

Sustained by Love - Being an Open and Affirming Church

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

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I believe that I have mentioned before that I love watching the Olympics, either one. It is actually on my bucket list to attend one of them in my lifetime. If all works out according to plan, it might be my retirement gift to myself. This is not just something I have done as an adult but as a child as well. Whenever the Olympics happened, I would move in with my grandparents because I took after my grandfather. Together we would watch it all, until exhaustion.

And so it was the case as we watched the 1976 Summer Olympics in Montreal. The Decathlon is deemed to be the most challenging discipline because in order to win a decathlon championship, one has to be pretty good in ten Field and Track disciplines. And as some of you might remember, that year the Olympic gold medal went to Bruce Jenner, today known by her new name: Caitlyn Marie Jenner.

Then, Bruce, did not only win but set a new world record and with that became the world's most famous athlete.

After the Olympics, then Bruce, remained in the public eye through endorsements, speaking engagement, TV appearances and other outlets. Then, he, struggled to make a living. Most recently, Bruce had a steady gig with his family's reality show "The Kardashians." (Now here is a name I never thought I would ever mention in a sermon.)

If you are a watcher of this particular reality show in 2015, you got the impression that something big was coming.

But for those who did not, the news might have been shocking: the person formerly known as Bruce Jenner appeared on the July 2015 cover of *Vanity Fair* with long hair and the most amazing make up ever and a daring outfit reading, "Call Me Caitlyn."

The world's greatest athlete, almost 40 years later, is now a woman and goes by Caitlyn Marie Jenner. In one day, with one photograph, everything changed.

If you have followed Caitlyn's story, we know that she shared in the interview that when she was as little as 5 or 6, she looked like a boy and everybody treated her like a boy, but she did not feel like a boy. She felt like a girl.

For 65 years she lived like a boy and then a man – being an athlete, a husband, a father, and now, grandfather. As much as she tried to be good at it, eventually it did not work for her anymore because that was not who she was.

Caitlyn finally made this life-changing decision to live as her true and authentic self.

This was not a choice on her part, but a matter of life and death. And while I admit that I don't understand all contributing factors, I can hardly imagine what kind of courage that took.

If you have continued to follow Caitlyn's story, we got an insight of how her family reacted, has come to grips with this change, and how they have come out in support of Caitlyn.

It was, by no means, easy, nor has it led to immediate understanding and acceptance, but, 6 months into this new life, Caitlyn finds herself loved and supported by her family and an entirely new set of friends.

Caitlyn's story played out in public, as part of reality TV. So, I was curious to find out what the public reactions were to her transformation and transitioning. It is estimated that 750,000 people in the US alone deal with the same issue of gender identity, but most of their stories do not make the news.

Would you like to know what I found? Pure hate and disgust for her. And the most hateful were Christian conservative voices. The more I read, the more I wondered, “What do these so-called Christians don’t get about Jesus and his message of unconditional love?” The more I read, the madder I got, which definitely affected my tennis game on Friday as I sat down to think about the sermon.

To be fair, I did find two articles that were different: one was cautioning us not to judge all too quickly because none of us can really imagine what it feels like to live in a body where the inside does not match the outside. And the other was written by Erin Taylor Green, a writer for the Huffington Post religion page, who says that it is time for Christians to reclaim the radical message of Jesus’ love for all people and that it is “Time to Stand Up, for Charleston, Caitlyn Jenner, & the Fight for Human Rights.”

Ever wondered why this church became an Open and Affirming Church?

Because we wanted our doors to be open to all people as mentioned in our Statement of Welcome. Because we wanted people to know that their authentic self is welcomed here, and that they did not have to hide in some dusty closet.

Because we wanted people to know that God loves God’s creation in whatever shape, form, sexual orientation and identity, age, race, or political persuasion, they come in.

Because that is what Open and Affirming means, and because it was and is not enough to put “All Are Welcome” on our sign outside.

Today we are celebrating 16 years of being an Open and Affirming Church. It is one of the cornerstones of **Who We Are**. When I came to this church in November of 1999 I arrived here with a partner in tow, but was still in my dusty closet. It did not take long for some of you to figure that one out, right?

But I have never officially come out to you. I was not out at my church in Essex Junction. It took some time for me to come out to myself in my late teens, early 20s. I knew though that if I were come out in East Germany and live openly, I could potentially go to prison. And the church of East

Germany had no place for gay people. They would not have ordained an openly gay minister. So, the closet was a much safer place to be.

