

## Haydenville Congregational Church

The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian

April 25, 2010

Acts 9:1-20

### “All the People”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

I don't know if you have seen the new one.  
I don't know if you have seen any of them.  
I am talking about the ads for the United Church of Christ.

The newest ad, now on TV and on the UCC website, is called “The Language of God.” It features powerful images in rapid-fire succession with guitar music and drumming behind the photographs. The images flash on the screen quickly and disappear quickly. They include biracial couples, children, people of color marching for freedom, two women getting married and many more. At the end of the ad, the screen goes blank and then these words appear: “God is still speaking....The United Church of Christ.”  
That's the newest of the UCC ads.

You may have seen some of the older ads on TV or on the website.

There's one called “The Bouncer”—in that one you see people walking toward a big stone church and you hear church bells ringing. People are coming from all directions. But two burly men, like bouncers, stand with arms crossed at the front door of the church. They have those velvet ropes across the entrance to the church and they are screening the crowd that gathers and wants to enter the church—the bouncers only let SOME people into the church. You see the bouncers let a heterosexual couple through and two white women. But they say “No no, not you” and block the entrance when a gay male couple approaches and they turn away three people of color. At the end of that ad, these words appear on the screen: “Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we. The United Church of Christ.”

There's also the famous “Ejector Ad.” In that ad people are filing into a big church before a worship service, the place is filling up. Then the camera focuses on a woman of color with a crying baby and suddenly BOOM you see a hand press a

big red button and the woman and the baby are ejected from her pew—they go flying up in the air and out of the church. Then you see two men arm in arm and BOOM they are ejected, they go flying out of their pew. Then you see an old man with a walker and BOOM he and his walker go flying. After several people who “don’t fit in” are ejected from their pews, the screen goes blank. Then you see these words: “God doesn’t reject people. Neither do we. The United Church of Christ.”

Of all the ads, my favorite is the first one the UCC made. It is the oldest and I think the most touching. I watch it on line and I tear up every time. This ad begins with one little girl who stares right into the camera and says: “Here’s the Church, here’s the steeple, open the doors and see all the people.” And then one by one, a dozen individuals and couples say to the camera: “all the people.” The people saying those three simple words are people of color and white people, gay couples and heterosexual couples, people with disabilities, families—all different kinds of people say: “all the people.” At the end of that ad, a voice says: “God accepts all the people. So do we. The United Church of Christ.”

The UCC is certainly not a perfect, flawless denomination. There is no such thing. The UCC is certainly not without its issues, struggles and difficult internal politics. But the UCC IS a place where all the people are welcome. And that is important. The UCC is a denomination that truly believes God is still speaking to us and through us, that we all are beloved by God and that we are the continuing story of God’s revelation in this world. The UCC believes that an extravagant welcome is part of our mission, part of our work, one of the tenets of our faith. The UCC truly believes that whoever you are, wherever you are on life’s journey you are welcome here.

Why is this important? It is important because “all the people” are not welcome in all the churches. All the people are not welcome in all churches, in all synagogues, in all mosques, in all offices, senate chambers, colleges, board rooms or bar-rooms. And so some group of caring people, some group of faithful Christians, some church must stand up and speak out for inclusion and love. Some church with courage and faith must be a brave witness, a living example of the radical love that Jesus showed for all the people. Some church must demonstrate the unconditional love that is our birthright. And we, in the United Church of Christ, are trying to be that church. And so when discrimination is carried out in the name of God, WE are the people who step up, step forward and say: No, stop. God loves everyone. God does not discriminate. And neither do we.

Friends, here in Haydenville we are proud to be an open and affirming church but we cannot become complacent, smug or silent. We cannot assume our work is done. We cannot think that gay men, lesbians, bisexual and transgendered people are safe in all our communities, welcome in all houses of worship, protected in all our schools, respected by all our neighbors. That is not the reality.

