**HOMILY (Part 1) No Matter Who You Are or Where You Are**

Dear friends, what joy it is again to come together to worship, pray and listen to the kind of world, the kind of reality that God is forever beckoning us into. A world where people’s worth is inherent as image-bearers of the Divine. A world where love is celebrated and affirmed. A world that does not dismiss or erase those deemed different because of their sexuality or gender-identity. A world where each image-bearer is in control of their own bodies.

Today is a celebration of all the diversity we find in humanity, amidst *yet* another trying week. And specifically, it is a time to *remember* the journey that this congregation has taken to become a community of faith who are passionate about the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and non-binary people, and their families in the life and work of ministry here. St Andrew, what a joy it is to be on this journey with you!

This is the Sunday designated by the National Church of the UCC to affirm and renew the covenant that our Local Congregation has made to be Open and Affirming LGBTQ+ people and their families. And this is no small or insignificant task in this place and time!

The decision to overturn Roe v. Wade signals not only the end of federal reproductive rights; it marks a turning point in our society. With this decision, the Supreme Court has indicated that it would be willing to dismantle other fundamental rights including legalized same-sex marriage. It is therefore in light of this new day that:

We proudly display year-round the symbol of the Rainbow in prominence on the outside of our building, proclaiming God’s justice for all and extravagant welcome to the LGBTQ+ community.

We commit ourselves to being a visible presence in the annual Pride events of this city, offering an alternative to the often loud and condemnatory voices of Christianity.

We celebrate and support the work of the Open and Affirming Coalition of the United Church of Christ in our Association, Conference and in the National Setting.

We seek to display the Pride Rainbow on print and online material, so that our Open and Affirming may be publicly know and that LGBTQ+ persons may be welcomed across all in-person and virtual gatherings.

We seek to maintain and strengthen our relationship with local LGBTQ+ organizations in our city and services that directly serve the needs of the LGBTQ+ population, including but not limited to Sweet Evening Breeze and House of Ruth.

We will conduct, with love and joy, the marriage of same-sex couples.

We will celebrate queer trans and non-binary people, informing ourselves of their needs and challenges in accessing necessary and life-giving health services.

We celebrate and affirm the leadership of openly LGBTQ+ individuals on our staff and on our ministry teams, including the ordination of openly gay people.

We celebrate and affirm the ongoing, daily ministry of LGBTQ+ individuals that call this church ‘home.’

*And still our covenant calls us forward* into new ways of engaging those LGBTQ+ folk in our community that are excluded, demonized, and put at risk by repressive policies, laws and theologies.

We proclaim that all people are created in the image of a loving God, that the example of Jesus Christ calls us to ever expand our vision for the kin-dom of God, and that the Holy Spirit leads us to be united even in our differences…not that there are not differences, but that those differences shouldn’t be cause for exclusion, discrimination, or prejudice.

We understand that our ONA covenant, just like any covenant, is not static. It was never meant to be concluded at that congregational vote taken in April 2009. The world, and the society in which we live, has changed, and will continue to change and continue to demand different, creative responses and ongoing learning from us.

Covenants are relational agreements, and as such they are dynamic, and the commitment to be relationship with the LGBTQ+ community, means to be held accountable to them, in this ever-changing society. Our responsibility grows and changes, therefore our willingness to journey with this community through the thick and thin is crucial.

With that in mind, let us reflect that just in the last year, a record 26 anti-gay bills were enacted into law across ten states. And in 2022 so far, at least 195 anti-LGBTQ bills are already pending in state legislatures, more than half of which specifically target transgender youth and ban them from being able to fully participate in everyday life.

Lawmakers from coast to coast are seeking to ban transgender youth from participating in sports; criminalize medically necessary, life-saving healthcare for transgender youth; ban discussion of LGBTQ youth and families in classrooms; revive “bathroom bills” to prohibit transgender young people from simply using the restroom at school; and even undermine companies’ own internal inclusion and safe workplace programs.

Saint Andrew, you have done incredible work and yet our covenant and our faith continues to call us to engage in the work of affirming LGBTQ+ people and families not just inside these walls but outside; where their sacred value, worth and beauty are often diminished.

So, we declare this Sunday that we believe in a God that welcomes ALL, no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey and invites you to participate in expanding the reaches of God’s loving kin-dom to ALL.

