

January 10, 2021 Mark 1:4-10; Matthew 22:34-40 Rev. John Hogue

You at First Church are doing amazing things with Vaughn, Food Pantry, Revolving Closet, Clothing Depot Christmas Festival Bach Festival. You need to remind yourself of the good you have and will continue to create. Sometimes, lose sight of our spiritual journey. We lose sight of who we are as people of God. With recent January Tidings have stirred old feelings from the past. Friends and members of First Church, what happened in the Past is in the past, you need to let go. You need to forgive the event and each other. Because it is consuming you. Secondly, all I am asking in the Tidings is a vision statement from you as members to help discern that process and only place I could start is with ONA team in this COVID environment because deals with hospitality. I am the Pastor of the entire congregation and love God with all my heart and soul. I want First Church to succeed as a whole, collectively and unified as one. However, we have two different understandings of the church should look like.

We all have experiences; we have stories that explain why we think and feel the way we do about things. In the light of the extremists storming our nation's capital, in the light of pain and anguish that is happening all across the spectrum of our society, the concern and practice of recent 11 days here at First Church prompted me to deliver and preach this sermon. Allow me to remind you, that as Ordained minister in United Church of Christ, I have authority to preach in freedom of the pulpit. I want to begin by reading to you the Constitution of First Church:

Article III, (1)- “all members of the First Church acknowledge that they are ministers to a world of rapid change and revolution and united with others to be God’s servants in the service of all.”

Article 111 (3) Committed to searching of the truth and the way of love without being encumbered by dogmatisms, religious or social exclusiveness, goes on to say honesty of thought, expression and purity of heart before God.

Article 111 (4) Seek to be activist in way of love.

Article 111 (6) The church will seek to serve the entire community by fulfilling the basic and religious needs of all of God’s children.

Article III (8) Guide to follow of UCC Statement of Faith of which I want to read part of it to you.

UCC STATEMENT OF FAITH

*“God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the **whole human family**, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and **resist the powers of evil**, to share in Christ’s baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.”*

*“God promises to all who trust in the gospel **forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace**, the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end.”*

Therefore, per First Church Constitution, **not to be constricted by dogma , social exclusiveness but seek activist in the way of love and serve religious needs of all God's children- and so to speak in honesty and thought and expression and pure heart before God**, I asked myself:

Why am I here? I am here as a Pastor and teacher of the United Church of Christ. The main reason I entered ministry is the Matthew text Jesus love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. Let's be honest with each other, what was **first lesson you learned in Sunday School? Jesus loves you**, loved by the creator God, right? As people who look to the scriptures for light and God's guidance, this means we in our own time, need to consider very carefully which **commandments in scripture are the most important**. In our Gospel text today, 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 Sadducees were peppering his 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.” This is the bedrock of all Christian teaching. *The difficulty has always been figuring out how to live it.* However, Jesus remind us Everything, I repeat everything HANGS in the balance of this commandment.

Hence comes in the *Church Covenant of the Tidings*, everyone needs to stop bickering

and listen to one another. Church Covenant explains how to go about it. ***It very difficult to do. But it's biblical and calls us to do the difficult walk of faith in love.***

I have been hearing why the whole notion of ‘why do we need Open and Affirming team?’ Some people said we are already Open and Affirming. Then I hear from ONA side, why other camp not understand what we are trying to do? So I have noticed the very notion mentioning ONA has made some of you uncomfortable. Some of you have been uncomfortable because it means 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.*** We need to stop making this a political issue but it is a **moral issue** within exercising as being the body of Christ. **Object Lesson: Unity in Christ** Pour a small amount of oil into the jar. Sometimes we’re like the oil in this jar. Pour more oil in and it mixes just fine. Add a little vinegar and look what happens. The oil and vinegar don’t mix. When we meet someone different from us, we might think, “This person is just too different. How can we get along?” If we don’t accept people, we’ll never mix – or get along. Read Romans 15:5-7. Let’s add a few drops of dishwashing soap which will represent Jesus, and see what happens. The oil and vinegar mix. Jesus, thank you for accepting us. Help us accept and welcome others in love.

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.

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. Why do we First Church need to do with ONA? The reason is that many of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, queer, transgender and intersex folk 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. *ONA is about welcoming them as members, and as leaders in our church.* ONA means that we’ll do our best to minister to them and their families just as we do with the *rest of our members* and in my ordination vows to those who do not believe in trinity. It means that we believe that those who love someone of the same gender are no more inherently sinful than anyone else.