Just last year, a young boy in Springfield killed himself after being called anti-gay names at school. The headline in the *Republican* read: “Anti-gay taunts in school lead to 11-year old’s suicide.” This is the first line of the article: “Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover was 11—hardly old enough to know his sexuality and yet distraught enough to hang himself last week after school bullies repeatedly called him gay.”

We cannot be silent. We must be a force for change.

Earlier this year, in a Study Bible donated to our church library we found on page 28 a long description of “The Biblical Definition of Marriage” which states that “according to God’s purpose, marriage is a heterosexual and monogamous union.” We cannot be silent. We must be a force for change.

A few weeks ago, Senator Barney Frank was spit upon and called anti-gay slurs after voting for health care reform. He had to get secret security protection just to travel in and around Washington.

We cannot be silent. We must be a force for change.

This past Friday evening the Larry King Live show featured a well known, successful Christian singer Jennifer Knapp who has come out as a lesbian. The other guest was a pastor who told Jennifer in no uncertain terms that you cannot be Christian AND gay.

We cannot be silent. We must be a force for change.

The on-line website *massresistance.org* tracks gay-positive, gay-affirming activities in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and mocks them and instructs people how to disrupt them and protest anything that is pro-gay. It a website site that teaches discrimination and encourages hate.

We cannot be silent. We must be a force for change.

And the book, *We Were Baptized Too: Claiming God’s Grace for Lesbians and Gays*, tells painful story after painful story of the bullying, exclusion, prejudices, stereotypes, intolerance and bigotry faced by lesbians and gay men in schools and jobs but mainly IN CHURCHES.

We cannot be silent. We must be a force for change.

And so the United Church of Christ stands as a counter-cultural witness with arms open wide saying: members of the LGBT community, you are loved, you are precious, you are whole, God loves you just the way you are. Our message is: “Jesus did not turn people away. Neither do we.”

Historically and up until today, the Christian church has persecuted the LGBT community. The Christian Church has been a place of judgment, rejection, discrimination and pain for the gay community. It is time for the Christian church as a whole to have a conversion experience. The church needs to become the protector of the LGBT community...protecting those the Church has for centuries hurt, harmed, wounded and rejected.

And the church has a powerful example of a powerful conversion experience. We heard that story read today from the Book of Acts. One of the church’s revered apostles had a conversion experience that transformed him from persecutor to preacher on behalf of the church. Saul of Tarsus had a dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus. The church needs to look again at Paul and learn the lesson that change is possible, dramatic change is possible. The Christian church needs to admit that as an institution, historically, it has been very wrong in its assessment and treatment of members of the LGBT community. The church needs to confess its sin and repent. We heard the story of Saul who was renamed Paul this morning—that story has much to teach traditional churches that discriminate against the LGBT community.

Saul was a passionate Pharisee. His life’s work was to find Christian men and women and persecute them. Saul was trying to single-handedly wipe out the early church, one Christian at a time. One day Saul was on the road to Damascus to find and torture Christians. The Bible says Saul was on the road to Damascus “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” when a light from heaven flashed around him and a voice said, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” I am Jesus, who you are persecuting. Get up and enter the city and you will be told what you are to do” (Acts 9:1-6).

Saul heard the voice of Jesus, was struck blind and speechless and was transformed forever. He recognized that he had been terribly misguided for so long, that he had been carrying out sinful, evil acts. Saul could not speak or see until God sent a man named Ananias to lay his hands on him. Then Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he regained his sight and voice. Now renamed PAUL this transformed man had a new mission: to spread the word of the grace of God and the teachings

of Jesus. Paul began preaching in synagogues that Jesus was the Son of God. Saul became the apostle Paul—the one who spread the gospel throughout the Mediterranean region.

