - 1.5 billion people strong - has to find a way out of the homophobic abyss that engulfs too many individual Christians and too many congregations. Although we are as diverse as the human family that God has created, we do share our baptism in Christ. As Paul says to the Ephesians and to all of us:

*"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." (Ephesians 4:4-6)*

God is Creator of ALL - above ALL, through ALL, and in ALL. God has not created most beautiful and others unworthy. The majority excluding a minority is not of God. Such exclusion has nothing to do with the promise of the Gospel to ALL who repent and believe in Christ. We have to be vigilant in our actions because there are Justin Aaberg's of all ages - struggling to know, and feel and realize that God loves them and everyone - unconditionally.

I offer you five foundational principles we can apply in finding a way forward. ***First, we need to bear with one another in love. Second, we need to confess the arrogance of our certitude. Third, we need to find common ground by seeing each person as a beloved child of our loving God. Fourth, we need to break the code of silence and secrecy. Fifth, we need to identify the pain of exclusion that others feel when left out, cast out and shut out of the church.***

These principles work. Just ask the congregation of Olin T. Binkley Baptist Memorial Church in Chapel Hill, N.C. The congregation of Olin T. Binkley Baptist Church applied these and other principles when John Blevins was presented as a student minister to their Southern Baptist Church's Deaconal Board. John was a student seminarian seeking a license to preach the gospel and ultimately ordination in their church. He was presented as a Christian who was openly gay. Immediately, two things tore the church: their love for John and their long-standing belief that homosexuality was a sin. Nevertheless, rather than believe they were right about their long-standing beliefs, they extended a "temporary" license to John and they began to pray together, study scripture together, and discern the movement of the Holy Spirit in this matter.

In time, they came to believe the church was wrong on homosexuality the same way it had been wrong on women and slavery. John was granted standing and he was ordained. The people of Binkley Baptist believed that no one should dictate to them how to read scripture. They were Baptist and as such, they were congregational in their approach to faith and life together.

With their decision, a firestorm of response came at Binkley Baptist from other churches in the Southern Baptist Convention. Instead of becoming defensive, members went out and met with their opponents. In Christian love, they extended their way and their principles to other churches. Some listened. Some changed their views. Some never opened their doors (maintaining the code of silence and secrecy). However, they stood firm in their faith and convictions in Christ. (This story is found in Keith Hartman's book, *Congregations in Conflict: The Battle Over Homosexuality*, "License to Preach: Binkley Baptist," Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1996, pp. 50-65)

Unfortunately, for every Binkley Baptist story, there are nine or 10 other stories in which a church chooses to insulate itself from conversation and exposure to these and other issues. Especially the code of silence and secrecy is more important than any other code in the church and there is no identification with the pain of exclusion. The code of silence is deadly. This is the code that the school board, teachers, principals and community leaders in Anoka, Minn., used that brought on one suicide after another.

A way forward must mean practicing all five of these principles in an attempt to move out of the past and into the future. Since Christendom is congregationally based (or as I like to say, "ALL CHURCH IS LOCAL"), eventually this way means that congregation by congregation, leaders would agree to talk openly, pray together, reason together and agree to disagree, always seeking to work through their differences. If you think about it, that is what we did at First Church 10

years ago. We took our time and struggled openly, prayed fervently, confessed the arrogance of our certitude (yes Congregationalists - like others - are often arrogant in their certitude), and moved forward gracefully.

You and I need to engage our friends and other pastors, people and congregations with these loving principles. No matter where someone goes to church, we need to give him or a chance to move out of the despair of judgment, which denigrates both gay and straight Christians. For that matter, teachers in public schools need to know that there are congregations that love and care about their LGBT children and teens.

Consider the life of one who challenged the issues of his day in his church. John Woolman was a Quaker abolitionist. Woolman set out in the 1830s to convince every Quaker that it was wrong to own slaves. Although this journey from church to church and then from person to person took Woolman almost 20 years of his life, eventually there were no slaves in America held by Quakers!

How powerful is that?! Not only that, but the Quakers stood alongside the Congregationalists to become the greatest leaders in the abolitionist movement. Woolman's approach was simple. He sat down with people, one-to-one and prayed with them, listened to their struggles, loved them, grew in relationship with them and then, through the power of God's Holy Spirit, encouraged each man to change his ways. We live in a world where we want instant results and instant gratification. Email, texting or e-message won't change hearts and minds. Your friends and family will not change because I preached this sermon today (or last week) and you sent it to them. Only the power and presence of God working in you and through you WILL change hearts and minds.

As you may know, I am a theological liberal by nature. As such, I believe in the beauty, sanctity and nobility of human beings. I believe Jesus command to love one another.

I believe that Jesus' two commandments to love God and love neighbor form our foundation for this love and belief in other people. Now I believe many people are closer to acceptance and affirmation than you and I may know they are. It is often the men or women we have written off as reactionary, cruel and cold who are in fact the folks most willing to listen! It is their shield we see - not their heart.