It is our place to be welcoming, open and AFFIRMING, to be teachers and friends, to get to know the individual need and meet it. To affirm them, and go beyond the usual greetings, and salutations, to the book of salvation to homeless, prostitute, physical challenged, those different ethnic backgrounds, alcoholic, recovering alcoholic, those struggle with mental illness, those struggle with other addictions.

I am blessed for The United Church of Christ that believes in social justice for **all** people. Read you part of my ordination vows in **UCC BOOK OF WORSHIP**- “**WILL YOU SEEK TO REGARD ALL PEOPLE WITH EQUAL LOVE AND CONCERN AND UNDERTAKE TO MINISTER IMPARTIALLY TO THE NEEDS OF ALL**”

Then I responded- “I do relying on God’s grace.”

I will counsel, listen, love all people of all backgrounds but how can I continue to row over to Gilligan's Island every Sunday and say to the castaways that we accept everyone, that no matter where you are on life's journey you are welcome here, then go back to our land of abundance leaving them still marooned on the island. I want us to invite the people on the boat and to make as many trips as necessary to bring them out and to that place of security, in the bosom of God. My work isn't done until I can tell God who I helped save. God won't be proud if I can't share the escape route to from bondage and the pathway to love. Will God say well done my good and faithful servant to us? I sure hope so. When someone takes that sometimes terrifying step across the threshold of our house of worship we need to be prepared to repair, heal and set free them. Even if the person can't walk across that threshold alone, we need to rescue them, and help erase the harms done. **We need to show a different Christian than the ones they've known before.**

Now I want to turn to *the six difficult passages* some Christians use 'condone' Homosexuality. Some theologians and colleagues call them the six Bullets in the Chamber. Remember last week I talked about *etymology*, the study and origin of words? The word "homosexuality" didn't even show up in English translations of the Bible until 1946, so why do we say the Bible condemns it? In fact, when RSV translation of the bible was being done, one of the new testament scholars admitted they did not know how to translate the difficult word ***arsenkoitai***. It is in the files of Princeton Theological Seminary who spearheaded the in the translation committee -why did that translation committee not start the prescient of saying- you know ***arsenkoitai*** this is a rare Greek New Testament term and we do not know how it should be translated. It would have saved so many people from anguish, agony and enabled people to take their own lives. In contrast to those 6 verses **compare** that to the **2000 Bible verses on poverty. On money. On the rich and poor.**

Those 2000+ verses give us some basic instructions for life on earth, that could be summed up in the ancient wisdom of a prophet 700 years before Jesus of Nazareth:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? — Micah 6:8

And yet, all anyone wants to talk about are six Bible verses that “condemn homosexuality.” **Here’s the thing — they don’t.**

We need to accept that so we can get back to the more important things to do work of Vaughn, Food Pantry, Clothing Depot and hopefully add more ministries down the road and more importantly- follow the love commandment.

There are six Bible verses used to defend a “traditional” view on homosexuality. However well intentioned, these verses are known as the “trouble verses” that condemn same-sex behavior. Some call them clobber verses or some say “the six bullets in the gun.”

What do we do with these Bible verses? We must read them **in context.** And take the bullets out of the chamber. **It’s time for a cease-fire.** Let’s take the bullets out one by one right now-

Genesis 19:5

This is the fabled Sodom & Gomorrah passage. Sodom and Gomorrah were sister cities. It’s pretty clear in Genesis 13:13 that “... the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord.”

What was their sin? They were ruthless in their acquisition of wealth, power and territory — and they oppressed the poor and took advantage of the weak and were terrible at hospitality.

That’s clear in the Bible, too.

The ancient Jewish Prophet Ezekiel remembered the sin of Sodom as such: *This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did*

abominable things before me; therefore, I removed them when I saw it. — Ezekiel 16:49,50

The sins of Sodom, Gomorrah and their sister cities was so bad, they were frequently used as examples of people not to emulate.

