

“Created Equally in God’s Image: A Reflection on the Shootings at Orlando’s Pulse Nightclub”

*A Sermon Preached by The Rev. Stephen R. Silver at
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Genesis 1.26-27

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

It was just about five years ago—the exact anniversary is June 29th—that I stood in this pulpit and delivered a sermon titled "Strangers Welcome. Really." Some of you may recall that message. It was one I shared as our church was exploring the question of marriage equality and what we were going to do in terms of the rite of Christian marriage as a congregation. The work around this matter started long before I arrived here, during the tenure of my predecessor, Richard Slater. There was a lot of thoughtful conversation and a lot of discussion and our deacons worked hard and one of the outcomes was a statement of welcome that you will find on the reverse side of the bulletin you have here this morning.

When I was talking with the church about becoming your pastor, I was sent a packet of information. I received annual reports, newsletters, and the bulletin and I read the Statement of Welcome that appears on its back and I thought, "Oh, this is great. This church uses the lingo of the United Church of Christ. It’s Open and Affirming. We don't have to do anything on that front. Check off that box." I thought that this was wonderful because I wanted to be at a church that was Open and Affirming. I didn't ask anybody on the committee about this and while the committee members asked me a lot of great, penetrating questions, they didn't ask me about my position on marriage equality or Open and Affirming status.

I was called to be your pastor and shortly after I arrived, a delegation from the diaconate appeared at my front door to tell me that there was a small piece of

unfinished business that we needed to address as a congregation and it was the matter of whether or not we were going to offer the rite of Christian marriage to all couples. I paused, said I was surprised, but was happy to dive in.

Over the ensuing months, our deacons continued to have fruitful conversation, engaged in discernment and prayer, explored scripture, I preached on the matter, offered classes, had one-on-one conversations with people. I know members of the church talked with each other. Ultimately, your deacons produced an affirmation of the Statement of Welcome that made clear that this church was going to offer the rite of Christian marriage to all couples. That affirmation was then endorsed by the church counsel and with these votes in hand, I was able to get in touch with the people at the UCC who manage the Open and Affirming list and they said, "We're ready to add you to the roster."

Our church was officially recognized as Open and Affirming. We have a number. I don't remember what it is but we've got our number, we're on their website and I know that we're on the website because people who have visited our church have told me they've looked for the designation before they showed up here. To this day this is one of the decisions and actions of this church in which I take the greatest pride. Not only because of the decision itself but because of the way this community engaged in its process of discernment and the way people talked about the matter and the way people treated one another and the way people listen and held each other.

Throughout the process, people here modeled the kind of behavior we want to see in the Christian church. We held each other in love and that is not always easy to do. So what? We had a vote, we adopted a statement. So what? That question has been raised by your deacons. They've been asking themselves, "What does it mean for us to live into our statement of welcome? If we're saying we're open and affirming, what does that mean for us as a community? What do we want to do?" This question was explored at some length at the deacon's retreat that was held a week ago yesterday. It was explored in all of its different dimensions. There was recognition that being a welcoming church means not only thinking about how we might welcome in friends who are members of the lesbian gay bisexual transgender queer and questioning community (I'll just refer to that as LGBTQ going forward), but

also people who might be in a different economic circumstance than us, people who might look different from us, or have a different cultural background or educational background.

We recognized that this is a big question but we spent some serious time focusing in particular on our outreach and welcome to the LGBTQ community and sadly the timeliness of that conversation couldn't have been more appropriate. It was only 24 hours later that we found ourselves following news updates on our phones, reading the newspaper, watching the television, listening to the radio and hearing about the shootings at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando. 39 people were killed, 53 others injured and they were targeted because they were gay. That is the one ineluctable fact and there are, I will confess, many other dimensions to the story that we can explore. We can talk about radical Islam, we can talk about gun violence, we can talk about an overheated political environment. These are all issues that the church can explore. We can talk about how we welcome or don't welcome Latinos into our common life but the evidence is made clear that this nightclub was chosen because it was popular with members of the LGBTQ community. The shooter went there to kill gay people.

One of the things that I had not considered when I first heard this story, because it's something of which I really have no experience, is what a gathering place like this might mean to members of this community. One word that I heard over and over throughout the week was 'sanctuary'. Clubs like Pulse are sanctuaries where members of the LGBTQ community could come together and be themselves and relax and have a nice night out and not have to worry about being judged or censured. It was a place where people could explore their identity and this really hit me as I read posts on my Facebook feed from friends of mine reflecting on the first time they went to a gay club and what it meant to them. This wasn't about some people. This was about people I know and I care about.

'Sanctuary' is a word that we church people at first impulse might associate with a big room like the one in which we are now gathered. A sanctuary is a place where you come to pray, sing hymns, worship God and it is. But a sanctuary is ultimately a safe place and do we not come here to be in a safe place before our God? It is here in the church, in the sanctuary that we are able to confess our sins and our failings, admit our insecurities and be

vulnerable before God. Imagine how we would feel if our sanctuary were violated. That's something for us to reflect on as we think about the outrage that was committed in Orlando. I will not refer to this as a tragedy. It is an outrage.

As I contemplate this outrage, I find myself asking, what can I do as a Christian? What can the church do as a community? One thing I believe that is available to us is to go back to Scripture and to ask ourselves, what are the texts on which we base our faith and where do they lead us? Think about the lines we heard from Genesis this morning. Those verses are our origin story and our forebears oh so long ago confessed that all humankind, male and female alike, were made in the image of God. No asterisks there. No exclusions. No qualifications.

I'm pretty confident in saying that all those millennia ago when those stories were shared there were people who seemed like outsiders who were different, who were scorned, and yet, those words made it into Scripture. What a confession. Right there we see that every person is equally created in God's image. Doesn't matter what we look like, who we love, what language we speak. Every one of us equally created in God's image. That's what this statement of welcome points us to and the place we're going is that New Jerusalem that we heard described in Revelation: The place without tears. The place with hope and love where each person can be himself or herself, however an individual defines themselves. That is the community that we are called to participate in and to build.

What are we to do? The deacons have begun to discuss some practical steps we might take. This coming week, if you read the *Valley News* and you turn to the page that has all the church ads, you'll see we're adding some language to our box ad. It will note that we are Open and Affirming. We may add a rainbow stripe to the front sign that faces the park. We're talking about putting a sign up at the back door, which as many people know is really our front door, and we can put a rainbow stripe there. We're in the process of updating the welcome brochure that we keep in the pews. We can add some language there. We have a robust music ministry here in which many different groups from outside come to sing here. We're going to reach out to groups like the Boston Gay Men's Chorus, invite them to be here and

publicize it. We're going to reach out to Dartmouth College, and to the appropriate groups, there to let folks know, "You're welcome here."

If you want something you can do today, right in the back of the sanctuary, there's a basket with little rainbow ribbons. You can wear a ribbon, you can put it on your backpack, your purse. These may seem like small gestures but they communicate a powerful message. I was reminded of the power of our gestures earlier in the week. I had sent out a communication to everyone here reflecting on the shooting and I posted it on the church Facebook page and then I shared it on my own feed and the number of my gay and lesbian and transgender friends who got back to me thanking me for that was moving. Little steps we take can make a tremendous difference. We are a community that is committed to sharing God's grace and God's love with the wider world, a community that it claims that it wants to grow. Lets open the door and as we do so, lets do our best to actually pull people in, to embrace them, to let everybody know each individual is equally created in the image of God. Each individual is equally beloved by God.