

PILGRIM UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
Sunday, February 1, 2009 — Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
The Rev. John Tamilio, Senior Pastor

Sermon Title: “Untitled”
Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (Lectionary Text)

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A funny thing happened on the way to the office today... I was planning on preaching a sermon on the passage from 1 Corinthians — a passage on Holy Communion as it was experienced in the Corinthian church and as we understand it today — but after the media attention we received following our vote last Sunday to not sign state-issued marriage licenses, I felt it would be a huge *faux pas* not to address this issue from the pulpit.

It is a pretty incredible experience. When you take a stand on a controversial issue, you become loved and hated. Even though you may not draw a line in the sand, other people feel as if you have. Others begin putting words in your mouth and judging your actions from their self-proclaimed and self-constructed seats of judgment.

Two days ago, as many of you know, *The Plain Dealer* ran a story on us — on our decision to not sign marriage licenses, but to still perform weddings for all couples regardless of their sexual orientation. This unleashed a frenzy of responses: both positive and negative. The Associated Press and National Public Radio picked up the story and e-mails and phone calls came in from across the country. I do not expect everyone to agree with our position; that's fine. What I am not totally used to still is the lack of civility, love, and compassion that comes from some who call themselves Christians. Some of the responses that appeared on *The Plain Dealer's* website and in my e-mail inbox were unbelievable:

- Haven't you ever read your Bible? Mine makes it very clear: homosexuality is an abomination. “Abomination” — that's a pretty big word. Someone as narrow minded as you probably does not know what that means.
- Good luck with explaining this to our Lord on Judgment Day.
- I would not feel bad if the welfare rats stole the copper out of this so called house of God!

Nice. But there were positive comments posted on *The Plain Dealer* site as well:

- Thank God for a new era of social justice. Great job Pilgrim Church.
- Way to go! This is great news — finally instead of someone saying enough is enough, we have people actually taking action. The road to civil rights will not be without a fight, but I am honored to be part of the generation that decided to bring on change!
- WAY TO GO PILGRIM! Never place a period where God has placed a comma.. God is still speaking..

And of course there were others.

The most moving message was an e-mail that came to me from a gay couple who have been together for fifteen years. They had left the Church years ago, because the message they constantly heard was that their relationship was sinful; they were evil; in the eyes of God they are an abomination. People use that word a lot in regards to LGBT folk. *Abomination*. Do you know what that word actually means? According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, *abominable* means, "worthy of or causing disgust or hatred; detestable." This is Fred Phelps language. *Disgust. Hatred*. Does God actually look upon anyone this way? According to some of the messages I received this week, apparently many people believe that God does. As the best-selling author Anne Lamott once wrote, "You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."¹ But this couple, who have been together for fifteen years, found a message of hope in the decision we made last week. According to them, they did not know that churches like ours existed. "Maybe," the writer of this e-mail said to me, "maybe God does love us after all."

Paul wrote the passage that Denise read just a moment ago. Paul also wrote that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." *"Maybe God does love us after all."* My heart broke — to live that long in a relationship, because it is based on love, but doubting that the love of God might be extended to them because the institutional Church told them otherwise for years?

- I knew then why we took this vote.
- I knew then why Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus.

¹ Taken from www.quotationspage.com/quote/30904.html.

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- I knew then why Martin Luther King, the night before he was assassinated, said, “I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land.”
- I knew then why Mohandas K. Gandhi stood up to the British Empire even if it meant denying his body food and facing an assassin’s bullet.
- I knew then why Stephen Biko suffered numerous blows to his head and died as a martyr fighting against Apartheid in South Africa.
- I knew then why our denomination took a stand for many firsts, especially when they weren’t popular: firsts which included the ordination of the first African-American pastor, the first woman, and the first openly gay man. The denomination that openly defied laws codifying slavery in this country and was on the forefront of the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s.
- I knew then why I was called to Cleveland to be part of this church which is rooted in the Social Gospel Movement and has a rich history of standing on the side of justice and in solidarity with any people who are oppressed, especially when such stands are not popular. As one writer stated on *The Plain Dealer* website, “This is soooo radical and rational... WAY TO GO PILGRIM. Those who fought for social justice are whoop, whoop, whooping in heaven.”

Doing what one believes is right and doing what is popular are not always the same thing. In fact, such things often stand in opposition to each other. Slavery was quite popular when the church (well, some churches) stood up against it in the nineteenth century. When the white church joined with their African-American brothers and sisters in the midst of the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and ‘60s, this cost many pastors, particularly in the South and in the Midwest their positions.

We are in the midst of the civil rights movement of this generation, and no — it is not popular within most Christian churches. Our friend Ron Bufford once mentioned to me that years from now we will look back at this moment. The inclusion of the LGBT community into the full life and ministry of the mainline Church will be realized. At that time, each church will have to ask itself where it stood then, just as it has to ask itself where it stood when slavery and segregation were legal in this country.

But more than this, though, what struck me when I read the hate-filled and vile responses that were posted on *The Plain Dealer’s* site, or were sent to me via e-mail, was that this statement we are making is about love: the love that other people have for each other, the love that we have for them, and the love that God has for all of us. *It is all about love.* It is that simple. And yet, the love that we are trying to show is being

met — by some whom it does not even concern — with hate. Disagreement is fine. I welcome disagreement and constructive dialogue. But hate is another thing — and to hate in the name of God is unconscionable. The 14th century English mystic Julian of Norwich put it best when she wrote,

For God is everything that is good, and God has made everything that is made, and God loves everything that [God] has made, and if any man or woman withdraws his love from any of his fellow Christians, he does not love at all, because he has not love towards all.²

Some people have asked me, “So what do we do now? Where do we go from here?” Well, the story that appeared about us in *The Plain Dealer* appeared in the Associated Press, as I mentioned a moment ago, so it has gone nation-wide. There is no changing the fact that we have taken this vote — not that we would anyway. *My advice?* We continue to stand strong, knowing that our still speaking God stands with us. We resolve to see this as a justice issue, because that is what it is: it is about justice — equal rights for all of God’s children. And, in the meantime, we will follow the words of the Christ: we will love all people (even those who hate us) with the love that God has for all of creation. For it is only in loving all people (those who stand with us and those who want the rats to eat the copper out of our building) that we will be a people who stand on the side of justice, because that is what justice is all about. Amen.

² Julian of Norwich, *Showings* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, Inc., 1978), 134.