When Jesus would run into conflict in cities he was ministering in, unfolding his work and vision amongst the poor, he even used Sodom as an example when he would declare “it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.” (Matthew 11:24)

The so-called “Sodomites” in Genesis are beating down the door of a man named Lot who was entertaining two messengers of God (we often hear them described as “angels” in the Scriptures.) The men of Sodom want to have sexual intercourse with them. Fair enough, you might say. But in the end, Lot offers up his two virgin daughters for the so-called Sodomites to gang rape. **It's brutal, horrendous stuff. In Old Testament Bible talks about polygamy,** And it has nothing to do with homosexuality. So why do we continue to think it does?

Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

The “Levitical laws” are foundational commandments for a people looking to survive. *For a people on the move. For a people looking to make a way out of no way.*

They're literally on the run — an exodus — out of Egypt. And these passages have nothing to do with homosexuality either.

If we want to get all Levitical about it and take it literally -the same laws dictate that shellfish cannot be eaten well there goes New England clam chowder I enjoy at Muddy moose and oysters, mixed fabric garments cannot be worn-I guess I need to burn my Pittsburgh Steelers Jersey and your New England Patriot jersey and all the clothes that have mixed garments. I believe I wouldn't have any clothes left.

Romans 1:26–27

What about the New Testament? Enter St. Paul's magnum opus, the Roman Epistle, and his "clear teaching" on same-sex behavior.

For this reason, God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

The theological argument from the context of this text is written it is dealing with "Idolatry, promiscuity and shrine or Temple prostitution are what Paul is addressing in Romans 1 — not same-sex relationships between faithful and committed partners."

This Romans text is about **gross misuse of power, Roman elitist overindulgence, and misguided over-sexualized spirituality.** Many Biblical commentators except, fundamentalist, see this passage is about excessive lust: the central problem with lust in Romans 1 is that it is an expression of idolatry in a specific sense: *lust involves serving one's own self-seeking desires rather than worshiping the one true God.*

This lust was being exhibited at a colossal scale by members of the Roman imperial court. Emperors Gaius and Caligula conjure up all sorts of sexual indulgence.

This is not the stuff of friends, loved ones, neighbors and colleagues who happen to be gay and celebrate marriage equality.

1 Corinthians 6:9–11

This is one of the most awful, hurtful, and misused passages that Christians have often used to LGBTQ people to convince them of their sin. In essence, many Christians will shoot this Biblical bullet in the heart of others to condemn people straight to hell.

This needs to stop. If not yesterday, today.

This is one of those passages that, I would argue, has a direct corollary to the rise in gay Christian suicides in the past generation.

The problem is, people have horrifically misunderstood two simple words in this ancient letter that St. Paul wrote to an early Christian community in the trade city of Corinth.

The words are: *malakoi* and *arsenkoitai*.

Matthew goes on to define *malakoi* as “effeminate.” It’s a Greek word that literally means “soft” and is used to describe fine clothing elsewhere in the New Testament. In a moral context, this word is actually more about “lack of self-control, weakness, laziness, or cowardice.”

There were sexual connotations for “*malakoi*” as well, but again, it always points back to uncontrolled acts of lust or misused sexuality — no matter the gender or act. The word was not understood to reference same-sex behavior in the church until after the 20th century, when Bible translations adopted a new slant.

Arsenkoitai is more bizarre and harder to grasp. Many believe that St. Paul actually invented the word, as it is extremely rare in ancient Greek literature.

The word literally is a combination of two other words in Greek: *arsen* (male) and *koites* (bed). So, *arsenkoitai* could be translated literally as “male-bedders.” And this word was understood by Bible translators before the 20th century to mean male-male sexual intercourse.

But when the word is used elsewhere in ancient Greek literature, it references the abuse of the poor (as in the Sibylline Oracles) or “economic exploitation and power abuses (as in a 2nd century text called the Acts of John).” The Acts of John lists *arsenkoitai* amongst a list of sins separate from a catalog of other sexual sins. Many believe that *arsenkoitai* is about economic abuses and exploitation.

Which is why the ancient act of “pederasty” is often brought up in relation to passages like this— the practice of Greek elite elder men who would adopt young men to use as sexual objects. Again, having nothing to do with LGBTQ loved ones, friends, and colleagues who are looking to live as good neighbors.

1 Timothy 1:9–10

The word *arsenkoitai* is used again, in this passage.

