

The Most Important Commandment

A sermon by Pastor Beth Lyon at Glenside UCC on January 25, 2009. the Sunday of their ONA vote. Texts: Mark 12 28-34 and I Corinthians 12: 12-26

We all have experiences, we have stories that explain why we think and feel the way we do about things. Nine years ago when I first talked with the search committee of this church, they asked me what I believed about the open and affirming movement within the United Church of Christ. I told them a story. As a college freshman, I floundered around trying to find a place to connect with other Christians. There were no UCC churches. I tried the Presbyterians. I tried the Methodists. I even went to mass with a few Catholic friends. I spent most of that first year attending a non-denominational Christian fellowship, but in the end I couldn't stomach their refusal of women's leadership and I stopped going.

Then in the spring of my freshman year a friend invited me along on a retreat to the mountains with the Episcopal students. I got to know, Sam, the priest who was chaplain to the group. He was new, having arrived the same year I did. I began attending their Sunday Evensong service. By sophomore year I'd joined their choir. Every week Sam preached and he was the most marvelous preacher I'd ever heard. When he preached to that college community you could hear a pin drop. I started going to the Thursday night Eucharist for students too. I'd found a community, a home and I'd found a spiritual guide who could help me make sense of my faith.

Then one day a young woman I knew who was a year ahead of me paid a visit to my dorm room. She was an Episcopalian and had been active in the group before I got involved. She didn't come around anymore. She told me that when Sam arrived all of the original members of the group had stopped coming. He'd told them that he was gay. Since I'd gotten involved in the group she just thought I should know.

Well, it was the late '70s. I'd grow up just outside Reading, a solid conservative blue-collar town. No one in my high school ever said they were gay or lesbian. There was gossip and there were rumors, but out of self-preservation no one came out. And I knew the Bible. I'd read it cover to cover more than once and I knew what Leviticus had to say and what I'd read in Paul's letters. I couldn't sleep that night, because what I'd been taught was right and what I'd experienced just didn't match up. I felt like Huck Finn. In Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck is caught in a moral dilemma. He helps Jim to escape from slavery. As they raft down the river, Huck knows that by helping Jim to freedom he's doing something he has always been taught is wrong. Yet his conscious is telling him something else. In the end, he decides not to betray Jim. "All right," he says, "I'll go to hell!" So I stayed right where I was. In 1980 Sam performed my marriage to Bob.

Our experiences form the way we think about things. It's not that I haven't

looked at this through biblical and theological lenses. Being divided over a social issue is nothing new for the church in America. We've been much more divided than this before. In the 19th century the issue that bitterly divided America's churches was slavery. I know you may think this isn't a fair analogy, because no one is going to argue in favor of slavery any more, but not only was the argument over slavery bitterly divisive - it led to a bloody war, both sides used the bible in ways similar to the arguments we're hearing about homosexuality.

One of the predecessor denominations to the United Church of Christ was the Christian Church. A founding principal of the Christian denomination was that the bible was the only rule of faith and practice. But what did the bible have to say about holding slaves? Both New England and Virginia and North Carolina had many congregations of the Christian Church. To the Southern churches, the bible was quite clear on the subject of slavery. The patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, held slaves. The laws in Deuteronomy and Leviticus regulated treatment of slaves. In two of Paul's letters, Ephesians and Colossians, he says that slaves are to obey their masters as they would obey Christ. The letter to Philemon was one that Paul sent with an escaped slave he was returning to his master! It seemed obvious to them that the bible approved of slavery.

New England Christians along with their fiery Congregationalist neighbors took the opposite view. Their biblical argument was this: If Jesus taught us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us, how could we hold other people as slaves if we ourselves would not wish to be held as slaves? Their opponents thought that the anti-slavery faction was reading its own biases into the golden rule.

The Christian denomination split in two over this issue. Nor were they alone. The Baptists split North from South. So did the Methodists and Presbyterians. Both groups were convinced that God was on their side. A century and a half later it looks pretty clear, but it wasn't clear to many ordinary people at that time.

We'll be voting later on this afternoon at our annual meeting on a statement that says we are open to and affirming of people regardless of their sexual orientation. To pass this statement means that gay and lesbian persons are welcome as members, as employees and as leaders in our church. To pass it means that their families are welcome here. It means that we'll do our best to minister to them and their families just as we do with the rest of our members. It means that we believe that those who love someone of the same gender are no more inherently sinful than anyone else.

As people who look to the scriptures for light and God's leading, this means we in our own time, need to consider very carefully which commandments in scripture are the most important. In framing the statement, the ONA committee chose the gospel lesson we read this morning. One of the scribes, a scholar of the Jewish faith, came up to Jesus, and because he was impressed by the way Jesus handled himself as the

Pharisees and Saducees were peppering him with trick questions, the scribe asked him: "Of all the things that God asks of us, what's the most important?" What Jesus said was this: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one and you shall love the Lord your God is all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." That was from the Torah, from the book of Deuteronomy. Then he added a second commandment from Leviticus, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The foot note in my Bible says that Mark has the scribe repeat Jesus' answer back to him to be sure that his listeners would remember it, kind of like I did with the children, because this is the bedrock of all Christian teaching. The difficulty has always been figuring out how to live it. In Luke's version of the gospel story, Jesus is talking with a lawyer, and as lawyers will, the man immediately looked for a loophole, a way to limit his obligations under this law. "Who's my neighbor?" he asked. You may remember that instead of giving him a list, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, in which the good neighbor was the outsider, the one that good Temple-going Jews thought to be unholy and unclean.

The most common question asked when a UCC church considers adopting a statement such as the one we'll be considering is this: Why do we need to do this? The reason is that many of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters have had painful experiences with the church. They're been treated as Samaritans, outsiders, less than children of God. Because this congregation has been open to all sorts of people for a long time, we don't realize that it isn't that way everywhere. A few years ago now the UCC started running that Bouncer ad where the two musclebound guys in sunglasses stood behind the velvet rope and decided who would be allowed in church and who would be kept out. It got a huge national response from people who'd felt excluded and alienated from the church. "Is it true?" people wanted to know, "Am I really welcome in your church?" And with every question there was often a painful story to go with it.

Paul calls the church the body of Christ. He says that each one of us are like different body parts. Some may be eyes, ears, hands or feet. We all need each other. Some he suggests, may be the part we sit on, but even those are necessary. But, he says, just as when your big toe aches, it can make you miserable all over, if one member suffers, all suffer together. If one member is honored all rejoice together with it.

I know this long process has made many of you uncomfortable. Some of you have been uncomfortable because its meant talking openly about sexuality and *we don't talk about that sort of thing in church!* Others have been uncomfortable because we've taken so long to decide over something that seems so clear and self evident. Others have wondered how you can take a vote on something like this. I agree with that last part. Voting inevitably sets up winners and losers. It's important to repeat that we are all one body, even when we disagree. That we love each other, even when

we disagree. Especially when we disagree.

I hope this will not be a political exercise but instead an exercise in being the body of Christ. A New Testament scholar Klara Butting says: "Human beings become one body wherever reconciliation takes place, where the experiences and wounds of the one become the experiences and wounds of the other." And that's our challenge - to make the experiences and the wounds of one the experiences and wounds of the other. If we are going to keep the main thing the main thing - loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves - then we need to listen deeply to one another and make each other's wounds our own.