

First Congregational Church UCC of Burlington, VT

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Sermon

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Growing up Catholic, I was not aware of this passage. The only memories of reading scripture are in my Christian Education program in 8th grade for four weeks. Diocese-approved textbooks and the catholic missal informed us of everything we needed to know. Priests, lay leaders, and parents reinforced their interpretations of God's love. Right out of the gate, my interpretation of this passage in Mark didn't speak outright to what I usually preach: acceptance and access. If this scripture had been interpreted to me in my church as a teenager, when I was questioning my sexuality, I would be wondering if God's love is truly unconditional.

Scripture need not clearly state that Jesus turned away the LGBTQ+ people for scripture to be weaponized. Personal interpretation can drive that point home from a trusted pastor or the person in the next pew. The message doesn't defile the person. The messenger does.

Our modern-day definition of fornication is sexual relations between two people who aren't married. If we dive deeper, the term fornication is not just about sexual relations between two unmarried people. The root of fornication in Greek is porneia, and I am sure I just gave a mental image some of us wish we could unsee. Jesus tells his followers that if they engage in sexual activities with a prostitute, which is the definition of porneia, these actions are considered defilement to the body. I welcome newer, inclusive interpretations of words and definitions. In this case, using modern-day interpretation results in many churches' use of this passage as anecdotal proof that being LGBTQ+ is a sin. In the United Church of Christ, only 1/3rd of churches are certified as ONA. For a significant portion of Christians and Catholic churches, systemically, including the Methodist, Baptist, and the Roman Catholic Church, same-sex marriages and identifying as LGBTQ+ is either discouraged, not allowed, or considered a sin. In the UCC, we harbor a lesser-known movement supporting "historical biblical marriage", which includes one congregation in Vermont that aligns itself with this movement.

We can be a lifesaving church by recognizing the impact of our interpretation of passages like this one. Tradition allows us to interpret God's love instead of being a

church that defiles ourselves inside by preaching hate. We are a tradition that speaks of God's love.

We live out God's love among the 40.9% of churches in Vermont that are ONA. 56 out of 137 churches. I look out today in this sanctuary, proud to be attending an ONA church, proud to be part of the UCC that has spoken to honoring our LGBTQ+ siblings in Christ.

This acceptance in my church home was not always the case. When I was 16, I came out to my family. In foresight, I could have planned better than deciding to come out the week before my Catholic confirmation. I grew up in an inclusive family with family friends who identified as gay. My mother was one of those mothers who would adopt anyone who felt rejection from their own family and would be a lifeline. When it became apparent that Dad and his family would not share the same acceptance, I never came out to him.

I did make my confirmation, and I am glad I did. In my family, we believe that once a teenager is confirmed, they are old enough to decide their own religious and spiritual beliefs. I remember that at the time, the Pope was adamant in his interpretation of God's love by not extending a welcome to the LGBTQ+ community. Those who chose to oppress others defiled my identity, and I chose to leave the church.

Despite that, I consider myself lucky. As someone who has been a lifetime advocate with both disabilities and sexual identities, I can speak for those who can't. I was one of 40% youth who can say I had at least one accepting adult, which cut down my risk of reporting a suicide attempt. I am one of the 72% who would answer yes that I have felt uncomfortable or directly discriminated against in a Catholic church or event. I'm one of the 55% of people who would identify that teachings on LGBTQ+ issues are why I left the Church. I am one of the 64% who no longer identifies as Catholic because of my sexual identity and no longer felt welcome.

I'm lucky as I'm not part of the 40% of LGBTQ+ who have seriously considered attempting suicide in the past 12 months

The numbers are telling, and the division of my childhood church is even more apparent now. Efforts from priests such as Fr. James Martin, SJ, a Jesuit priest located in New York City who has written the book *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity*, fall on unresponsive ears and hate speech by Catholics. Those who still don't get the point are those who repeat Catholic Catechism that states "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered." These same individuals cannot acknowledge that these words have a part

of 56% of younger generations leaving the church, with only 16% of millennials identifying as Catholic.

Knowing these numbers, seeing the impact, we have the power as a church to witness change in how we affirm sexual identity. This summer at General Synod 33, every other year national meeting of the United Church of Christ, 99% of the General Synod delegates voted to strongly urge the banning of Conversion Therapy. This practice, also known as "praying the gay away," is legal for adults in all 50 states and is still legal in 30 states for youth and children. It's considered unethical and dangerous. The psychological impact of this therapy is adverse and long-lasting.

The impact of this practice is seen in what we know about the post-long-term effects — one in five individuals identifying as transgender report subjection to gender conversion therapy. After going through conversion therapy, we know these individuals are twice as likely to consider suicide. The Trevor Project reports that 57% of transgender and non-binary youth have reported a suicide attempt after being subjected to this practice.

Part of the coming-out story that I don't usually share is that I was offered conversion therapy. When I was in college, I started to reconsider my stance on Church. I met a group of gals in my business program, and they were part of the denominational church in Vermont called the "Church of Christ." They invited me to their church, and when I found out they weren't Catholic, I decided to go.

Initially, I thought I was going to attend a United Church of Christ Church. I found old commercials from the UCC on YouTube portraying a more diverse group of people welcoming anyone to the Church. I assumed that both churches were the same.

It was not until we were driving to the church that I was informed that the "united" part of the name was not accidentally left out. Not knowing much about either church and accepting my friend's invitation as part of their expression and interpretation of God's love, I ended up attending.

I attended this church for four months. The congregation I attended included practices I had wanted growing up. There was bible study weekly. The services were a bit longer, and they had bibles in the pews. They also had potlucks and family dinners afterward. As a college kid, I will admit that I was in no position to give up the potlucks even though there were some red flags. Despite these aspects that fulfilled specific wants, the red flags were there. The minister was very wary of me and was concerned that I was trying to "convert" one of my friends to become a lesbian. A lot of the sermons, when I attended, were about LGBTQ+ and why it was wrong. The bible studies for young

women were focused on "pre-marital counseling," including whether to work full-time or part-time to balance their "wifely duties" to their husbands.

After a while, I found ways to reason out concerns and red flags. When I asked about the membership process, My friend's cousin told me that if I were interested, I would need counseling sessions with the minister concerning my same-sex attraction to help me realize what God **really** intended. I may have been questioning a lot around religion and church at that point, but I do remember giving a non-hesitant, "No." Speaking to my friend alone, in her car, as we took that long drive back up to campus, I told her that I didn't need to fix my gay. I was, and still am, very sure that God made me gay, and if God made me gay, then that's perfection.

I don't know where I would be if I had said yes to conversion therapy. As someone open about seeing a psychologist weekly, I can only imagine the intense harm that would have resulted in that decision and the additional impact it would have on my mental health. I had the option of saying no, but many youths do not have that option as a minor. For adults, the opportunity is there, but the language that a church uses to communicate its "love for humanity" can affect how someone views themselves. We have the chance, as a church, to use language that allows for individuals who have had similar experiences to feel that they are safely able to be part of faith communities that do not hold the intention of denying part of a person's identity.

My story here today is just one of the many stories. These experiences of negativity, sometimes hostility, occur in Northern New England, not just the deep south or the bible belt. Inherent sexuality is sacred sexuality. God gave us sexuality, and because of that, there is sacredness around identity. When we declare ourselves ONA, we are being called not just to raise a rainbow flag but to witness what we mean by our actions in caring for all of our siblings in Christ. We need to reject defilement through an interpretation when churches preach the painful words of "Love the sinner, hate the sin" as a false bare minimum of welcome. We need to make it clear that we recognize that there is no sin in living out who you are and whom you love because God is love.