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First United Methodist Church  
Moorestown, NJ  
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## SERMON FOR A RECONCILING MINISTRIES SERVICE OF CELEBRATION

Isaiah 52:7

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

I John 3: 17-18

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

Matthew 5:14-16

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

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We all know why we're here. Right? The First United Methodist Church has decided to be openly honest, loving and inclusive in matters of how God has created each of us for love, relationship and self identification. What used to be a wall of fear – both toward the other and even oneself – is becoming a bridge, even a new creation. In Methodist terms, this church is identifying itself as a "Reconciling Congregation."

Let me begin with a word from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Tomorrow we celebrate his birthday and public ministry. He would have been 90 years old this past Tuesday.

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

If he had lived to be 90 instead of being murdered at 39, I have a hunch he would have expanded those words. If not, I have an even stronger conviction that he SHOULD have done so. Expanded them to say, "I have a dream that my four little children—and ALL of our little children – and all of US little children...."

You know, this guy named "John" addressed his readers with the title, "Little children." We just heard the words, how he wrote, "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

So yes, I believe that Martin, after another half century of ministry, would have expanded his statement to say, "I have a dream that my four little children—and ALL our little children – and all of US little children – will one day live in a nation where we will not be judged by the color of our skin, by our family of origin, by our country of origin, by the language we speak, by the persons to whom we are attracted in love, or by our gender identities; but that we will be judged by the content of our character. A character of authenticity, a character with the boldness to take our own places at life's table, and a character defined by a love which welcomes others – ALL others – to that same table." Whether or not they can stand such inclusivity is their problem.

And he would have said “Amen” to Shirley Chisholm: “If they don’t give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair....”

He also said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

“Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.”

Of course, some will say, “Yeah. In your dreams.” And we reply, “Yes! In. Our. Dreams.”

But today we awaken from slumber and say, “Not ONLY in our dreams. But also in our personal lives! In the life of our faith communities! And in the public life to which we contribute every gift imaginable for the common good of us all!”

Isn’t that the spirit in which we are gathered today? That after serious prayer, study and discernment, the First United Methodist Church of Moorestown is stepping forth from its own closet to say:

“Yes, we are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a closet, but puts it out in the open, on a lampstand, and lets light flood the whole house. This is the way we will let our light shine before others, so that they may see our good lives, convictions and deeds – and thereby give glory to the One who in profound Wisdom has created and sustains us all.”

To this end let me make some observations.

**1) First, what this church is doing is what is normal. Even ordinary!**

Yeah. Sorry about that to all of us who want desperately to be “special.” (I often think of the “church lady” from Saturday Night Live saying, “Well, isn’t that special?”) But the truth is what we are affirming today is because of what we believe really is normal! Let’s not slip into that heretical narcissism that declares being inclusive is “special,” “better than others,” or “extraordinary.” I get weary of progressive churches that wallow in an identity of being “special.” No, we do what we do because of the way we believe life really is!

Years ago I preached an ordination sermon for a friend out in Milwaukee. I confess I like to play with words. So in preparing for this ordination sermon, I reflected on the word “ordination” – a word that just happens to have the same root as “ordinary.” What I concluded is that the word itself is the opposite of what usually gets affirmed – that is, that clergy are “set aside” in some special state of being. But clergy are not “special.” They’re simply giving leadership to a community seeking to be normal according to the sovereignty of God. Seeking to be normal, ordinary, within the good news of the gospel. Seeking to be normal according to what we pray for with the words, “thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” What is NORMAL “in heaven.” We are joining league with Paul when he says that when the day comes that we no longer see through a glass dimly, then faith and hope become meaningless, they pass away. But love remains.

Love is the standard by which we all live and breathe and have our being. Love is the ordinary ethic for us all. Now and forever. There is nothing exceptional about it. Its very nature is inclusion, and its destiny is to be ordinary throughout the cosmos.

We can trot this pony out of several scriptural barns.

We can start by remembering what Jesus said about sexual orientation and gender identification. Listen. (Long pause.)

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Did you hear that? Did you hear what Jesus said about homosexuality and gender identification?

That's right. Absolutely nothing.

As for those other references upon which the culture wars hang, you can count them on your fingers and you don't even need all ten. You don't even have to conscript your toes for the count. More importantly, they're far easier to deal with than the explicit references to misogyny, slavery and poverty throughout the holy writ. Their literalization makes fools of those who dismiss the REST of the purity code requirements with which these clobber passages are clustered.

I'm not going to unpack it all here. You have that covered in the links embedded in your web page. Then again, if you'd like another reference, google "The Blue Book" which is available in PDF form on the web page of the Mt. Kisco Presbyterian Church in Mt. Kisco, NY.

