

BECOMING WELCOMING & AFFIRMING: ONE CONGREGATION'S PROCESS

THE FIRST CHURCH IN ALBANY, NEW YORK

MARCH, 2010

CONGREGATIONAL STATEMENT:

A WELCOMING & AFFIRMING CONGREGATION

In response to God's unconditional love for all people made known to us in Jesus Christ, we are called to be a welcoming and affirming community. The First Church in Albany includes young and old, families, couples and singles, rich and poor, persons of various races, ethnicities, backgrounds, sexual orientations and gender identities, differing physical and mental abilities, believers and seekers. We welcome into the full life of the church all those whom God sends us. Centered in Christ, we commit ourselves to breaking down dividing walls and building a community where all are loved.

BACKGROUND PROCESS

In 2007 our congregation undertook a long-range planning process. After a Joint Boards (elders, deacons and trustees) retreat in October 2006 and a series of interviews with many members of the congregation in early 2007, we identified five areas of strength. One of them was diversity. At a congregational gathering in March 2007 we brainstormed ways in which to build on those strengths. A long-range planning team then gathered all that information and developed more specific goals. One of them was to have the congregation go through "a process of discussion, guided by God's Word and Holy Spirit, about whether to adopt a statement" that we welcome into the full life of the church all people whom God sends us. The goals were presented to the congregation at a post-service luncheon in October 2007 and the Joint Boards approved the goals in December 2007.

Events in the city of Albany surrounding a controversial visit by members of the Westboro Baptist Church led to increased discussion in the consistory and congregation about what it might mean to be a fully welcoming congregation, including persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Throughout the fall of 2009, we conducted a series of open meetings to talk about this question. The meetings included prayer, Bible study, discussion, and presentations by the Rev. Robert Luidens, member of the denominational task force on homosexuality, and by the Rev. Seth Kaper-Dale, co-pastor of the Reformed Church of Highland Park, New Jersey, who spoke about the experience of that church in becoming a congregation that openly welcomes and affirms gay, lesbian and transgender persons. All of the meetings at First Church have been open to all members and friends of the congregation. Summaries of some of those meetings and of the Bible study resources were made available. A sermon was preached in conjunction with the proposed statement in January, 2010 (see below, "*Belonging*") based on Isaiah 56: 1- 8 and Luke 4: 21 - 30

The above statement is a result of those discussions. Consistory discussed the statement and voted unanimously to approve it in March, 2010.

The questions and answers which follow also arose out of the discussions that were held during that months-long process. The responses do not represent official positions of the consistory or presume to speak for the entire congregation. They are an attempt to help us think through the implications of adopting a welcoming and affirming statement and to assist the congregation in further discussion.

QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES FOR DISCUSSION

1. Don't we welcome all people already? Is it even necessary to make a statement?

One of the strengths of our congregation is its diversity and the way all sorts of people have been welcomed into the life of our church, but that may not be well known outside our own congregation. Some Christian churches, including those in our own denomination, have made it clear that they do not fully welcome gay and lesbian persons. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender) people have been rejected and even persecuted in our society. Adopting a welcoming and affirming statement and letting it guide our actions is a way of following Christ's example of welcoming the outcasts.

Furthermore, in the process of discussing a possible welcoming statement for our church we have become aware of ways that we could be more welcoming, not only to gay and lesbian persons, but to others as well. We may not always be as fully welcoming as we think. We can do better. We hope that this statement will lead us in that direction.

2. Is it necessary to make a list of the 'categories' of people we welcome? We can never list everyone. Aren't we unintentionally excluding some by listing others? Why not just say we welcome everyone?

The list is meant to be illustrative, not exhaustive. When the Apostle Paul wanted to affirm that "all are one in Christ" (Galatians 3:28) he prefaced it by saying, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female." These were some of the social barriers in Paul's time. The prophet Isaiah specifically mentions the foreigner and the eunuch as belonging among God's people because these were categories of people who had formerly been excluded (Isaiah 56, Deuteronomy 23). Jesus began his public ministry by quoting from Isaiah 61 and naming the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed (Luke 4: 18-19.) When certain people have been previously singled out and excluded or discriminated against it is important to mention them by name in order to be clear that we mean to include them.

