

Draft

**GAY AND STRAIGHT TOGETHER**  
**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson**  
**February 6, 2011**

Good morning, everyone. Thank you all for being here today. I would add a special thank you to Paula and Jorge for their music and to Steve for welcome and announcements his first month on the board.

This morning I want to speak about one of the continuing struggles in American civil rights, religious freedom and our very understanding of what equality and the pursuit of happiness means. The freedom to live, explore and celebrate one's sexual orientation is one of the remaining cutting edges of American life and values.

Let me start with a personal caveat. In planning this service over the last several weeks, I asked myself how I could ever truly understand what it felt like to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered in this society.

I asked myself if I had ever been filled with frustration that no one really understood or cared about my life, my feelings, and my self-hood beyond names, labeling or appearances?

My thoughts went back to my high school days in Maine. I'd been home taught, which was most unusual in the 1950's. For the most part I'd never been around people my own age. You can imagine what it was like for me to be thrown into the chaos of high school with other teens. To put it kindly, it was a nightmare that has never fully gone away for me. I was often beaten by the school bullies and laughed at behind my back for the clothes I wore or my style of talking. I remembered people calling me "fag" or "queer" and wondering what on earth they were talking about. Later, of course, I came to learn what they meant. Although I never questioned being heterosexual, the taunts hurt and confused me in those dark years.

So while I cannot fully appreciate the stigma of being a different skin color, a scorned ethnic heritage or sexual orientation, I remember oppression and the pain of labeling all too well.

This morning I'd like to share three brief stories that perhaps exemplify some of the dilemma people face about sexual orientation. In some respects, the people in these stories are echoed in my personal life and perhaps in yours as well. I don't plan to speak intellectually or historically about the continuing struggle by those of the spectrum of sexual orientations to gain full rights. Instead, I offer the courage I see in each story to take steps of faith beyond the traditional assumptions of American religion.

**Further, I would propose that those brave actions you took in 2005 to become a Welcoming Congregation were the first steps of your calling or vocation as a congregation for the new millennium.**

The first story involves a visit I made to a private college in Jacksonville, Illinois while I was interim minister in the nearby city of Springfield. Illinois College is a small college affiliated with Protestant denominations. I was asked to speak to a world religions class about Unitarian Universalism. I did so and then asked if there were any questions. One young woman immediately put her hand up and asked me what position we as a church took on gay rights. I responded that we welcomed all sexual orientations into our community and also a significant number of our ministers were gay, lesbian or transgendered. She immediately asked me how we could do that given the Bible statements saying that homosexuality was evil. My response was to say that many statements in the Bible contradicted the teachings of Jesus and moral matters we take for granted in our society. Two that I cited were support of slavery and the property value of women. I also mentioned that given the 70 or so students in the class, at least a few statistically were possibly gay, lesbian or bisexual and perhaps included her friends.

And then I finished my response to her question with some comments about our Welcoming Congregation curriculum. She wasn't happy with my answers but after the class several students quietly came up to ask me about the Welcoming Congregation and what it might mean for them.

So what is a "Welcoming Congregation"?

According to the reading this morning, **"The Welcoming Congregation Program is a completely volunteer program for congregations that see a need to become more inclusive towards bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender people. It consists of a series of workshops developed by the UUA. The goal of the workshops is to reduce prejudice by increasing understanding and acceptance among people of different sexual orientations."** I would invite you to check out the website at the Unitarian Universalist Association website for more detailed information.

This congregation did something extraordinarily brave some years ago. You undertook a deliberate process to be certified as an official UUA Welcoming Congregation. You were the first in South Carolina to do so. Even though Clemson is a relatively progressive community, it was a courageous decision in a time and place when passions still run high. You spoke to a calling of vocation that said "we welcome all those who enter these doors who are in the GLBTQ community and you will not be shunned

or ignored.” **You were willing to stand up and speak the truth in love that scriptures from ancient books do not speak truth in this modern world. This might be the second part of your calling as a congregation.**

This brings me to my second story again regarding labels and the role of the Welcoming Congregation. Some of you have heard this story so forgive me for repeating it. I was minister at a church a number of years ago in the Puget Sound area and taught the “Jesus Reconsidered” class there for the first time. We advertised it and had several people attend from the community. One of them was a gay man whose name was Bob. He enjoyed the class and brought his partner with him. They hadn’t been to the church before and began attending Sunday services. They both got involved and decided to join. As I remember it, Bob got up to make a brief statement of thanks for the chance to join. He shared how he and his partner had felt welcomed at the church – something not affirmed in other churches they’d attended. He went on to say that he felt much honored that he could be gay and not feel ashamed of whom he was. Then he went on to say that he also appreciated the congregation accepted him being a person who had voted for George W. Bush the November 2000 election, and considered himself a loyal life long Republican. He was delighted to be able to be in a church that affirmed his political choices, too. There was an extended silence in the sanctuary as people took in a more complex labeling than they had assumed.