Meanwhile, "Don't call unclean that which I have called clean."

"Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters whom they have seen, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect."

And remember that parable of Jesus when folks were invited to come to a banquet, but they were all too busy to come? Jesus had the master tell his servant, "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame." Which the servant did. But he came back and said, "There's still room!" To which the master said, "Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. But I tell you, not one of those who were first invited will get a taste of my banquet."

Yes, what we find in scripture tends to match what we go looking for. I admit that. But having grown up in a fairly conservative, even fundamentalist, midwest Baptist Church, I am now convinced that actually **READING** the Bible is a far more liberating experience than always **TALKING** about what it says as if it were a weapon to clobber others.

So yes. I declare that what you are doing here is an affirmation of what is normal, ordinary, in God's eyes, commandments, and testimonies.

**2) Second of all, what you are doing is supported by science and the simple observation of human behavior.** That's the diligent study of what "really is" on the basis of consistent, tested, human behavior. Even basic animal behavior. It turns out we're just not as binary as we've tried to believe.

Yes, I read the articles describing the battle of scientific perspectives. But just like with scripture, it seems that some scientists are constrained by the obligation of conventional orthodoxy. We've had competing op eds in the Philadelphia Inquirer over the past several weeks. But the very discipline of biology is demonstrating that it's no longer a simple xx and xy affair. The sociological and psychological observations regarding sexuality and gender identification have biological underpinnings as well. And when we get to it, as much pressure as there is to be "conforming" in all matters of sexuality, it appears that "nonconforming" is truly the new normal for us all. We're just not all alike.

The fact is that human sexuality is a complex business. It used to be said that "Everyone is queer but me and thee, but I'm not so sure about thee." Well, my perception is that we're all queer. Period. The question is whether or not we're bold enough to own it.

**3) My own observation picks up on this in a personal way.** And I beg forgiveness from anyone who takes offense at my personal appropriation of a term that is fertile and meaningful for those who no longer resist the word, but instead use it to affirm who they are as queer folk. Just like the early Christians, they finally turned an "insult" into an affirmation, saying, "Yes indeed. That's who we are. We're queer."

In my own general experience, the evidence of a spectrum, or even more than one spectrum, of sexual "wiring" and gender identity just seems to compute. I'm not a scientist, but I'm not blind. And I can tell when a general description of life matches my own experience of it. You see, I've never fit the stereotypes of how I'm supposed to act or think as a man.

Here I am, a cisgender heterosexual male. Yet I have felt queer all my life.

When I was five years old, I came home from play school to do the dishes. Because I wanted to do. I know that mom did them all over again to make sure they were clean. But she let me to come home to do what I wanted. When I was six, I was dressed up as a little girl for Halloween, and I absolutely loved that dress. I wore it when playing inside the house. I also had a doll. Mom and dad laughed about it, but they let me be.

At the same time, even though I did not understand what it was all about, it was evident in the fiber of my being about how I was "wired." In kindergarten, I remember taking my nap next to my classmate Jane. Our rugs were beside one another for naptime, and even at that age I could sense this special sort of attraction. I didn't feel the same thing with my boy classmates. And when I hear others tell me of a similar awareness regarding their own LGBTQI orientation in their own early years, that holds an authority for me.

Meanwhile, I never enjoyed "getting dirty" out in the garage like my brother did. Somehow I was attracted to the questions of meaning and what it meant to meddle creatively in one another's lives. Never mind that for some that meant I was some kind of sissy. At times I was told so.

I scheduled my ordination on Super Bowl Sunday 44 years ago and didn't even know it. The pastor with whom I was working said, "What about the football game?" I said, "Oh, there's one every Sunday. What are you going to do?" He smiled, thought I knew what I was talking about, and we made the schedule. I still don't understand the big deal over the Super Bowl.

The first line of Dr. Joe Williamson's sermon that day was, "At last we know the innate perversity of Marvin A. Marsh. Who else would schedule his ordination for the second half of the SuperBowl." He then went on to use the metaphor of the game to interpret the scripture I had asked him to work with.

All of which is to say. Yes, I'm queer. A queer cisgender heterosexual white male. Someone who was privileged by both my family and my church to explore and discover my own sense of self and the world. Instead of fighting who I was, the church affirmed me. And boy oh boy, am I grateful! And if I was so privileged, why should not all others be so affirmed, no matter their orientation or gender identification?!

Meanwhile. Every New Year's Day the Mummies blatantly cry and act out their truth, "Here's who we really are! When can we live beyond the stereotypes with which we imprison one another?" Bless their little drag queen hearts!