3. Why have the discussions focused especially on welcoming people of different sexual orientations and gender identities? Don't we need to be concerned about welcoming other people who may also feel excluded?

We do need to be concerned about welcoming all people but in some parts of our society and in some churches, gay, lesbian and transgender people in particular have been singled out and made to feel excluded. The issue of welcoming these persons in the life of the church has been a controversial one in many denominations, including the Reformed Church in America. For these reasons it is important to devote time and attention to this issue and to be clear that these persons are welcomed in our church.

4. Are we welcoming and affirming in other areas of diversity?

Our congregation includes people from various races, educational backgrounds, walks of life, differing family configurations, young and old. The building is fully accessible. But in the course of our discussions we learned that there are probably ways we can be more welcoming—to the hearing and sight impaired, for example. Perhaps we would benefit from some frank discussions about race. There may be things we can change about some of our worship services or other programs or activities that can help more people feel more welcome.

5. What does it mean to be an “affirming” community? Who or what are we affirming?

We want to affirm all people, recognizing each person, regardless of background, circumstance or sexual orientation as God's beloved child, and therefore worthy of our respect, care and love.

6. What do we mean by the “full life of the church”?

We mean that participation in worship, the sacraments, volunteering in church activities or programs, serving on a church committee or board, being ordained to the office of elder or deacon, funerals, weddings, or offering other pastoral services of the church, will not be denied because of race, class, sexual orientation or any other such category. We also believe that that a diverse membership is a strength of the church and that by welcoming a variety of people into the full life of the church we become a stronger, more faithful congregation of Jesus Christ. A diversity of people with a diversity of gifts enriches our life together.

7. I thought the responsibility and authority for admitting people into the membership of the church belonged to the Board of Elders. Will that change?

The Board of Elders will continue to exercise the same responsibility and authority as they have in the past. They admit persons into membership, act on requests for baptism, and exercise responsible care and oversight of all the members including the ministers. The same vows and expectations would apply to all people requesting membership in the church.

8. Does this mean that a gay person or couple could present a child for baptism?

Each request for baptism is presented before the Board of Elders. As long as at least one of the parents or guardians is a member of the congregation and the couple or parent/guardian is able to faithfully and sincerely assume the vows of baptism, the Board of Elders would consider the request.

The same vows and expectations would apply to all people requesting baptism for themselves or for their child.

9. Does this mean that a gay or lesbian person could be ordained a deacon or elder?

Yes, if duly nominated by the consistory and elected by the congregation and the person is able to faithfully and sincerely assume the vows of ordination. The same vows and expectations would apply to all people who are candidates for ordination.

10. Does this mean that a gay or lesbian couple could be married in our church?

When a couple comes to the church requesting marriage the pastor meets several times with the couple for pre-marital counseling, to plan the ceremony, and to help the couple prepare for married life together. The pastor may seek the counsel of the Board of Elders. The same vows and expectations would apply to all people who are seeking to be married –a promise to live in a committed, loving and just relationship marked by fidelity and permanency.

11. But are same-gender weddings even possible in New York?

Until and unless the laws of NY State are modified the marriage would not be recognized by the state. It would, however, be a marriage blessed by the church.

12. Does this mean we could call a gay or lesbian person to be our pastor?

Adopting this statement would not change the process for calling a minister. That remains the responsibility of the Joint Boards after receiving a recommendation from a search committee and seeking the mind of the congregation. If the Joint Boards approves we could call a gay or lesbian person to serve as our pastor. However, any call that a congregation extends to a minister must first be approved by the classis. And only the classis has the authority to ordain persons to the office of Minister of Word and Sacrament.

