

Set Toward Love  
Pastor Alison Thatcher  
CHCC 6.29.25

I delivered a sermon a couple of years ago and the main message was that we are supposed to love ourselves. God created everything and called it good, including us and, besides, “loving your neighbor like yourself” doesn’t mean anything if you don’t actually love yourself. After worship, a college student approached me and said the message had meant so much to him. He said, “I grew up in church but when I came out, my church basically shunned me and I haven’t been back there since.” He was not taught that he should love himself for who he was. And really, the most tragic part of his story, is that it is so common. A few months ago a young man told me that he had been a youth leader in his church but was told he had to step down when he came out. Two of my former UCC pastors had been initially discouraged from their spiritual journeys when they each came out. You probably know people who this kind of thing has happened to as well. It is so common. And maybe, if you’re like me, when someone learns that you’re Christian before they know anything else about you, you may feel compelled to say something like “...but not like that kind of Christian.” Because discriminating against people in the LGBTQ+ community in the name of Jesus has become so common, it is often seen by society at large as the default brand of Christianity.

By contrast, when Maris told me that they were not just a boy but not just a girl, and that they/them pronouns felt good, and we went to church the following Sunday and we told their Sunday School teacher, she said, “Ok!” That is what should be common. That is the simple, extravagant welcome, the affirmation that every person is good and beloved just as they are and are becoming in their own way, that God desires for us. It is because of that space between what is and what should be, that the Open and Affirming mission is so important. Not because any one demographic is more important than any other, but because there is a norm within the various Christian denominations that needs drastic correcting. And people in the LGBTQ+ community need to know explicitly that they will be safe in a church setting, because they have taught that that often isn’t the case. I am so grateful, so delighted, to be able to walk the way with a congregation who understands that. Those who went through the process themselves and voted to adopt the covenant, and those who have joined since and embraced and encouraged that commitment. What a gift to the wider community is Center Harbor Congregational Church’s unabashed flying of the rainbow flag on the outside and the loving, affirming welcome on the inside.

And I'm sure it hasn't been easy. I haven't learned much yet about your particular ONA journey and vote, but I know that for many congregations it is really disruptive, uncomfortable, even painful. But so is lovingly accepting, boldly expressing, and proudly proclaiming who you truly are when those around you want you to quiet down and fit in. LGBTQ+ folk and proponents of ONA may be called divisive, which oftentimes just means, "It makes me uncomfortable when you deviate from the status quo so I wish you'd just play nice and stop making waves." But you know who else would be considered divisive these days? Jesus.

There are a few times in the gospels where Jesus startles or angers or confuses the general public. And in today's gospel story he gets kicked out of one town for staying true to himself, and then he's almost scaring away those who do want to follow him. It's unsettling for those of us who strive to follow Jesus today. Dr. Matthew Meyer Boulton sums up Jesus' responses to those who wish to follow him when he writes, "To the first potential recruit, Jesus candidly underscores that following him means living a life of itinerancy, with "nowhere to lay his head." To the second, Jesus insists that following him means that typical social obligations will no longer apply; and to the third, he declares that following him means always looking forward, not backward." In this Sunday's context, we might ask what have we been asked to give up in committing to the ONA mission? As allies, we may have to unlearn assumptions that we have rested on, like the fact that you can't assume someone's gender by how they look. We may feel social discomfort when we speak up for our LGBTQ+ siblings in front of our not-so-accepting, less informed siblings. And, as legal protections for LGBTQ+ folk are sliding backwards on the state and federal level, us allies who have not had to fight for our own rights, are shaken from our political inaction - and fear of combining church and politics-, and asked to take up the rainbow flag, not just in our church, but in the voting booth and on the state house lawn. Worldly powers and principalities will always strive to consolidate power in a small group of people made up of a very homogeneous demographic. We Jesus followers are called to move forward, not backward, toward that inclusive, colorful, beloved community of equity and abundance.

