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"OLDEST PULPIT IN AMERICA"

## FIRST CHURCH IN ALBANY

*A National Historic Site*

110 NORTH PEARL STREET, ALBANY, NY 12207-2231

Telephone: (518) 463-4449 - Fax: (518) 463-4830

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, 1/31/10  
First Church in Albany

Isaiah 56: 1- 8  
Luke 4: 21 - 30

### "Belonging"

Over the past several months we have been talking about whether we should adopt a statement about being a welcoming and affirming congregation. One result of those discussions is the statement included on the insert in your bulletin:

*In response to God's unconditional love for all people made known to us in Jesus Christ, we are called to be a welcoming and affirming community. The First Church in Albany includes young and old, families, couples and singles, rich and poor, persons of various races, ethnicities, backgrounds, sexual orientations and gender identities, differing physical and mental abilities, believers and seekers. We welcome into the full life of the church all those whom God sends us. Centered in Christ, we commit ourselves to breaking down dividing walls and building a community where all are loved.*

That's not an official statement. Consistory has been talking about and will talk about it more and we hope that others will be discussing this, too.

Many of you have asked questions, good and helpful questions, about this process and why we are considering making such a statement, about whether we need to or should say something like this at all. I'm not able to address all of those questions in one sermon, but I hope that this morning's sermon can be part of the discussion. And after worship this morning in the parlor there will be additional opportunity to ask questions and respond to the sermon.

At the start let me be clear about one thing: The reason for considering this statement is not because we have not been welcoming; it's not because of something we have done or not done that has made someone feel unwelcome. This is one of the most welcoming and diverse congregations I have been a part of. Which is not to say we couldn't do better. But the fact is many different kinds of people have found a home here. This congregation has been very warm and welcoming.

So why say it? Because sometimes it's good to say who we are and to affirm what we already know and already do and want to do.

I love my wife. She knows that; I don't have to tell her. But sometimes it's good to say it. And it's nice to hear. It's good to remind ourselves who we are and who we are called to be.

And the truth is, others may not know. Churches, including churches in the Reformed Church in America, have not always been welcoming, especially to gay, lesbian and transgender people. Some have been told, maybe not directly, but pretty clearly, that they are not welcome.

Let me also say that I've not heard anyone say that about this congregation. I've never heard or sensed that anyone has communicated that people—whoever they are, wherever they've come from—aren't welcome in worship at this church. I think you've made it pretty clear that all are welcome in worship. I do think we are less clear about what we mean about welcoming people into 'full life of the church.'

God's people have often struggled with who is in and who is out. We are God's "called out" people, separate from the surrounding culture, 'in the world but not of it', we live by different values, live for different purpose, often see the world differently than others. The problem is sometimes that understanding has become distorted and God's people have come to see their 'chosenness' as a kind of privilege or entitlement.

In the Gospel lesson this morning Jesus names some of the 'outsiders' who were recipients of God's grace and participants in God's plan, while the 'insiders' were not chosen. And the insiders got so upset with him they nearly threw him off a cliff.

Through the prophet Isaiah God calls for his house to be "a house of prayer for all peoples" and specifically mentions the eunuch and the foreigner. Why? Because in Deuteronomy 23 these were the very people who were specifically forbidden to be a part of the worshipping assembly of God's people. It is a direct contradiction to what scripture had said earlier. Those formerly excluded are now to be welcomed into the fellowship.

In Isaiah's time it was eunuchs and foreigners. The first Christians had to face a decision about whether or not to accept Gentiles and then on what grounds. For a time in the history of our nation and in the life of many congregations African-Americans were not welcomed into full life of the church. Until not so very long ago women could not be ordained to office in the Reformed Church. And in each of these cases, people mounted Biblical arguments for excluding certain people.

Today one of the issues we are debating is whether gay, lesbian and transgender persons are truly, fully welcomed into the life of the church.