Searches through several reference books taught me that “homosexual offenders” was a translation of the Greek word *arsenokoitai*. To my surprise, one reference book listed the same word as appearing in another passage, 1 Timothy 1: 10. I turned to 1 Timothy 1: 10 in my New International Version Bible, and, there, saw that the word was translated simply as “perverts.” There’s quite a difference between “homosexual offenders” and “perverts.”

The Bible is a complicated library of books with antiquated, complicated Greek terminology and social contexts. Modern day translators are bound to mess it up from time to time or even insert their own biases. To quote my seminary professor Robert Kelley - “the translator is always a traitor.” **What about from the words of Jesus, he is silent on this issue but clear that we are love all people, even your enemies.**

Overall, though, because of the abuse of these six bullets of difficult passages, there are **horrible stories of anguish. Losing jobs, losing schools, losing friends and family. An unnecessary wreckage of human life in the name of faith.**

And how aware are you of the ways in which you may be contributing to suffering and hurt in gay people’s lives? People say but don’t blame me – I’m just reading the Bible. That’s just what it says.” Well, first of all, no, you are not just reading the Bible. You are taking a few verses out of context and extracting from them an absolute condemnation that was never intended. But you are also striking to the very core of another human being and gutting them of their sense of dignity and of self-worth. You are reinforcing the message that gay people have heard for centuries: You will always be alone. You come from a family, but you’ll never form one of your own. You are uniquely unworthy of loving and being loved by another person, and all because you’re different, because you’re gay.

Being different is no crime. Being gay is not a sin. For any LBGTQI to desire and pursue love and marriage and family is no more selfish or sinful than when a straight person desires and pursues the very same things. The Song of Songs tells us that King Solomon’s wedding day was “the day his heart rejoiced.” *To deny to a small minority of people, not just a wedding day, but a lifetime of love and commitment and family is to*

inflict on them a devastating level of hurt and anguish. There is nothing in the Bible that indicates that Christians are called to perpetuate that kind of pain in other people's lives rather than work to alleviate it, especially when the problem is so easy to fix. All it takes is acceptance. The Bible is not opposed to the acceptance of gay Christians, or of loving relationships for them. And if you are uncomfortable with the idea of two men or two women in love, if you are dead-set against that idea, then I am asking you to try to see things differently for my sake, even if it makes you uncomfortable. I'm asking you to ask yourself this: How deeply do you care about your family? How deeply do you love your spouse? What if grandchild turn to be LBGTQ? And how would you fight for them if they were ever in danger or in harm's way? That is how deeply you should care, and that is how you should fight, for the very same things for my life, because they matter just as much to me. LBGTQI, or other marginalized person should be a treasured part of our families and our communities, and the truly Christian response to them is acceptance, support, and love.

It's time to bring an end to this — and not just because the Supreme Court has ruled in favor of Marriage Equality. It's time to bring an end to this, for those of us trying to take the Bible seriously, because the Bible seriously doesn't talk about homosexuality as we know it. I offer all people to talk. We all united as one of all backgrounds. I will help you. I offer my love to you, especially to those who are marginalized. **You the people of First Church need to navigate these waters to determine who you are as the people of God and your vision.**

My goal now is the same as it's always been: to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with the God who's been my first love all along. When it comes to this conversation, my goal has been to help Christians create the kinds of communities that make LBGTQI people feel wanted — where we can worship God, use our gifts, serve our neighbors, and find a family to share in the joys and sorrows of living in a world where so many people are so lonely. It's a widening of the circle —

Finally, for those in this congregation who feel strongly about we need **to pull away from the United Church of Christ. As Teacher and Pastor of the United Church of**

Christ, who welcomed and accepted me in radical love and hospitality being the light unto me, as long as I am Pastor living and breathing in this pulpit, we will remain in the United Church of Christ and that thought and argument ends now.

If it turns out that I'm wrong, I trust God will be faithful to catch me. For now, though, I hope those of you who disagree will continue to welcome my friendship, be together as a community to disagree in love and serve alongside everyone in the church. We could choose instead to focus on all we share in common and seek to mend what's been broken in this fragile world. Finally I offer-

John 8:7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And yes Jesus says later do not sin anymore because took her in the community of body of Christ, welcomed her, accepted her, loved her. There is no way, I am going to cast the first stone to anyone, if someone does, I will shield them with my body to keep them from being harmed. Because I will always focus on what hangs everything in the balance that is reread the words Matthew -

Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Amen.