Remember, these five principles call us to confess the arrogance of our certitude, not to proclaim the arrogance of someone else's! We need to see the one who resists our Open and Affirming beliefs as a beloved child of a Loving God. We need to trust God and God's Grace. Then, we need to go out and share the good news of what you have come to know here at First Church. Share your enthusiasm and our story - one person at a time. Talk to pastors, priests, bishops, lay people, and then teachers, co-workers and others.

So many of you have told me your stories or stories of friends, neighbors and family members who are great people - except they can't see how to love unconditionally those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered. Ask for time with them. Spend time with them. Love them. Listen to them. Listen to their pain if you wish for them to hear yours. Moreover, remember, this is not a journey for those who are GLBT only. This journey is for each one of us and all of us together.

**The tide is shifting.** There is an "under toe" of hope!

Ten years ago, 23% of Americans felt that gay people should be allowed to marry. Today, 53% believe it is okay. **The middle is moving!** We need to encourage the middle with good theology, our positive experiences, and our deeply rooted beliefs in the unconditional love of God for all people. We can add to that the carefully studied evidence from John Boswell that the Christian church - as far back as the eighth and ninth centuries were performing same-sex marriages. In his book *The Marriage of Likeness*, published 17 years ago,

Boswell showed that social tolerance was alive and well in the Roman Catholic Church 13 centuries ago! It is a shame that the Roman Catholic Church hid its best liturgies for 13 centuries. But now is a great time to reclaim them!

Speaking of marriage, Ohio lags behind on our tolerance of marriage between persons of the same sex. Washington forged ahead this week and joined seven other states that have legalized same-sex marriage. New Jersey passed the law in the legislature but it was quickly vetoed by Governor Christy (How could he show such love and compassion for Whitney Houston and place the state's flag at half-mast while showing such a lack of love and compassion for the LGBT men and women in his state who are seeking to commit themselves to life-long covenantal relationships?). Meanwhile, Ohio is seemingly standing behind the regressive mandate passed by our electorate in 2004.

However, across the country the tide is changing - across the state, Christians, Jews and other people of faith are gathering to proclaim the freedom to marry. Last Sunday, I was one of the celebrants lifting up marriage for all at First Unitarian Universalist Church. We were together to proclaim our belief that people need to be free to marry.

You may not know this, but I have performed same-sex marriages for the past 20 years (12 of which have been here). Moreover, our church has honored same-sex marriages for 18 years - six years before I arrived - eight years before we were ONA! It is in our DNA as ONA to stand up for those who are gay.

I believe we can make a clear and compelling theological stand for gay unions based on our theology of Sanctification. Sanctification comes from the Latin word "*sanctus*," which means holy. Sanctification is the process in which the Holy Spirit imparts new life to the believer and through which he or she is released from the compulsive power of sin and guilt and enabled to love God and serve neighbor. A sanctified life is one

growing ever closer to God in holiness. A sanctified union is the discipline of giving ourselves to another in love for growing in holiness - more precisely, growing together for the sake of God.

We are all called each day to live a sanctified life - a life growing in holiness and beauty. We follow a Sanctified Savior who was not only sanctified, but at one point, was changed into pure light.

Mark's Gospel today tells us that on a high and holy mountain, **long ago, Jesus was transfigured.** He was changed in bodily form and became a translucent figure - dazzling in appearance. In an intensely spiritual moment between Jesus and God (with Moses and Elijah appearing alongside - the two great embodiments of the law and the prophets), Jesus was changed from earthly nature into heavenly glory. This happened in a cloud on the mountaintop. It was intended to be a private experience. Nevertheless, somehow, Peter, James and John recorded it in the writings that became our gospels.

The story was leaked for a reason. Christ's glory shining through on the high mountain was the holiness of the man shining through his humanness. It was his face shining through so afire that it almost blinded him. Beyond birth and death; beyond mountaintop stillness or Messianic transfigurations, you and I each experience transfiguring moments in our lives - moments in which we are changed by God's love and light!

I have seen the faces of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons changed when they have encountered the unconditional love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord - as demonstrated by the church that bears his name. I have seen people change when they have opened their hearts to people they had shunned, shamed and cast out in the past. I have seen the light of God brighten within men and women who welcome all people. I have witnessed transfiguration stories in

this congregation in one-on-ones, and at our altar as I have married two women and two men in this high and holy place. God has changed me. I know what this looks like!

We must become the Church of Transfiguration. We must embrace God's call to holiness and health, to life, to light! We must become the church of change, the church that brightens this world in its dark places!

In memory of Justin Aaberg and all the children, teens, and adults who have taken their own lives, or like Matthew Shepherd who was crucified, hung on a country road fence and the thousands like Matthew who have been killed by others - thus feeling the wrath of the church instead of the love of God and Christ's church, we must place ourselves on the front lines and get off the sidelines to create a better world.

We must stand.  
Then we must step out.  
We must speak out.

- 1. Bearing with one another in love.***
- 2. Confessing the arrogance of our certitude.***
- 3. Seeking to find common ground by seeing each person as a beloved child of our Loving God.***
- 4. Breaking the code of silence and secrecy.***
- 5. Identifying the pain of exclusion that others feel when left out, cast out, and shut out of the church.***

I say, let us be Christians!