That debate has taken a lot of energy in our denomination and in others. And in some mainline protestant denominations the debate has become quite rancorous, threatening to divide the church. I find it distressing that the church of Jesus Christ which has such a vital mission to fulfill in a world where there is so much need, so much hurt, should spend so much time and energy arguing among ourselves about this—there are more important things we could be doing. Thankfully, there are more important things we are doing. Still, this is an important issue and one worthy of our careful attention and prayerful discussion.

Why? Because real people are involved. Real justice is at stake. Real faithfulness to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ is involved in this issue.

When we talk about gay and lesbian and transgender people we are not just talking people out there somewhere. We are talking about our own brothers and sisters and sons and daughters and aunts and uncles in our own biological families and we are talking about our brothers and sisters in Christ, men and women who break bread with us, who worship with us, who serve Christ in mission with us.

For a long time these people have been told that there is something wrong with them and the church has often been a part of that, making biblical arguments against homosexual behavior.

There are about a half dozen passages in scripture that are sometimes cited. I think it's safe to say none of the biblical writers was talking about sexual orientation as it is understood today. And most, perhaps all of these passages are addressing exploitive, abusive relationships, and that is the kind of behavior we ought to condemn, whether it is homosexual, heterosexual, or asexual. None of the scripture passages often referred to addresses same-gender relationships based on mutuality and respect and love and characterized by faithfulness and life-long commitment.

These scripture passages merit more discussion and perhaps we can talk more during the post-service hour. We also have some Bible study resources available.

The draft statement says "we are called to be a welcoming and affirming community." What is the difference between just welcoming and being welcoming and affirming?

Let me put it this way: When I was in grade school and high school I played a lot of baseball in the summer-- not on any organized team, just gathering of boys from the neighborhood. Two people were chosen as captains and they began choosing their team mates, taking turns, first one than the other, until all were chosen. The team captains tended to chose their friends and those whom they judged to be the better players. If I was one of the very last to be chosen, I guess I felt welcomed-- sort of. But if I was one of the first chosen, then I felt affirmed.

If we say "*we are called to be a welcoming and affirming community*" we are saying, "We welcome you, not reluctantly or half-heartedly, but fully, eagerly, with open arms. You have gifts to offer in Christ's service; you enrich our life together; you make us a better team, a more faithful congregation of Jesus Christ."

And in saying that we also say that as followers of Jesus Christ we also have certain expectations of each other in this fellowship.

The word from Isaiah was not quite an unconditional welcome to all eunuchs, all foreigners—but "to those who keep my Sabbath," says God, "those who hold fast my covenant, I will make joyful in my house of prayer."

When someone presents themselves before the board of elders for membership in this congregation, we don't ask if you are straight or gay, we ask you to keep covenant: "Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Will you be a faithful member of this congregation and through worship and service seek to advance God's purposes here and throughout the world?"

When you present a child for baptism, or request baptism for yourself, we don't ask if you are rich or poor, straight or gay, we ask you to keep covenant: "Do you promise to instruct this child in the way of Jesus Christ? Do you promise to accept the spiritual guidance of the church, to walk in a spirit in Christian love with this congregation and to seek those things that make for unity, purity and peace?"

When someone is elected and ordained to the office of elder or deacon, we don't ask about sexual orientation or political party affiliation or ethnic origin. We ask you to keep covenant: "Will you be diligent in your study of Holy Scripture and in your use of the means of grace? Will you pray for God's people and lead them by your own example in faithful service and holy living?"

And when a couple asks about getting married in this church it shouldn't matter if they are a straight couple or a gay couple. What matters is if they are willing to keep covenant together and make vows before God and their witnesses: "Will you love each other, comfort each other, honor and protect each other, and forsaking all others, be faithful to each other as long as you both shall live?"

I know that many, maybe most people disagree with me about this and that's OK. Some of you may think I'm nuts for even suggesting such a thing. But I hope you can understand that I am not advocating an "anything goes" mentality with respect to marriage, but rather make this argument out of deep respect for the institution of marriage.