The story is a powerful example of a complete reversal, a complete transformation and many churches that continue to discriminate against the gay community need to undergo a similar dramatic transformation. They need to admit their sin, repent and move from persecutor to protector of God's beloved sons and daughters. Paul went from persecutor to protector and preacher as Paul the apostle. Christian churches who have hurt and excluded members of the gay community need to lift up Paul's example of a complete conversion and reversal and repent of their sins. To be a true Christ follower, all of us must live and share the message of an open, loving, inclusive, radical and welcoming Christ.

Saul was hunting down Christians, tying them up, dragging them to Jerusalem, throwing them in jail and doing the unthinkable to them. Saul was ravaging the early Church and persecuting the early Christians. And Jesus asked: why are you doing this in my name?

Today it is the church itself that must be asked the same question: why are you persecuting people in my name?

Because oppression, discrimination, harassment and exclusion are still practiced by many Christian churches, the United Church of Christ MUST stand as a beacon of hope that says: you cannot justify your discrimination in the name of God. The UCC will continue to give voice to an extravagant welcome until everyone understands that when we say "all the people" we mean "all the people." We will witness with our voices, with our programs, with our liturgy, with our welcome, with our banners, with our pride marches, with our Children's Church, with our clergy, with our whole being until the world recognizes that Jesus did not turn people away and neither do we....until the world recognizes that God does not reject people and neither do we....until the world recognizes that God is still speaking through us, through ALL of us with ALL our beautiful diversity, that WE all are the current chapter in the story of God's people in the world.

Several years ago, after this Church declared itself an open and affirming church, we hung a rainbow flag out front. The deacons talked about how that flag signaled to all who saw it that we mean it when we say, whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. After the flag hung out front for a few months, one of the older members in our church (a woman in her 80s) went to do

her banking at the bank right across the street—the bank that faces our church. When our church member had finished her transaction, the teller leaned forward and said: “When are you going to remove that rainbow flag from the front of your church?” Our church member leaned forward and said, “Never.”

About a year after that exchange happened, I was at a Clergy gathering in Connecticut and I told that story in a small group break-out session. About 8 of us were sitting in a circle and I talked about how our rainbow flag was a visible, short-hand way of saying: LGBT folks, you can feel welcome and safe in our pews. A man in the circle, clearly uncomfortable with my story, shifted in his chair and grimaced. Then he said: “Well, our church flies an American flag out front.” The group was quiet. Then a woman in the circle said, “Why? Do you think there are Americans who don’t feel welcome and safe in your pews?”

The original rainbow flag that hung out front sort of wore out. The colors faded—it was out there so long through so many seasons. So some of you came to me and said, “Pastor, get a new rainbow flag, the one out front looks ratty.” I dutifully took it down and brought it to the Pride store in downtown Northampton so I could buy another one of the same size. When I told the owner of the store why we were replacing our flag he said to me, “It gives me hope that your church wore out a rainbow flag and needs another one. Tell the church thank you.”

Until all the people are safe in all houses of worship, in all workplaces, in all courtrooms, in all neighborhoods, in all schools, in all universities, in all medical centers, in all public offices, in all private board rooms, in all settings, until then...this church as part of the United Church of Christ will witness visibly, loudly, consistently, regularly, reliably, dependably, clearly, noticeably, and sometimes raucously to the indisputable fact that God does not discriminate; that being gay is as normal and common as being left-handed; that this world needs more loving, faithful, committed couples, not fewer; more happy, stable families, not fewer; more joyous unions and delighted partners, not fewer. We will witness with our last breath to the reality that God does not just tolerate the LGBT community God LOVES the LGBT community with an undying and unconditional love.

The church must change, just as Saul was changed to Paul. The church must go from persecutor to protector of the LGBT community. And if the United Church of Christ can in it’s own faltering and limited way be part of that change, model that change, inspire the conversion, aid the transformation well Praise Be to God.

I know I am grateful for this small but mighty church.  
And our worn out pride flag out front. And our diverse and alive congregation.  
And our extravagant welcome and radical love.

I am grateful that we live and model the belief that God truly loves “all the people.”  
Amen.

DO NOT COPY