**HOMILY (Part 2) Inheriting the Promise**

Our passage today is from in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, which is perhaps one of the angriest pieces of literature in the ancient world (*Forgotten* Creed, p.9), however the portion we just read is considered by some to be the oldest, forgotten, creed in Christianity. And it is beautiful!

Paul wrote this letter to persuade this fledging church that *both* Jews and non-Jews/Greeks could worship together. Whether you adhered to all the festivals. customs, and rituals of Judaism or not, you could come and be a part of the Jesus Movement. Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians together around the common table.

And so, we get this very practical, very clear argument, that is rooted in the life and the experience of the people to whom he is writing. He states, “There is neither Jew nor Greek…you are all God’s children through faith in Christ Jesus.” It’s to the point and may be Paul’s finest moment in this whole letter (*Forgotten* Creed, p.15). And yet Paul doesn’t stop there.

He adds two other, nearly identical statements: “there is neither slave nor free nor is there male and female.” Stephen J. Patterson a Professor of Religious and Ethical Studies, not to mention the author of the book “The Forgotten Creed” on this very passage asks…Why? Why did Paul do that? “Nothing in the letter necessitates adding these (additional) clauses. The issue at hand is not slavery or gender roles, but the equal standing of Jew and Greek. There are three statements where only one is needed.” (*Forgotten* Creed, p.16).

Sounds like church liturgy if ever there was, right? He concludes that “this is no ordinary speech,” no ordinary letter. This sort of literary construction is the product of deeper thought and planning. Ethnicity, class, and gender…all *ways* in which human beings divide themselves one for another are subsumed, brought under and included in Paul’s reasoning. NOTHING, particularly one’s identity, should be grounds for exclusion in the family of God.

This precise wording was not randomly selected, there is some awareness – perhaps divine insight even – that humanity’s propensity *for creating in-groups and out-groups* wouldn’t stop at the argument-of-the-day. This is a statement about the convictions of the earliest followers of the Jesus Movement, and “it’s not a statement about God, or about the mysteries of Christ.

It is about people and who they are, really” (*Forgotten* Creed, p.29). It is about people’s dignity and humanity, their ability to thrive and live in a world that allow their flourishing not their demise and suffering. It is about giving up our efforts to exclude and to control access, on the basis of identity. Instead, in God’s kin-dom we declare that ALL are children of God. Grafted in. Adopted and Beloved. And IT IS THIS promise that we proudly inherit today, on this Open and Affirming Sunday. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and non-binary people, are Children of God…to be celebrated, advocated for, affirmed and included.

For the Galatians, just as today, this creed is about imagining a world which is radically different to the one we live in and are witness to outside these walls.

“There is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male and female” – was not a creed about overcoming difference for the sake of sameness…it was about overcoming our painful practice of rejecting others. It was about overcoming the distinctions that commonly underwrite the human tendency to denigrate the other, to disempower, disenfranchise, dehumanize, and even enslave another person on the flimsy grounds that they are different” (*Forgotten* Creed, p.158.)

And, to be clear…this is not a statement of tolerance for all things. Embedded in this creed is the understanding that the thing that is not tolerated in this Transformed World, this Kin-dom of God is the dehumanization of any other beloved Child of God.

Anti-Semitic, homophobic, transphobic, racist, sexist, classist, and supremacist language, policies and actions will not be tolerated in God’s beloved community because they demean and cause suffering to others. They hurt and isolate others. Instead of creating space for other human beings to flourish, they diminish their quality of life and cause untold suffering. Being Open and Affirming does not give license to these actions.

For Jesus taught his ancient followers – many of which found themselves on the outside of power, excluded from temple worship, left to languish on the economic margins of society – that they were to see themselves as “Children of God.” As belonging to the Almighty, intimately connected to the One who created the universe (*Forgotten* Creed, p.62), and this creed vividly paints a picture of that hoped-for reality. A reality that we seek to live out in the life and work of this community of faith!

What a message of belonging and welcome…and what good news to those previously excluded! This is the promise we inherit…this is the promise that we bind ourselves to in covenant once more today. That we would be a community of faith committed to overcoming the forces of evil that would seek to sow division by rejecting human dignity and agency. We proclaim, along with Paul and our ancient predecessors in the faith, human dignity and justice for all.

Dear friends, may we never tire in this work.

“For you are all children of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

As many of you who have been baptized into Christ

Have been clothes in Christ:

There is no longer Jew or Greek,

There is no longer slave or free,

There is no longer male and female.

For you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Amen.