

Sunday Morning Message
by Winona Eles (Worship)
March 13, 2022

Our message today is based on several resources provided to help us celebrate **National Affirming Day**.

We're going to begin with a short video from our United Church.

Courtney read the story of Lazarus this morning from the book of John. I'm going to share an alternate contemporary version of the story with you now.

I want to start by telling you a story.

I think we all like stories and Jesus certainly used them to teach.

This is a true story. I don't know if it really happened this way, but it is a true story.

Many years ago, in a small town, there was a young boy who lived with his parents and sisters. He was well liked and admired, and people thought he would go far in the family business.

While he was still young, his parents died. At first, people felt sorry for him and understood why he was still living with his sisters – they needed to be taken care of.

But years went by. Many women were interested in this young man and tried to entice him into marriage. He never did marry. Nor did his sisters.

Rumours started in the town. What kind of a man was this? Real men married and had children, especially sons. How could he be a real man if he never had sons to work for him, to carry on his name?

The rumours became worse. Wealthy business competitors, who were jealous of his wealth, started to tell stories that the man wasn't interested in women at all. He wasn't "normal". He was "one of those people".

Word spread and friends and customers started to avoid him. Some began to point out that the laws of the church and the laws of the country did not approve of his supposed behaviour. He needed to be punished.

Although the law said he should be killed, the people were reluctant to shed blood and began a campaign to shun him, to declare him dead.

His sisters, hearing the stories, warned their brother but he refused to bow to such foolish comments. The sisters sent word to their close friend, a preacher the citizens of the town knew and admired. They told their friend that their brother was “dying”, being shunned, and ignored by the townspeople. They begged their friend to come and speak some sense to the people.

Their friend was delayed and by the time he arrived the whole town had declared the man to be dead and that everyone was to shun him. Bowing to the pressure, he had left everything with his sisters and had gone to live in a cave.

When the friend arrived and heard what had happened, he wept. He knew that the people had failed to understand his preaching on love and justice. They failed to accept the fact that God created out of love and so all were loved equally by the creator.

He asked the sisters to take him to where their brother was buried so that he could be brought back to the life of the town. The sisters understood but were worried. Surely if their brother came back, the townspeople would become angry and raise a stink about his being accepted again as a full living, loving human being!

The friend insisted. The sisters took their friend to the cave. By now, most of the town had heard that the preacher was back and knew what he was planning on doing and followed them to the cave.

The preacher spoke again about how powerful God’s love was. That God, the source of all love and life, wanted all humans to live in a community of love and justice and equality. The town, in the way it had treated his friend, had failed to show God’s love. But God can forgive and give them all a new chance. God’s love is so powerful that life could be given back to the dead.

The preacher turned toward the cave in a loud voice cried, “Lazarus, come out!”

I would like to end with a few words from the Rev. Gary Patterson, minister at St. Andrews-Wesley United Church in Vancouver and former moderator of the United Church of Canada as provided in the resources for today.

From Rev. Patterson: Let me speak more personally. When I was a teen-ager, struggling with my sexuality, in the mid/late sixties, coming to realize that I was at least bisexual, probably a gay person, I was told by the government that I was a criminal; by the medical profession, that I was sick; and by the church, that I was a condemned sinner. When I turned 20 in 1969, the Canadian government took the first step in de-criminalizing homosexuality ("The State has no business in the bedrooms of the nation.") in 1973, the American Psychiatric Society determined that in and of itself homosexuality was not an illness; it was, in fact, social oppression and prejudice that created "mental health" problems for LGBTQ persons.

In 1988 the United Church, at the 32nd General Council, declared that all people regardless of sexual orientation are welcome as full members of the United Church, and all members are eligible to be considered for ordered ministry. It also affirms that God's intention for all human relationships (both heterosexual and homosexual couples) is that they be faithful, responsible, just, loving, health-giving, healing, and sustaining of community and self.

Over the years, starting with criminal, sick and sinner, the church has moved to variations on sick and/or disordered; to "don't ask, don't tell;" to disabled; to tolerated; to accepted; and finally, to affirmation and celebration.

It is an ongoing journey, and much still needs to be done. Hence the importance of National Affirming Sunday, and being Public, Intentional and Explicit.

-Gary Paterson

Thanks be to God.