13. What if I don't agree that we should welcome gay, lesbian or transgender persons into the full life of the church?

This is an issue about which faithful Christians can honestly disagree and still remain members of the same congregation. Such disagreement can be uncomfortable and even painful at times, but we do not think that this issue should divide the church. Our congregation values diversity, including a diversity of opinion. In spite of our differing opinions and honest disagreements we can remain together and still love each other, still learn from each other, and still serve Christ together.

14. There are some passages in the Bible that say that homosexual behavior is a sin. How can we be a church “Reformed according to the Word of God” if we don’t follow the teachings of scripture?

In Genesis 19 (the story of Sodom) the men of the city ask Lot to bring out his guests “that we may know them.” (To “know” is sometimes a euphemism in the Bible for sexual intercourse.) The motive of the men may not have been so much to satisfy their sexual desires (it certainly does not imply a loving relationship between two people of the same sex) but rather an act of sexual abuse, and an exercise of power as a way as a way to humiliate them. In an effort to protect his guests Lot offers the men of the city his virgin daughters instead. This is a strange and sordid story and hardly the place to look for teachings on sexual morality. Before we assume the story is only or primarily about homosexual behavior it is important to look at how is it interpreted elsewhere in scripture.

Where the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is referred to elsewhere in scripture homosexuality is never specifically mentioned in association with it. The letter of Jude speaks of “sexual immorality and unnatural lust” (Jude 1:7.) The prophet Ezekiel lists the sins of Sodom as pride, excess of food, prosperous ease, and neglect of the poor (Ezekiel 16: 48-49.) When Jesus speaks of the sins of Sodom he speaks of the sin of inhospitality (Matthew 10:15.)

Passages in Leviticus 18 and 20 are a part of a section that contains the Holiness Code which also prohibits sowing a field with two kinds of seed and wearing a garment made of two different materials and various other ritual and moral guidelines. Part of the task of interpreting scripture is to distinguish which teachings are for all times and places and which are particular to a particular context of history, to discern that which is culture-bound (to Israel in the 10 century BC, for example) and that which is fundamental to faith in any age. To do that it is important to look at the whole sweep of scripture and at the bigger picture of what the Bible says about God’s relationship with human beings and the portrait of God we see most clearly in Jesus Christ.

The New Testament passages that are often cited as referring to homosexual behavior are all from the letters of Paul (Romans 1: 26-27; I Corinthians 6:9; I Timothy 1:10.) Many interpreters think that Paul was not talking about homosexuality per se, but was writing against male prostitution and pedophilia, two common practices in the Roman culture of the day. Many think that Paul was condemning sexual abuse and sexual power and was not really addressing the situation of a same-gender, mutually loving and faithful relationships.

The word *homosexuality* is never used in scripture. There is no such word in ancient Greek and nothing is said about homosexual orientation as understood by modern science, nor is anything said about the loving relationship of two same-gender persons who have covenanted to be life partners. None of the scripture passages often cited as prohibiting homosexual behavior addresses same-gender relationships based on mutuality and respect and characterized by fidelity and commitment. And there is not a single word about homosexuality in the teachings of Jesus or in any of the four Gospels. The Bible takes much more seriously sins like injustice, greed and lack of compassion than it does sins having to do with sexual behavior.

Although there is no consensus among Christians about the interpretation of these passages, it is clear that the Bible devotes relatively little attention to this issue. A much more prominent theme in

the Bible is the inclusive love of God (often over the resistance of God's people who want to restrict who belongs; see Isaiah 56, Acts 10 and 11, for example.) And an important work of the Holy Spirit seems to be changing people's minds about who is in and who is out. Jesus singled out for particular condemnation the wealthy, the powerful and the people concerned about ritual and moral purity, who were often the socially respectable people of his day, and stood with the outsiders, the poor, the disreputable and the fearful rather than with the self-confident and the self-righteous.

15. Will we be at variance with the policies of the Reformed Church in America if we welcome gay, lesbian or transgendered persons into the full life of our church?

