

John Sampson  
"Contrary to Nature"  
Text: Romans 11:17 - 24  
Preached at KVCC  
June 18, 2017

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer. AMEN.

We are in an exciting time in the history of this church. Since my first meeting with the Search Committee just over a year ago members and friends of this community, individually, and in small groups, have been talking about the possibility of becoming an Open and Affirming congregation within the UCC. Since 1983, the UCC's Open and Affirming program has been the denomination's ministry that encourages individual congregations to extend an explicit welcome to sexual and gender minorities, those who have traditionally been shunned by the church. And although the church, with a big C, may have rejected some, this congregation has a long

history of welcoming lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex people as visitors, as friends, as members, as leaders, as musicians, and as pastors.

Last weekend we took a big step into the future when I gave a presentation to a group of members and friends after worship. We explored the history of the Open and Affirming ministry, the theology that supports the program, and laid out what a process to becoming an Open and Affirming congregation might look like.

For many here today, whether physically or in spirit, we are already a church that is open to the inclusion of sexual and gender minorities; we are already a church that affirms the basic tenet that all God's LGBTQI children are made in her image.

But to become an Open and Affirming congregation means that we are not resting on our laurels. We are asking ourselves how can the

welcome we already extend be proclaimed, and lived into more widely, more deeply, and more radically. We are asking ourselves if there is more that God is inviting us to do. Can our understanding of communion be more open to more people?

And in response God sends us an image of a tree through this morning's reading from Paul. But it's not like most trees we see in our daily lives. It is a tree that is covered in branches from many different trees. There are sprigs from cultivated trees, and sprigs from wild trees, growing out there in the forests far away from the farms that ring our town center.

We are in an exciting time in the history of this church. Members and friends, individually, and in small groups, have been struggling with how we can welcome those of our community who are differently abled, in body and in mind, from what many of us would consider normal. This congregation has a long history of welcoming

people of different abilities. The ramp outside that allows for easier access for those of us who need it is an example. For many of us here today we are already a community that includes people of many abilities; we are already a church that affirms the basic tenets that all of God's children, in the full spectrum of ability, are made in her image.

Although the Open and Affirming process focuses on the full welcome and inclusion of LGBTQI people in the life of the church, the types of discussions we will have, the ways in which our assumptions about who we are as followers of the message of Jesus, will be pushed beyond our comfort zones. And these conversations will have implications for our welcome and affirmation of those who are differently abled, and feel deep within their heart of hearts Jesus' invitation to communion around his shared table. To go through the Open and Affirming process asks us to consider if there are ways in

which our outreach to those with different abilities can be wider, and deeper, and more radical.

And in response to our questions, and our conflicted thoughts and feelings about what expanding our embrace of our differently abled neighbors will mean for us, God reveals an image of a tree that looks like something Dr. Frankenstein would have created. It is a heterodox tree, a tree made up of the scraps and found pieces of all the trees around the neighborhood. It is wild, and cultivated, from old stock and new sprouts.

And it is this monstrous tree that Paul uses as a symbol of a church that reflects and lives into the radical welcome God is extending to all of humanity.

Paul is writing his letter to the congregation in Rome at a point when the early communities of Jesus followers, communities that

were predominantly Jewish, are beginning to attract widespread interest from people outside of the Jewish faith. Greeks, Samaritans, Ethiopians, and Romans, speakers of Aramaic, of Greek, and Latin all feel Jesus inviting them into communion with his resurrected spirit, and with his Jewish followers. But his Jewish followers don't know what to do with the people coming to their church houses. Growing up within the boundaries of Jewish ritual law it was forbidden to eat the types of food that the non-Jewish Jesus followers were used to eating. To even touch a member of another nation made a Jew ritually impure. The solution to these issues for many of Jesus' early Jewish followers was to mandate that the new seekers had to become Jewish first before they could be allowed into their faith community.

When we think about welcoming LGBTQI people into our church community do we also believe they need to become like us before they can be members? On one level the question seems ridiculous.

