

John Sampson

“Rainbow Promises”

Text: Genesis 9:12 - 16

Preached at KVCC

February 24, 2019 – A Celebration of Becoming Open and Affirming

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.

Today I deliver this morning’s reflection from up here in the pulpit because I want to access all of the power, and authority, and tradition that this pulpit represents.

Today I’m all gussied up in my preacher drag because I want to share a message and I don’t want anyone to miss the fact that it’s

coming from a person ordained to the ministry of the church of Jesus, the one we call the Christ.

Because over the history of the church from pulpits like this one, and from people dressed like me, a message has often been preached that divides people, that privileges some people over others, that tells some of us that we are fundamentally alienated from God, and from her love for all of her children.

But today is a different day, isn't it? And God is working something new. Today is a day when the church, and people dressed like me, can share a message not of separation, but of unity, not of alienation, but of embracing the inherent image of God that lives in all of us. Today we don't speak of sin, but of great blessing.

Because today Keene Valley Congregational Church celebrates our becoming an Open and Affirming congregation within the United Church of Christ.

Today we celebrate our determination to be more deeply welcoming to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning, and intersex seekers, and doubters, and followers into the full life of our church. Now it isn't that we haven't welcomed LGBTQI people before, that this congregation doesn't have a long history of welcoming sexual and gender minorities. But today we do it more publically, more intentionally, and more unabashedly.

It's appropriate that we celebrate the hope that becoming an Open and Affirming congregation represents because at our core we are a people of hope. We are a people who put unimaginable hope right in the center of our most sacred stories, and our life lived together. We know that death and intimidation, inhumanity and grief are

always present, no matter who we are, and where we come from.

But we also believe that these experiences do not have ultimate power. And that one-day they too will pass and their passing will be sealed with a sign – the sign of the rainbow.

Is it a coincidence that God chooses to sign her covenant with a people weary from death and destruction, with a people who have been brought to the brink of nothingness, with the sign of the rainbow?

Is it a coincidence that LGBTQI people and our allies, those of us who know what it means to be marginalized and dehumanized in our society, in our community, in our families, and in our churches, just for living into the truth of who we are and who we love, have chosen for our sign of being and liberation the sign of the rainbow?

Is it a coincidence that God puts this rainbow, this sign of unbreakable promise, in the skies for all of humanity to see?

Is it a coincidence that LGBTQI people, and our allies, fly the rainbow flag in the sky for all people to see as a symbol of our pride and our humanity?

Is it a coincidence that this congregation has chosen to hang a rainbow flag as the background to our cross, as a symbol of how our desire to be more open and more affirming and more welcoming to LGBTQI seekers is intimately connected to our sense of faith, and our understanding of how Christ's message challenges us to love our neighbors as ourselves?

The answer to all of these questions is "No."

No, it's not a coincidence that God, and LGBTQI people, and this church have all chosen to embrace the sign of the rainbow.

We do this because the rainbow symbolizes the wide spectrum of the diversity of human experience which God has blessed our species with. This diversity includes the love and sexual expression between people of opposite sexes. This diversity includes those of us who feel our gender matches our biological sex. But this diversity also includes the experiences of same gender loving people, of people born with both sexes, of those of us whose sense of sexuality and gender don't fit into the binary models our tradition has given us, and of those of us who feel called to change our gender to express the truth of our deepest being.

God didn't choose a sign of only one color to express her love for humanity because she hasn't chosen only one type of people to love.

Instead God chose a brilliant symbol pulsing with an infinite number of colors to express her covenant with the full possibility of humanity.

To become an Open and Affirming church is to follow God's lead and not limit ourselves to accept a rainbow of only one color. It is to open our eyes and affirm all of the colors, all of the people, which God has made and blessed the earth with, and who are already here among us. This includes our LGBTQI brothers and sisters.

I also believe that God chose the rainbow because she wanted to give us not just a symbol of diversity, but also a symbol of beauty.

God chose the beautiful rainbow to show us that our diversity, that the diversity of sexuality and gender expressed by her children, is also beautiful.

I was working in my office over in the manse last summer. It had been showering off and on throughout the day. And at one point I looked up from my laptop, looked out the window, and there, right over the mountains behind the Neighborhood House was a rainbow. It was so beautiful that I got right up, ran outside, took a couple of pictures and posted one on Facebook. That rainbow was so beautiful I wanted to share it with all of my friends. And I'm certainly not the first person who's ever done this.

There's something about the beauty of a rainbow that we celebrate almost instinctually, and that grabs us not so much in our minds, but in our hearts.

This is the experience that God has when she looks at all of her children. This is the experience God has when she looks at not just her straight and cis-gendered children, but also when she looks at her LGBTQI children.



This is the experience that God invites us to have, and that this congregation has committed to. You see becoming Open and Affirming isn't about toleration and acceptance; it's about the celebration of beauty.

It's about the celebration of beauty.

But a rainbow is fleeting, isn't it?

By the time I had come back into my office and looked out the window again the bow I had seen was fainter, and I could only make out one half of it. A couple of minutes later it was completely gone.

I think the impermanence of a rainbow has something to tell us about what we should expect from this Open and Affirming journey we have committed to. Because becoming an Open and Affirming

congregation is not the end of the journey; it's simply an important milestone along the road that will call us to an increasingly broader and more radical welcome to LGBTQI people, sure, but really to all of God's children.

Today our commitment is strong, but further down our path will be new experiences and new people looking to join our shared journey of spiritual exploration and we will be challenged to open our doors of welcome just a little bit wider, to loosen our traditions just a little bit more, to make our church just a little bit more accessible to all. And what God promises us along the way is that it will rain again, and the sun will come out from behind the clouds again, and that we will see the beauty of a rainbow once again. And in its beauty we will be reminded how beautiful all of us really are. And we'll remember that it is no coincidence that God, and our LGBTQI brothers and sisters, and this church have embraced the beauty of the rainbow.

As I end this reflection I want to share the words of Bishop Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop elected within the Episcopal Church, once again. But I will change them just a little bit.

The members and friends of Keene Valley Congregational Church believe God is doing a new thing in the world. God is always moving us to include more people in the kingdom. God has taught us that about people of color, about women, and now we think God is teaching that about gay and lesbian and transgender folk. And we are humbled and privileged that we might be playing a very small part in that grand and wonderful plan of God's.

So today let us celebrate! Let us celebrate becoming an Open and Affirming congregation! Let us celebrate our embrace of the beauty

of the rainbow! Let us celebrate how God has invited us to play a part in the sacred drama of her love for all of her children.

And the church says: Amen!