

## **Our Inheritance of Faith**

I would like to invite you now to close your eyes, if you feel comfortable (and feel free to turn off your camera for this little exercise) and join me on something of a visualization exercise. That is, I'm going to ask you to visualize as I describe a scene drawn from real life. (By the way, for the sake of convenience, throughout the message I will be using the word "queer" as a less cumbersome substitute for "LGBTQ".)

It's Saturday, August 31, 2019, a beautiful late summer day. A breeze sweeps through the valley, picking up force as it combs the hillside along Mt. Wantastiquet. The late-afternoon sun is casting its brilliance in Downtown Brattleboro. Music is playing the distance. Children are playing, folks are milling about, conversing and laughing. Into this scene steps a young queer couple walking along Main Street. As our couple of queer millennials make their way this, they stop in front of Centre Church, distracted by a banner draped along the side of the church edifice—the Rainbow Pride banner that says "God is still Speaking." Our couple takes it in for a moment, then begin speculating about the church. One of them is dubious; they think this sign is just "queer-bait"—i.e., really good PR of a church that knows its neighbors well and wants to seem appealing. This more skeptical half of the couple thinks, in all likelihood, the church still has folks in it who would rather they didn't come in. The other half of the couple is more hopeful; surely, it wouldn't hang here so prominently if it didn't reflect how the congregants feel. After deliberating a bit, they decide to check it out the next morning.

So the next day they return for the 10am worship service. They enter the sanctuary, take a bulletin from a very friendly greeter, and find a seat somewhere in the center of the room—not too far from the action upfront, but not too far from the door. They find the service edifying, the community warm and indeed welcoming, and, in time, they make their way back and start attending services with some regularity. The congregation becomes more familiar to them and it's mostly a great experience for them. But, over time, they begin to notice something, a feeling that is...different. They can't put their finger on it, but they both recognize there's something amiss. They're picking up on something, some energy perhaps. We might say, since they're

millennials, that they're getting a weird vibe. Let's pause our story here. If you're closing your eyes, I invite you to open them now and come back to this (virtual) space. We'll return to the queer couple at Centre, but first let's journey back in time to November 24, 2013.

Here we arrive at the culminating moment of what was by all accounts a tense, tough time for the congregation. Many, many hard conversations have taken place. A good number of congregants have left or are on the cusp of leaving, some going so far as to make a public gesture of revoking their membership on their way out. Many of you already know to what I refer: The Open and Affirming process Centre undertook to formalize the church's position on a hot-button issue at the time—that is to welcome all, particularly queer folks, “to share fully in our covenantal community...as equal partners who have full access to every opportunity to serve its mission.” Like many church communities who have gone through the Open and Affirming process, the community suffered deep fractures and divisions. It became too much to bear for some, who opted out, as mentioned. The official story, the one posterity tells (particularly in the book, *The Jewel On Main Street*), that the congregation voted unanimously to embrace the Open and Affirming designation, is of course a very misleading story. There were, as I understand, those who abstained as a means of registering their dissent. And then there were those who voted “yes” to embrace the designation as a way of keeping the peace—going along to get along, as the expression goes. What has been the result?

I don't dare presume to capture the full story of the evolution of this huge moment in the church's history to this point. But as I understand it, despite formally embracing the Open and Affirming designation, there are still those in our church who, while being as welcoming as they know how to be, still can't quite bring themselves to affirm the full covenantal belonging of queer Christians. This is not, I assure you, specific to Centre. Indeed this dynamic belongs to a much broader development that has emerged as countless churches—spanning most all denominations and no denomination—wrestling with how to live their convictions faithfully. These convictions roughly correspond to what the Gay Christian Network some years named

Side A, Side B, and Side X Christians. (I don't love this terminology, but it's used widely enough by now that it does offer a helpful framework for understanding these positions.)

Briefly, Side A Christians are Christians who are openly and confidently queer, assured in the knowledge that God blesses their union with same-sex partners in the same way God blesses opposite-sex unions. Side B Christians are queer Christians who see nothing wrong with having same-sex attraction so long as they don't act on those attractions. Side X Christians believe that there is absolutely something wrong with same-sex attraction and that they should seek help to "correct" their attractions. These sides are reflected by non-queer Christians, as well —i.e., non-queer Christians possess these views, as well. There are those who believe that there's nothing wrong with being gay, for example, so long as you don't act on any same-sex attraction you might have (aligned with Side B). You might hear such a Christian say something like this: "Of course gay folks are welcome in this church! No one is perfect; all have sinned"— well-meaning, perhaps, but not as welcoming a statement as they might think. And we're all, I gather, familiar with Christians who think even same-sex attraction is wrong and that gay and bisexual folks have no business calling themselves Christian unless they "fix their disorder."