Nothing in the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America (the *Book of Church Order*, the *Liturgy* and the Standards of Unity [the *Belgic Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the *Canons of the Synod of Dort*]) prohibits welcoming gay or lesbian persons into the life of the church. (They simply don't address the issue.) Some of the reports presented at previous General Synods have said that homosexual behavior (not homosexual orientation) is sinful. Certainly some homosexual behavior is sinful, as is some heterosexual behavior, but we do not think homosexual behavior per se is always sinful. In that respect many of us differ with some of the reports presented to the General Synod.

In 1990 the General Synod voted to adopt as the position of the Reformed Church in America that the practicing homosexual lifestyle is contrary to scripture, while at the same encouraging love and sensitivity towards such persons as fellow human beings. (*MGS 1990: 461*)

In 1994, General Synod voted to adopt another resolution addressing the church's relationship with homosexuals. The resolution stated: "The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America recognizes and confesses that the Reformed Church in America has failed to live up to its own statements regarding homosexuality in 1978 (*MGS 1978, pp. 229-40*), 1979 (*MGS 1979, pp. 128-135*), and 1990 (*MGS 1990, R-11, p. 461*). Few in the Reformed Church in America have creatively and lovingly spoken with persons with a homosexual orientation about the truths of Scripture and the hope of the gospel. Many have participated in or tolerated forms of speech and behavior which humiliate or degrade such persons. Many of the churches within the Reformed Church in America have not provided an environment where persons have felt the acceptance and freedom to struggle with hard issues involving sexual orientation. Many Reformed Church in America members have shown no interest in listening to their heartfelt cries as they struggle for self-acceptance and dignity. For all these wrongs, this General Synod expresses its humble and heartfelt repentance, and its desire to reflect the love of Christ to homosexual persons. In all that this General Synod does, it seeks to obey the whole of Scripture, demonstrating in its own life the same obedience it asks from others. It calls itself and the whole church to a greater faithfulness to Christ in relationships with persons of homosexual orientation."

More recently the RCA task force on homosexuality, after conducting a series of dialogues throughout the denomination, reported to the General Synod of 2009. (*MGS, 2009, pp. 104-109*) Part of that report stated: "Certainly, there is no consensus in the church regarding the antecedents of sexual orientation among humans, no consensus about whether same-sex unions can be faithful expressions of covenantal commitment, and no consensus about what ecclesiastical roles are appropriate for those who engage in homosexual practices. (Some participants in dialogue events would even deny certain civil rights to celibate persons of same-sex orientation, in contravention of the 1978 Commission on Theology paper."

The dialogue coordinator and steering committee recommended that the General Synod postpone further policy deliberations regarding homosexuality and that "it is wise to postpone further *Book of Church Order* proposals on the matter until additional local churches and classes become intentional about some form of dialogue. While

some parts of the church were ready, even eager, for a dialogue on homosexuality, other areas were moderately to strongly resistant.”

The report further stated that the dialogue process was “beneficial as a tool for helping participants understand and accept each other while simultaneously differing on emotionally loaded issues.” And that while “some transformation took place in understanding, dialogue facilitators also saw strongly held, persistent differences in beliefs. Beyond that, and distressingly, the RCA is a church that has not implemented the pastoral care and ministry recommendations that the General Synod commended in 1979 regarding homosexual persons.”

Also in 2009, the General Synod voted to affirm the value of continued dialogue and discernment on the topic of homosexuality, to encourage assemblies to refrain from disciplinary proceedings as a way of dealing with differing viewpoints on the issue, and to recommend that office holders and ministers avoid actions in violation of the policies of earlier statements of the General Synod. (*MGS 2009*, p. 236.)

16. In 2005 the Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield, a Reformed Church minister and past president of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, was disciplined by the General Synod for officiating at the same-gender marriage of his daughter and her partner. If one of our pastors performs a same-gender wedding could he or she face similar consequences?