Many of us would answer with an emphatic No! But the Open and Affirming process looks to find the less obvious ways in which accepting difference in our church manifests itself. It may be fine to have a gay member, but is it still fine when he sits in the pews holding his lover's hand? Are we happy to be known as a church that welcomes LGBTQI people, but uncomfortable to proclaim it through flying a Pride flag on church grounds? Where do our boundaries lie, and how is God inviting us to push past them?

Likewise, are we OK with people of different abilities attending our church, but would we be challenged if we were asked to approve a plan to reconfigure and remove some of the pews to allow for more accessible seating closer to the front of the church, or up here by the table? Are people of different abilities welcome as long as they sit without fidgeting and their prayers don't ramble for too long? Where do our boundaries lie, and how is God inviting us to push past them?

The question boils down to this. It is the question Paul is addressing in his early church community. It is the question we ask ourselves in the Open and Affirming process. It is the question our church is asking itself regarding our differently abled members and friends.

Is full membership, is full inclusion in the church community, predicated on you looking and acting like me?

Am I the norm by which your inclusion will be gauged?

Must the new sprigs grafted onto our tree be of the same stock as the root?

And it is God who responds.



She says, “Look at this beautiful tree. Look at this tree that I’ve made. It’s crazy and disjointed; it’s wild with different branches from all the trees I’ve created. And it is one of the trees of the Garden of Paradise. And unlike that other tree, I want you to partake of this one. I want you to experience its good knowledge of fellowship and community.”

She says, “Look, it is a radical vision of life together as a community of the followers of Jesus and his message. It is radical because it is based on the radix, the root, of my son. This root, this tree stock, is the axis that joins heaven and earth. It is what gives life to the branches, to all of you who seek to live together in love and compassion, justice and equality, who seek a life in the radiance of my Presence.”

This multivalent tree, composed of branches from all of the trees of creation, of people from all of human experience, is radical because

it exists contrary to nature. It is a thing not found in the wild, but created by God's Spirit, according to her invitation. Its branches will be pruned by the Divine hands, and we will be welcomed and grafted into the body of Christ based on God's desire, not ours. To be a part of this tree we don't need to shed our wildness, we don't need to erase ourselves; we don't need to be straight and cis-gendered. We don't need to be disease free, able to walk, and have perfect vision. Paul tells us that we are welcomed in our own right, as long as we remain humble and follow Jesus' message.

I met the former pastor of this church, Milt Dudley, one time. He was back in town from his travels, and he invited me to his house to check in and see how things were going, and offer the opportunity to ask any questions I might have about the church and the community. I really appreciated him taking the time to talk with me, and encourage me in my ministry.

During my time with Milt we talked about what would happen if another church were to open up in Keene or Keene Valley. We agreed that it would almost certainly lead to members of this church leaving. Depending on the type of church that opened more or less members would possibly leave. Perhaps it would even lead to a situation where the future of this church could be in jeopardy.

If it ever came to a situation where this church had to close, to sell its building, it would sadden me a great deal. But the thing that would break my heart would be that we lost the beauty of our god grafted diversity, that we would have chosen, of our own volition, to leave the wild complexity of this church, for a possibly more homogenous worship community.

Look around you.

We are atheists, Jews, practicing Catholics, Quakers, members of every mainline Protestant denomination, and Unitarians. We are gay, straight and bi. There are those of us who live with various types of mental disease, and we have a spectrum of physical ability represented in our pews.

God has collected us from all over creation and of her own will grafted us onto a common stock, the root of Jesus and his message.

And contrary to what so many church communities preach, God is not asking us to become more like each other in experience, and theology, and ability, and socioeconomic status. God is asking us to become more diverse, more inclusive, to welcome all of the new sprigs she has found and is grafting into the body of Christ. She is asking us to open our hearts wider and deeper than we are comfortable doing. She is asking us to give up our need to have one

another created in our human image, because she has already created us in her multivalent divine image.

This church is already like Paul's image of a Frankensteinian tree. But God is asking us to consider if there are ways in which the membership of this congregation can be wider, and deeper, and more radical. She is asking us how we can open ourselves to welcoming more and different types of sprigs, more and different types of people and human experience, into our church. Because in the end this process of an ever widening welcome is not about us. It is about God and her redemption of all of her children.

AMEN.