So, let's remedy one thing: Dear people of the Congregational Church of Needham, UCC and ONA, I am gay! And I want to thank you for providing me, like you have for so many other different people, with a place that is safe, and welcoming, and open to who I am and they are and where together, we can do our best to follow Christ's message of unconditional love.

I am not officially coming out to you as a gimmick (although it got you going) but in fact this is pretty serious because the Christian Church does not have a good track record of doing just that - being open and affirming and welcoming.

In fact, the church has a better track record as being the perpetrator of discrimination, homophobia, xenophobia, and of supporting violence against those who are different.

The church has taken Christ's words and contorted them into something that preaches and breeds intolerance.

Holy Scripture has been used to justify slavery and genocide, has been used to justify the marginalization of all kinds of people.

The church has used the words of God to justify hate, greed, and intolerance. I don't know if you want to be part of a church that does that. I do not.

As an Open and Affirming church, by making that decision we have said "no" to such distortions, and made it the heart of our ministry to share God's unconditional love.

Over the past 16 years we have offered a good number of educational events as well as done and supported advocacy work, and we support ministries and organizations that are committed to reach out to those at the margins and the most vulnerable.

The LGBTQ community is one still on the margins of society. It might not feel like that living in MA. We are living in a pretty safe place which is not the case in all areas of our country.

The good news is that we are not alone: there are over 1200 ONA churches in the UCC who are, in their own way committed to sharing God's unconditional love. Every major religious denomination has a welcoming ministry of sorts. And, believe it or not, even some of the evangelical Mega churches are doing some rethinking on the issue of Open and Affirming, realizing that evangelical and LGBTQ are not mutually exclusive.

Because of the hard work of ONA church communities, ours included, and together with advocates across the country and a few really brave people who brought before the courts issues that questioned blatant injustices, the world has changed. Most strikingly is that same-sex marriage is the Law of the Land now since 2013 which is huge but it is not, and never was the endgame in this fight for equality.

There is so much more to be done. This is where we can join the work within our nation and take an advocating role: 29 States have no LGBTQ rights protections.

They don't protect LGBTQ citizens in their laws from barring discrimination in housing and employment. LGBTQ teens are often subject to verbal and physical abuse in public and charter schools. They are also among the homeless when their families disown them and kick them out. Barriers for transgender Americans when it comes to housing and employment are even greater, and most insurance companies don't cover their medical needs.

When it comes to Refugees and Asylum seekers we know that in many countries, LGBTQ citizens face increasingly harsh laws that punish their sexual orientation or gender identity with imprisonment, torture, and death. Would they find a safe haven here in the US?

For us as an Open and Affirming congregation there are some particular things to do and work toward as well:

We have to continue educate our own membership and the new members that join us in what Open and Affirming means.

Maybe it is time for us to take a look at our Statement of Welcome. It is 16 years old and things have changed. Who might be missing from that list? Could we/ shouldn't we include people who have different faith background, and people of all gender identities and gender expressions, people who are in the process of immigrating, people who struggle with physical or mental illness, or those who serve in the military, or prescribe to all kinds of political beliefs, and live in all kinds of different family structure? See, people don't know that they are welcome here unless we spell it out!!

We could create genderless bathrooms, or make this church truly accessible by offering physical and programmatic access for people with disabilities. We could enter into new partnerships with community groups that work on finding job or housing or educational programs for especially young people who are struggling with their sexual orientation and gender identity as they might have been abandoned by their families as they are finding their place in life.

I chose Paul's words from Corinthians for a reason. Paul shares with us what love is; not the romantic kind of love that makes our heart flutter. Well, maybe that is part of his words, but I think the love he is talking about is God's love in Christ. God's love in Christ is patient and kind, it is caring and affirming, accepting and generous. Jesus was not about limiting God's love for whatever the world regards as "normal, perfect, and worthy", but Jesus was about sharing God's love with everybody.

If we are indeed committed to bringing God's good news of unconditional love to all people - straight, gay, black, white, young, old, rich, poor, able, disabled, healthy, sick, to the boy who identifies as girl, and girl who identifies as boy - we are telling each and every person that he and she is a child of God; a true reflection of God's love. We are, after all, all created in God's image and sustained by God's love.

Amen.

Sources:

1. Vanity Fair article at www.vanityfair.com/.../caitlyn-jenner
2. www.huffingtonpost.com/erin-taylor-green/time-to-stand-up-charlest_b_7622764.html+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us