Often the case for gay marriage is stated in terms like "marriage equality" and "equal rights." And it is that, but more importantly I think, it is about marriage responsibility. It's about keeping covenant.

New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote: "The conservative course must not be to banish gay people from making marriage commitments. The conservative course ought to be to expect gay people to make marriage commitments. We should insist on it. We should regard it as scandalous that two people can claim to love each other and not want to sanctify their love with marriage and fidelity. When liberals argue for gay marriage they sound like it's a really good employment benefits plan or they frame it as a civil rights issue. But marriage is not like that. It is going to be up to conservatives to make the important moral case for marriage including marriage among people who are gay. Not making it means drifting further into a culture of contingency, which, when it comes to intimate and sacred relationships, is an abomination." (Cited by Joanna Adams in a sermon, "The Bible and Homosexuality," October 8, 2006, Morningside Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia)

In one of his essays Wendell Berry decries the term "safe sex." "Sex has never been safe," he says, "and it is less safe now than it has ever been....Sexual lovemaking between humans is not and cannot be the thoughtless, instinctual coupling of animals; it is not 'recreation'; it is not 'safe.' It is the strongest prompting and the greatest joy that young people are likely to experience. Because it is so powerful, it is risky....It involves the giving away of the self that if not honored and reciprocated, inevitably reduces dignity and self-respect," and that, he says, is why it involves the whole community Wendell Berry. *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (Pantheon Books, 1992), pp. 142-143

"Lovers must not," he writes, "live for themselves alone. They must finally turn from their gaze at one another back toward the community. If they had only themselves to consider, lovers would not need to marry, but they must think of others and of other things. They say their vows to the community as much as to one another, and the community gathers around them to hear and to wish them well, on

their behalf and on its own. It gathers around them because it understands how necessary, how joyful, and how fearful this joining is. These lovers, pledging themselves to one another 'until death,' are giving themselves away,... And so here, at the very heart of community life, we find this momentous giving." Wendell Berry. *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (Pantheon Books, 1992), pp. 137-138.

I know that with regard to same-gender marriage probably most Americans disagree with me. I know that most Christians — intelligent, thoughtful and compassionate Christians — think differently about this. Not that long ago I thought differently about it. And one of the reasons I felt I could address this issue in a sermon because I think we are capable of having an intelligent, thoughtful and compassionate discussion about it.

However you think about this, I think we can all recognize that the God we meet in scripture is a "gathering" God, persistently pushing at the boundaries, making the circle larger, welcoming more and more people into God's loving embrace.

The passage we read from Isaiah tells of a God who gathers the outcasts of Israel and who will gather others to them besides those already gathered. (Isaiah 56:8) Elsewhere Isaiah speaks of a God who will feed his flock like a shepherd; and gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom. (Isaiah 40:11.)

Jesus, heart-broken over Jerusalem, lamented, "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." (Luke 13:34)

And when Jesus wanted to tell people what God is like he told stories:

Of a king who sent his servant out into the streets to gather everyone they could find and bring them in to the wedding banquet (Matt 22:10.) "Many will come from east and west, from north and south and will sit at table in the kingdom of God." (Lk.13:29)

He told the story of a shepherd with a flock of a 100 sheep who leaves everything to go searching for the one that is lost. (Luke 15:3-7)

And of a father who, while his wandering and wayward son was still a far off, sees him and is so filled with compassion that he forgets his dignity and runs out to embrace him. (Luke 15: 11-32)

This is a gathering God, reaching out in love, who wants to gather everyone in the wide embrace of God's love. This gathering God is always pushing at the boundaries, breaking down the walls, enlarging the circle. God is pushing out boundaries of fear, of custom, of tradition to say, "You belong—who ever you are."

Not your race, not your past, not your sexual identity, not your mental or your physical ability, not whether you agree with everything said in this sermon, not whether you have it all together—none of this is a barrier to your belonging. So come and keep covenant with us. You too, can belong— truly, fully belong to God's called out people.