

Sanctuary  
Rev. Jonathan Morgan  
First Congregational United Church of Christ  
Psalm 42  
June 19, 2016

PRAYER

We come into your presence to sing your praise, O God, for we are grateful for all your goodness bestowed upon us. Yet, even as we sing, we are conscious that there is deep pain also. You know the grief in our hearts that arises out of the events of the past week and of too many days where hatred and violence has taken hold of your creation. You know the questions that haunt us. You know our yearnings, You know of our profound need for Sanctuary. So, giver of all good things, Redeemer of all people, Provider of hope and energy and new community, prepare us to be your Sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true. With Thanksgiving let us be a living Sanctuary for you. Amen.

Song: Two Stanzas of Sanctuary

SERMON

For the most part, I move within this world without worry or wonder of how I might be judged by others. It is a luxury that I have enjoyed my entire life—being a white, middle class male lies at the root of this luxury—and I must say there was a time when I failed to realize that such a perspective is not enjoyed by many.

That is how the trappings of one's perspective can deceive and distort. We see what we are able to see and fail to see (or just plain ignore) what might be the very different viewpoint of another until... until we experience something that jars our perception to bring it into closer union with reality. Such an Epiphany happened to me about 15 years ago.

It occurred over lunch at Brigham's Restaurant in Concord, Massachusetts. I was dining with a friend and colleague, the Reverend Bob Brown who was a former member of my congregation in Boston, when he made his living as a TV producer. Later, Bob went to seminary and is presently serving as the Associate Minister of the Trinitarian UCC Church in that historic community.

It was so good to see Bob. Over the years, we walked a long way together as friends and colleagues — including a 20 mile journey to the bottom of the Grand Canyon... with 18 fellow middle aged and out-of-shape male parishioners. We were lucky to get everyone out of there in one piece. And then, there were the days when I offered my support as he gained his footing into his new life of sobriety; and then, there was the memorable time two weeks after 9/11 when I joined Bob in New York City to walk the fateful route he took on that horrible day—the day he walked downtown to try to offer his help and instead watched in horror as the second plane hit... a plane he later learned carried his friend and colleague on board.

On that cold late September day, we retraced his steps as a means of dealing with the post traumatic shock that had taken a firm grasp of his life and soul. I still remember walking past the still smoldering 100 foot high ruins of the buildings, and the barricaded car garages still filled with dust-covered cars, and perhaps most memorable of all, the men's clothing shop with row upon row of neatly folded pants and shirts still covered in 3 inches of gray soot.

With each step the Psalmist words kept going through my mind...My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

Yes, Bob and I had traveled a long way together over the years, and so, on that summer afternoon in Concord we were affectionately sharing memories while lifting up the costs and joys of pastoral ministry. Just enjoying each other's company, perhaps a little too much, at least for one other patron.

I caught sight of him in the corner of my eye about half way through lunch. He was a man in his middle 50's with a rather severe hairstyle. He sat alone but couldn't take his eyes off of us. I did not know the man but I guess he felt he knew enough about us to warrant an obvious disdain. I could feel the weight of his glaring presence even when I tried to concentrate on my friend. I was confused. Why were we the objects of such scorn? I looked over at him several times, it was hard not to, there was little doubt...hatred seemed to burn within his eyes.

Why I wondered? Bob and I weren't being obnoxiously loud. We told no off color jokes. We ate without making too much of a mess. What was his problem?

Then, just before we finished, it dawned on me...Aawww...I get it...two men having lunch together, affectionately sharing memories... both donning mustaches. He thought we were lovers and for that reason he couldn't help but glare at us with what felt like pure hatred.

Friends, my perspective changed that day. It made me very angry to be judged like that and it gave me a new understanding of what it might be like to live with the fear of being judged on a daily basis. I still have a lot to learn...

Thanks to another colleague and friend, the Rev Quinn Caldwell, who wrote in this week's UCC Daily Devotional, my perspective has again been enhanced.

"For me it was The Common Ground in Ithaca, New York," Quinn writes, "a magnificently seedy roadhouse several miles outside of town. It had a gravel and grass parking lot, a perpetual haze of cigarette smoke, and an all-age cast of regulars you could easily have built a sitcom around.

My husband will tell you about The Park in Roanoke, Virginia, which he and his college friends would drive 45 minutes to get to every weekend, and which they talk about today like it's a homeland from which they're in unwilling diaspora.

Ask any LGBTQ person you know, and chances are they'll have a story to tell you about a place like this. They will tell you about how they found a family there, how they found themselves there, how they felt safe for the first time on the dance floor there, how much they learned there, how they found love there, how they learned to be bold there...

That note you hear in their voice as they tell you about it? That's gratitude, and reverence.