The Rev. Dr. Kansfield is a “General Synod Professor of Theology” and as such was under the care and supervision of the General Synod. Ordained and installed ministers in our church are under the care and supervision of the Classis of Albany. All ministers installed by the classis vow to “accept the church’s order and governance, submitting to ecclesiastical discipline should [they] become delinquent in either life or doctrine.” When becoming a member of the classis, a minister also promises “to submit... to the counsel and admonition of the classis, always ready, with gentleness and reverence, to give an account of [his or her] understanding of the Christian faith.” In the potential case of officiating at a same-gender wedding ceremony, someone could formally complain to the classis and the classis would then have to determine whether or not that action violated the vows of ministry or the policies of the denomination.

17. If the consistory adopts this statement how will it be used? How will this statement be communicated to those outside our congregation?

The statement can serve as a guide in our life together and especially for the consistory and the Board of Elders. We may publish the statement in church publications, including the newsletter and the church website. We may also decide to include the statement in public advertizing. Adopting a welcoming and affirming statement is only one part of a continuing process. We still have much to learn about being a welcoming and loving community and we hope this statement can help us do that. We think it already has. We are still growing in faith, in hope and in love. We still have much to learn about how to “welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed us.” (Romans 15:7)

“Belonging”

Over the past several months we have been talking about whether we should adopt a statement about being a welcoming and affirming congregation. One result of those discussions is the statement included on the insert in your bulletin:

In response to God's unconditional love for all people made known to us in Jesus Christ, we are called to be a welcoming and affirming community. The First Church in Albany includes young and old, families, couples and singles, rich and poor, persons of various races, ethnicities, backgrounds, sexual orientations and gender identities, differing physical and mental abilities, believers and seekers. We welcome into the full life of the church all those whom God sends us. Centered in Christ, we commit ourselves to breaking down dividing walls and building a community where all are loved.

That's not an official statement. Consistory has been talking about and will talk about it more and we hope that others will be discussing this, too.

Many of you have asked questions, good and helpful questions, about this process and why we are considering making such a statement, about whether we need to or should say something like this at all. I'm not able to address all of those questions in one sermon, but I hope that this morning's sermon can be part of the discussion. And after worship this morning in the parlor there will be additional opportunity to ask questions and respond to the sermon.

At the start let me be clear about one thing: The reason for considering this statement is not because we have not been welcoming; it's not because of something we have done or not done that has made someone feel unwelcome. This is one of the most welcoming and diverse congregations of which I have been a part; which is not to say we couldn't do better. But the fact is, many different kinds of people have found a home here. This congregation has been very warm and welcoming.

So why say it? Because sometimes it's good to say who we are and affirm what we already know and already do and want to do.

I love my wife. She knows that; I don't have to tell her. But sometimes it's good to say it. And it's nice to hear. It's good to remind ourselves who we are and whom we are called to be.

And the truth is, others may not know. Churches, including churches in the Reformed Church in America, have not always been welcoming, especially to gay, lesbian and transgender people. Some have been told, maybe not directly, but pretty clearly, that they are not welcome.

Let me also say that I've not heard anyone say that about this congregation. I've never heard or sensed that anyone has communicated that people—whomever they are, wherever they've come from— aren't welcome in worship at this church. I think you've made it pretty clear that all are welcome in worship. I do think we are less clear about what we mean about welcoming people into 'full life of the church.'

God's people have often struggled with who is in and who is out. We are God's "called out" people, separate from the surrounding culture, 'in the world but not of it', we live by different values, live for a different purpose, often see the world differently than others. The problem is sometimes that understanding has become distorted and God's people have come to see their 'chosenness' as a kind of privilege or entitlement.

In the Gospel lesson this morning Jesus names some of the 'outsiders' who were recipients of God's grace and participants in God's plan, while the 'insiders' were not chosen. And the insiders got so upset with him they nearly threw him off a cliff.

Through the prophet Isaiah God calls for his house to be “a house of prayer for all peoples” and specifically mentions the eunuch and the foreigner. Why? Because Deuteronomy 23 cites these as the very people who were specifically forbidden to be a part of the worshipping assemblage of God’s people. It is a direct contradiction to what scripture had said earlier. Those formerly excluded are now to be welcomed into the fellowship.