But Centre is an Open and Affirming congregation, which means, when we're living up to our own professed ideal, we say yes to the whole person and affirm and say a queer person's queerness is not only tolerated, it is very much part of the goodness of the Created order and we celebrate that. I cannot overstate the importance of this because we're not just talking about abstract theological principles and convictions; we're talking about real people whose lives are actually impacted by the ways that we reflect on these questions. And ultimately our Open and Affirming designation is not about the identity of queer Christians; it is about Centre Congregational Church. Who are we, as a church? And how are we living in the light of God's revealed truth? In this, we are not unlike the earliest churches in our tradition, who were grappling with questions of their own identity.

There was vigorous debate in the first-century church over whether Gentiles converting to the faith had to follow the customs of Jews, namely that of circumcision, in order truly to

belong to the church, which at the time was not understood as being separate from Judaism but was rather a subset. This is the background of our text today. In Galatians Chapter 2, Paul describes his famous confrontation with Peter over this question of circumcision in the Jerusalem church that nearly split the church in two. As we know, Paul ends up winning the argument: the church leaders in Jerusalem confirm Paul's understanding that Gentiles do not have to be circumcised. But it was bitterly contentious and, I imagine, resulted in divisions that lingered for generations.

This early experience in the church is deeply relevant for us. Some have called this question of queer inclusion and affirmation within the church a "circumcision question," noting that, in a sense, this circumcision question never really went away; it just changed forms throughout church history. "Can you be a Christian if you're a protestant? Can you be a Christian if you haven't been water baptized? Can you be a Christian if you don't do the Lord's Supper the right way? Can you be a Christian if you're gay? Can you be a Christian if you don't believe the Bible is perfect? Can you be a Christian if you don't believe in the Trinity? Can you be a Christian if you don't believe in the virgin birth or in the bodily resurrection of Jesus?"<sup>1</sup> On and on the questions go, splintering the church into countless different denominations and churches within the same denomination. There have always been debates about what norms and practices are necessary in order to call oneself a Christian. There is no end to the forms this question takes. But our passage today speaks with crystal clarity on this and every related point: verses 25-26 —"But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus we are all children of God through faith." I love the way Aaron Van Voorhis paraphrases Dietrich Bonhoeffer on this point: "Christian faith is not just the end of one circumcision question; it is the end of all circumcision questions."

There is no point greater than this one, and this accounts for the somewhat conspicuous absence in this message of any reference to those passages that putatively condemn same-sex relationships, commonly called "lobber passages" [Genesis 19, Leviticus 18 and 20, Romans 1, 1

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<sup>1</sup> Van Voorhis, Aaron, *Survival Guide for Heretics*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishing, 2016), 46.

Corinthians 6, 1 Timothy 1; Also, sometimes, Judges 19 and Jude] because of how often they're invoked to forcefully resist the inclusion and affirmation of queer folks. There simply isn't time to attend to these. Suffice it to say, this belongs to a much bigger conversation about how we interpret and apply Scripture in everyday life. That's the macro-conversation to this micro-conversation. And I hope very much we can make time to have these conversations. They're needed and important. I'm eager to have them. There is so much more to say on this point, so much fertile ground to cover in a spirit of genuine curiosity.

But I believe the main point is this: The Bible is not a rulebook or our "disciplinarian," as we might call it in light of today's passage. It is a collection of many voices that register the complex, richly dynamic experience of wrestling to discern the genuine voice of God, to find that way made out of no way that God opens for God's people when they commit themselves to seeking that which the Spirit wants to reveal about the divine. I've said it many times before and will keep saying it like a mantra: There is no escape from the work of discernment. When we approach it with curiosity and openness, Scripture grounds and guides us, but it does not do our discernment for us. God *did* not speak to us; God *is* speaking to us.

Thanks to the miraculous, life-giving gift of the Holy Spirit, I know in my bones that queer folks—all queer folks, every letter of that gorgeous alphabet soup known as LGBTQIA+—are loved and celebrated by God in the fullness of who they are. I know this because I am privileged to be one-half of that queer couple we met at the start of this message. I am bisexual, and so is my spouse. We were that queer millennial couple who wandered by Centre Church that late summer day and trusted the words of that rainbow banner hanging out there now, which says "God is still speaking." We paused that story, but now it resumes. What matters most as we discern our way forward, the real test of our commitment to becoming an Open and Affirming congregation, is how much we trust the still-speaking voice of God rather than precepts to guide our steps. That is the degree of our openness to the Spirit's leading. Do we hear God speaking today? Are we as inclusive and affirming as we can be? And, most importantly, if and when another queer couple or person walks by Centre and looks up at the church and wonders

whether they might find a spiritual home behind its walls, a place where they can truly and fully belong, will we be worthy of their curiosity? I pray it is so.

Amen.