What heterosexual, cis gender folks do not have to do, is choose between living our authentic selves or fearing for our lives. One of the hardest things to experience for folks who come out is rejection from their churches or families, like some of the people who I mentioned before. No one should have to go through that. But God has proven time and time again that just when we feel abandoned in a wilderness of despair, God provides a surprising abundance. It doesn't erase the heartache of rejection, but those who have been shunned by their neighbors and families for being themselves, often form found families with other like-minded people. They form their own beloved community bursting with color and inclusivity when the drab society of homogeneity rejects such expressions of radical

love and extravagant welcome. And isn't that what the church is called to be in the face of such greed and hate? A colorful found family? The ONA mission is really nothing new. It is in our spiritual roots from the very first churches. They were some of the most welcoming, diverse groups in the midst of an empire that demanded blind submission and uniformity. And they didn't always get it right, but that's when Paul would remind them what their calling was.

Today's epistle reading begins with Paul's exhortation to, "Stand firm...and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." It is a form of slavery, isn't it, to give in to our own greed and fear, to play a game created by worldly powers who contrive a world of scarcity and competition, setting us against our neighbors. Paul gives us a list of characteristics that define that way of living. Verse 20 especially lists those we would recognize like "idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions." The fantasy nerd in me is bummed that sorcery made that list, but oh well.

"By contrast," Paul writes, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things." Though actually, as an aside, we may wonder these days that there do seem to be laws against such things. At least worldly laws. Anyway, earlier in this chapter Paul writes, "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbors as yourself.'" Just as we talked about last week, how God provides nourishment for this journey that we walk with Jesus, Paul gives the early church, and us, examples of spiritual food to feast on as we strive to live according to that law.

"Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." The contrast of these qualities to the hateful rhetoric that is spewed at and about our LGBTQ+ siblings, often in the name of Jesus, is astounding. And it's honestly hard to know why, other than perhaps a fear of the unfamiliar. The ONA coalition notes that there are only about seven verses in the Bible that homophobic, transphobic people use to attack LGBTQ+. Of the 31,000 verses in the entire Bible, those seven verses represent about 0.02%. Meanwhile, from the goodness of all creation at the beginning, to the vision of God's realm of peace and justice on Earth as it is in Heaven at the end, our sacred text is overflowing with calls to equitable, compassionate living and with hope for those most marginalized in society. Things that may feel threatening to those who benefit from the status quo. It hardly excuses the hateful behavior, but, as theologian John T. Carroll notes, "Radical teaching about such things as status inversion—and its embodiment in practice—will inevitably provoke those who enjoy favorable position in the present social order." We Jesus followers have to be ready for it. And not try to fight fire with fire, as the disciples

wanted to when they were rejected by the Samaritans. Jesus rebuked the disciples for suggesting they bring down fire from Heaven on the inhospitable village.

“Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” These are not trite, passive teachings. Faithful joy is resistance in a time when worldly powers would have us cower in fear. Peace is not simply the absence of war, but a nonviolent struggle toward justice for all. Patience, kindness, generosity, and gentleness take a lot of chutzpah to practice in days like these. In a consumerist society like ours, self-control is not the norm. And tying all of these together are the radical strings of love. Paul’s churches, and our own, much like the underground drag scene of 1980’s New York City, are very counterculture when practiced authentically and inclusively. When based on Jesus’ teachings. Today’s gospel tells us his face was set toward Jerusalem. It was a radical, divisive way. It was not common. Rev. Dr. Cheryl A. Lindsay writes, “Even for Jesus and the first disciples, diversity, equity, and inclusion required ongoing work—deliberate action and intention—to manifest the goals of restoration and harmony established at Creation.” And so is our way and our work today, as Center Harbor Congregational Church recommits to its ONA diversity statement to set our faces toward love. To imagine together a world where abundance for all means scarcity for none; where we stand together in solidarity against forces that seek to separate us; where we are all reminded everyday that we are God’s beloved, just as we are and are becoming.