In Isaiah’s time it was eunuchs and foreigners. The first Christians had to face a decision about whether or not to accept Gentiles, and then, on what grounds. For a time in the history of our nation and in the life of many congregations African-Americans were not welcomed into full life of the church. Until not so very long ago women could not be ordained to office in the Reformed Church. And in each of these cases, people mounted biblical arguments for excluding certain people.

Today one of the issues we are debating is whether gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender persons are truly, fully welcomed into the life of the church.

That debate has taken a lot of energy in our denomination and in others. And in some mainline Protestant denominations the debate has become quite rancorous, threatening to divide the church. I find it distressing that the church of Jesus Christ which has such a vital mission to fulfill in a world where there is so much need, so much hurt, should spend so much time and energy arguing among ourselves about this—there are more important things we could be doing. Thankfully, there are more important things we are doing. Still, this is an important issue and one worthy of our careful attention and prayerful discussion.

Why? Because real people are involved. Real justice is at stake. Real faithfulness to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ is involved in this issue.

When we talk about gay and lesbian and bisexual and transgender people we are not just talking about people out there somewhere. We are talking about our own brothers and sisters and sons and daughters and aunts and uncles in our own biological families. We are talking about our brothers and sisters in Christ, men and women who break bread with us, who worship with us, who serve Christ in mission with us.

For a long time these people have been told that there is something wrong with them and the church has often been a part of that, making biblical arguments against homosexual behavior.

There are about a half dozen passages in scripture that are sometimes cited. I think it’s safe to say not one of the biblical writers was talking about sexual orientation as it is understood today. And most, perhaps all of these passages are addressing exploitive, abusive relationships, and that is the kind of behavior we ought to condemn, whether it is homosexual, heterosexual, or asexual. None of the scripture passages often referred to address same-gender relationships based on mutuality and respect and love and characterized by faithfulness and life-long commitment.

These scripture passages merit more discussion and perhaps we can talk more during the post-service hour. We also have some Bible study resources available.

The draft statement says “we are called to be a welcoming and affirming community.” What is the difference between just welcoming and being welcoming and affirming?

Let me put it this way: When I was in grade school and high school I played a lot of baseball in the summer-- not on any organized team, just a gathering of boys from the neighborhood. Two people were chosen as captains and they began choosing their team mates, taking turns, first one than the other, until all were chosen. The team captains tended to chose their friends and those whom they judged to be the better players. If I was one of the very last to be chosen, I guess I felt welcomed-- sort of. But if I was one of the first chosen, then I felt affirmed.

If we say “*we are called to be a welcoming and affirming community*” we are saying, “We welcome you, not reluctantly or half-heartedly, but fully, eagerly, with open arms. You have gifts to offer in Christ’s service; you enrich our life together; you make us a better team, a more faithful congregation of Jesus Christ.”

And in saying that we also say that as followers of Jesus Christ we also have certain expectations of each other in this fellowship.

The word from Isaiah was not quite an unconditional welcome to all eunuchs, all foreigners—but “to those who keep my Sabbath,” says God, “those who hold fast my covenant, I will make joyful in my house of prayer.”

When someone presents themselves before the board of elders for membership in this congregation, we don’t ask if you are straight or gay, we ask you to keep covenant: “Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Will you be a faithful member of this congregation and through worship and service seek to advance God’s purposes here and throughout the world?”

When you present a child for baptism, or request baptism for yourself, we don’t ask if you are rich or poor, straight or gay, we ask you to keep covenant: “Do you promise to instruct this child in the way of Jesus Christ? Do you promise to accept the spiritual guidance of the church, to walk in a spirit in Christian love with this congregation and to seek those things that make for unity, purity and peace?”

When someone is elected and ordained to the office of elder or deacon, we don’t ask about sexual orientation or political party affiliation or ethnic origin. We ask you to keep covenant: “Will you be diligent in your study of Holy Scripture and in your use of the means of grace? Will you pray for God’s people and lead them by your own example in faithful service and holy living?”