What's more, go back and check out the church fellowship pictures in the middle of the twentieth century. It was "a thing" for middle age white folks to cross dress as a humorous activity. I don't think they were making fun of anybody. They were using what was then a socially acceptable opportunity to take a stab at liberating themselves – at least for a moment! Might never admit it, but they sure enjoyed it!

And blessings upon Corporal Klinger of "M\*A\*S\*H" fame – the one who sought sanity – not to mention a discharge from an insane situation – by maintaining an enviable feminine wardrobe. As a professor mine once said, "You have to be a little crazy to be sane in this mixed up world."

That's why I love Brian Wren's hymn: "Help us accept each other as Christ accepted us; teach us as sister, brother, each person to embrace. Be present, God among us, and bring us to believe we are ourselves accepted and meant to love and live...."

It is no great stretch for me to consider the evidence from nature, scripture, and basic common sense why it is normal to be open to one another as we really are – not just how others wish we would be. Or how others are afraid of what we might be. And if I was given that privilege, why not others, no matter the definition of their "queerness"?

One of my other favorite songs has these words:

Mine is the church where everybody's welcome.  
I know it's true 'cause I got through the door.  
We are a dazzling bouquet of every kind of flower.  
Jump in the vase, 'cause we've got space for more.

We don't simply tolerate each other  
We ask and tell, we don't just turn away.  
We give attention to every bud and blossom.  
Let every face come grace the grand bouquet.

Mine is the church where everybody's welcome.  
I know it's true 'cause I got through the door.

That's the church I've wanted to serve as a pastor. That's the church to which I want to belong as a member. That's the church to which I want to entrust myself as a real person searching for real salvation, not just some Sunday exercise in delusion. Not just some place where we figure if we "play pretend" long enough we'll somehow shed all the things that we don't want to believe or don't want to have disclosed about ourselves and others.

And we're not just talking "sex" here. We're talking about honoring all the factors that draw us together in relationship. Sexuality is part of it. But each of us is a matrix of whole bunches of things that make life work for us, and which help us make life work for all those around us.

Before ending, however, let me give a caution. Just because it seems like we're all on the same page today, don't be surprised by the bumps in the road. We're all on our own journeys. We all have scars as well as insights. What's more, many if not all of us tend to have tunnel vision in matters of liberation. We want others to be sensitive to our own issues, but we're not always good about discerning and respecting the issues of others. We're not done learning. We're not done theologizing. We're not done empathizing. We've got work to do in the process of being fully inclusive toward one another – and others – as the LGBTQI community. We've got lots of little "us-es" and "thems" among us. It's not just a tension between straights and LGBTQI folk.

When I started preparing this sermon, I wondered if I might be preaching to the choir. And then I remembered that even in the choir we work with a variety of "parts." So yes, I'm preaching to the choir. What we are affirming is normal. The problem is that "affirming" is a difficult task even within the would-be welcoming community. The scars which many of us bear from past perspectives and experiences require time and often specialized attention. We dare not get all romantic about the blissful road ahead.

Capice? So let's be open and gentle with one another. Practice the gifts of the spirit with one another – as well as with the rest of the world that has not yet caught on to where we are all headed as participants in the holy community of God.

In the midst of these challenges – both from the "outside world" as well as from one another, let me end with Paul's words as found in his letter to the Romans. This was read at the WOW Conference in 2004 at the University of Pennsylvania. Were any of you there? WOW stands for "Welcome Our Witness," and it was a religious convening of LGBTQI folk from all over North America.

Well. When this passage was read, it was listed as a scripture reading. But it became a powerful litany. It's the passage that reads like this:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

And then, the passage asks, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" It goes on with a list beginning with hardship, distress, persecution.... As the words were read one at a time, there

was a spontaneous, thundering “No” that followed each one. “Will hardship?” The gathering roared “No!” “Will distress?” The gathering roared “No!” “Will persecution?” The gathering roared “No!”

I know this isn’t spontaneous right now. But let me invite you to echo that realization right here, right now:

What then are we to say about these things? ...If God is for us, who is against us? Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

Will hardship? [No!] Or distress? [No!] Or persecution? [No!] Or famine? [No!] Or nakedness? [No!] Or peril? [No!] Or sword? [No!]

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor [bigotry, nor fear, nor ignorance, nor the scars of our past experience, not] anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

“Mine is the church where everybody’s welcome. I know it’s true ‘cause I got in the door.”

May it be so right here in Moorestown, New Jersey. For you are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a closet, but puts it out in the open, on a lampstand, and lets light flood the whole house. Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good lives, convictions and deeds – and thereby give glory to the One who in profound Wisdom creates and sustains us all.”

For this is what is normal in the Holy Community of God. Yeah. Get used to being and becoming really normal living in and from God’s colony established in the midst of a confused and chaotic world.

May grace, peace and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all.

Amen