I mention this story because I believe that The Welcoming Congregation and its profound lesson about the common ground of gay and straight life are ways to show us how inclusiveness really works. I would hope that the Welcoming Congregation model would invite us to welcome anyone who walks through these doors whether they are humanist, gay, environmentalist, Republican, political conservative but liberal religious, Christian, or new member with new ideas. **A third part of your calling might then be to be sure that people aren’t given assumed labels of conservative or liberal just because they have sought us out.**

Why would people come to us rather than the typical churches around us in all directions? This brings me to my third story.

This story involves a man by the name of Steve. I don’t know his last name for reasons that will be apparent. A friend from the AA community recently called me and told me that Steve had died of AIDS. I’d met Steve a couple of years ago at the AA meeting I regularly attended in a very conservative part of the West Coast. It was an early meeting and so tended to attract a group of regular attendees. Steve never really talked much about being gay or his struggle with AIDS. Like all of us, he talked about recovery. All of us were in recovery from addictions such as alcoholism or

drugs. We were all there together – gay and straight, conservative and liberal and in between, Catholic and Unitarian Universalist and others.

Our common purpose was to help each other stay sober and sane. We were all on a spiritual journey to find wholeness within us and supported by each other.

Some in that room were privileged to be wealthy or white or straight or with nice homes. Others were poor, off the streets or religious fundamentalists. All of us were oppressed in that room by the disease of addiction. We faced it together no matter what other labels were given us.

Perhaps this is also a lesson for us in our calling as a religious faith.

There is no doubt that some of us have been far more deeply oppressed historically and in our lives than others have been.

But let me toss out an idea for you. We all come from a place of being oppressed regardless of our sexual orientation, our skin color or our so-called class. You might raise your eyebrows at such a thought. Most of us are somewhat privileged in our lives, after all. I suggest that one place of common oppression for us come with our religious identity.

How many of us have had to do the same? How many of us have a momentary twinge of fear or anxiety if we declare ourselves to be Unitarian Universalist or religious liberals? How many of us have heard through rumors that we belong to “the church of Satan” or “the gay church” or “the church that’s a cult” that someone mentioned this week. How many of us came from religious backgrounds where questioning brought shunning or declarations we were going to hell?

I believe we here know oppression all too well and it remains important to remember it in our lives. Otherwise, we are doomed to forget its very real presence in the world around us. **Our fourth calling is to acknowledge that oppression is universal and not owned by any one group however worthy they may be.**

This brings me back to the opening words this morning about our vocation not only as people but as a congregation.

What I have typically seen in many congregations is that a great effort is made to become a Green Sanctuary church or a Welcoming Congregation or other certification of our intentions. Then very often the effort to keep up that momentum is lost because of so many other causes, responsibilities and demands of church life.

Two churches I know about here in Clemson want to reach out to the GLBTQ community. They both meet in this building. I find in that reality a great opportunity for two churches – Peace Church and UUFC – to combine our gifts of justice seeking and stands against oppression.

I have discussed an idea with Rev. Susie Smith lately about having an ad hoc working group that represents Welcoming Congregation here and PRISM at Peace Church. PRISM is focused toward youth but seeks to hold up the same inclusiveness that we do here.

I've proposed that this ad hoc group from both our communities as well as people who were involved in PFLAG before it disbanded get together to brainstorm how we might collaborate.

In doing so, we lessen the work we might duplicate and strengthen the ministry we share in common.

Please see me after service if you're interested.

But what about us as UUFC? What is our calling?

As long as there is one person who despairs of injustice but who would affirm our principles, we must be a welcoming congregation.

As long as we can hold up a chalice flame together that is like a beacon in the dark times of greed, anger and ignorance, we must be a welcoming congregation.

As long as one person seeks an open-minded and openhearted religion and feels lost and alone, we must be a welcoming congregation that offers the spiritual tools to face each step of life and learning and walk the path together.

May it be so.