50 dead and more than 50 wounded hits hard any time and anywhere. But for many LGBTQ people, what happened at the Pulse night club last week hits as hard as shootings in churches hit for Christians, as hard as shootings in black churches hit for black Christians. It's not just the death toll. It's not just that it was a hate crime.

It's that it happened in a sanctuary.”

What can we take away from these two illustrations as people of faith and members of a Christian Church?

The first might seem rather obvious but it is challenging none-the-less. As a church we must provide a place of sanctuary for everyone to feel welcomed and embraced.

As you may know, our denomination made the decision to be an Open and Affirming denomination almost 30 years ago at our General Synod. Knowing how badly the struggle is for other mainline protestant denominations to reach that place even today it is certainly a celebration that we made that decision over three decades ago.

No doubt you also know that as a congregation we chose to declare ourselves an Open and Affirming congregation over 20 years ago. Again, this is something to be lifted up with great joy and celebration.

However, what you may not know is that we are the minority within our own denomination. Because about 2/3 of our sister churches in the UCC have not declared themselves to be Open and Affirming that is over 3000 of the 5000 churches in our denomination. I am sorry if I have broadened your perspective.

Here is the thing...most churches will readily embrace the Being Open part of the equation. “Of course we are open to whomever walks through our door,” you might hear, “but why do we have to be embracing? Isn't being open enough?”

Having led a congregation through the two—year process of becoming an Open and Affirming church I know this is a common complaint and concern. “Can't we just be open without the whole embracing part?”

The answer is NO. Not if we want to be a Sanctuary.

Well, of course we could, as a UCC church we are free to do what we think is best, and a fair number of churches have done this very thing. Open and Welcoming they call it, which is rather redundant. I believe by doing so they have effectively ignored the very painful part of our legacy as an institution, when we actively discriminated against and severely judged people of the LGBTQ community... to the point of outright exclusion and rejection. I know this to be the case.

Lisa and I have a friend from high school named Jim who learned the painful reality of this truth back in 1977 when he went to the Senior Minister of our home church, a UCC church, and he shared with our pastor that he was gay. It did not go well.

In fact, our dear friend, a faithful member of our youth group and beloved member of our fellowship and life long member of our congregation, a sweet, caring and creative soul, who sought Sanctuary at a most vulnerable time in his life, was thrown out of our pastor's office with these cruel hate-filled words as a parting shot, “Get out of my office... How could you be so hurtful to your parents!” He never came back. He was not alone.

I am so glad that as a church we have embraced on a week-to-week and even daily basis what it means to be an Open and Affirming congregation. And because of this understanding of what it means to be a

Sanctuary we are a home for all who seek the loving embrace of our God as shown so clearly by the life and ministry, and yes, sacrifice, of Jesus Christ. This is good.

But there is more, something more personal. Something that might even call for a change in perspective. Let me put it in the form of a question: How does your life reflect the call to provide Sanctuary?

How have we, as individual followers of Jesus, actively embraced our brothers and sisters as willingly and completely as Jesus did? How have we loved those whom society has deemed unworthy, as Jesus did on a regular basis? How have we become a living Sanctuary pure and holy tried and true?

Sometimes all that is needed is a gentle caring presence.

Rachel Naomi Remen, one of our earliest pioneers in the mind/body holistic health movement has said, "Perhaps the most important thing we bring to another person is the silence in us, not the sort of silence that is filled with unspoken criticism or hard withdrawal. The sort of silence that is a place of refuge, of rest, of acceptance of someone as they are. We are all hungry for this other silence. It is hard to find. In its presence we can remember something beyond the moment, a strength on which to build a life. Silence is a place of great power and healing."

In this time of silence...is there someone dear to you whom you have pushed away because of some impossible standard of acceptance you have put before them?

Go to them and Embrace them.

Is there a co-worker, or neighbor, or family member who feels unloved and lives in a hard place of judgment by others?

Reach out to them and provide a living Sanctuary of your love.

Is there a place within yourself that you harbor feelings of judgment about your life? A shadowy place of self hatred?

People of faith, live into the blessings of God's love and provide blessed Sanctuary for your soul, and remember the promise of the Psalmist who proclaims: Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for we shall again praise our God.

Then, let us lead the procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude creating Sanctuary for all.

Let us pray

Redeemer of all people, Provider of hope and energy and new community, prepare us to be your Sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true. With Thanksgiving let us be a living Sanctuary for you. Amen.

Song: Sanctuary

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 42

<sup>1</sup>As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

<sup>2</sup>My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?

<sup>3</sup>My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

<sup>4</sup>These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

<sup>5</sup>Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help

<sup>6</sup>and my God.