And when a couple asks about getting married in this church it shouldn’t matter if they are a straight couple or a gay couple. What matters is if they are willing to keep covenant together and make vows before God and their witnesses: “Will you love each other, comfort each other, honor and protect each other, and forsaking all others, be faithful to each other as long as you both shall live?”

I know that many, maybe most people disagree with me about this and that’s OK. Some of you may think I’m nuts for even suggesting such a thing. But I hope you can understand that I am not advocating an “anything goes” mentality with respect to marriage, but rather make this argument out of deep respect for the institution of marriage.

Often the case for gay marriage is stated in terms like “marriage equality” and “equal rights.” And it is that, but more importantly I think, it is about marriage responsibility. It’s about keeping covenant.

New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote: “The conservative course must not be to banish gay people from making marriage commitments. The conservative course ought to be to expect gay people to make marriage commitments. We should insist on it. We should regard it as scandalous that two people can claim to love each other and not want to sanctify their love with marriage and fidelity. When liberals argue for gay marriage they sound like it’s a really good employment benefits plan or they frame it as a civil rights issue. But marriage is not like that. It is going to be up to conservatives to make the important moral case for marriage including marriage among people who are gay. Not making it means drifting further into a culture of contingency, which, when it comes to intimate and sacred relationships, is an abomination.” (Cited by Joanna Adams in a sermon, “The Bible and Homosexuality,” October 8, 2006, Morningside Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia)

In one of his essays Wendell Berry decries the term “safe sex.” “Sex has never been safe,” he says, “and it is less safe now than it has ever been....Sexual lovemaking between humans is not and cannot be the thoughtless, instinctual coupling of animals; it is not ‘recreation’; it is not ‘safe.’ It is the strongest prompting and the greatest joy that young people are likely to experience. Because it is so powerful, it is risky....It involves the giving away of the self that if not honored and reciprocated, inevitably reduces dignity and self-

respect," and that, he says, is why it involves the whole community. (Wendell Berry. *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*: Pantheon Books, 1992, pp. 142-143)

"Lovers must not," he writes, "live for themselves alone. They must finally turn from their gaze at one another back toward the community. If they had only themselves to consider, lovers would not need to marry, but they must think of others and of other things. They say their vows to the community as much as to one another, and the community gathers around them to hear and to wish them well, on their behalf and on its own. It gathers around them because it understands how necessary, how joyful, and how fearful this joining is. These lovers, pledging themselves to one another 'until death,' are giving themselves away... And so here, at the very heart of community life, we find this momentous giving." (Wendell Berry. *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*, pp. 137-138)

I know that with regard to same-gender marriage probably most Americans disagree with me. I know that most Christians — intelligent, thoughtful and compassionate Christians — think differently about this. Not that long ago, I thought differently about it. And one of the reasons I felt I could address this issue in a sermon because I think we are capable of having an intelligent, thoughtful and compassionate discussion about it.

However you think about this, I think we can all recognize that the God we meet in scripture is a "gathering" God, persistently pushing at the boundaries, making the circle larger, welcoming more and more people into God's loving embrace.

The passage we read from Isaiah tells of a God who gathers the outcasts of Israel and who will gather others to them besides those already gathered. (Isaiah 56:8) Elsewhere Isaiah speaks of a God who will feed his flock like a shepherd; and gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom. (Isaiah 40:11.)

Jesus, heart-broken over Jerusalem, lamented, "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." (Luke 13:34)

And when Jesus wanted to tell people what God is like he told stories:

Of a king who sent his servant out into the streets to gather everyone they could find and bring them in to the wedding banquet (Matt 22:10.) "Many will come from east and west, from north and south and will sit at table in the kingdom of God." (Lk.13:29)

He told the story of a shepherd with a flock of a 100 sheep who leaves everything to go searching for the one that is lost. (Luke 15:3-7)

And of a father who, while his wandering and wayward son was still a far off, sees him and is so filled with compassion that he forgets his dignity and runs out to embrace him. (Luke 15: 11-32)

This is a gathering God, reaching out in love, who wants to gather everyone in the wide embrace of God's love. This gathering God is always pushing at the boundaries, breaking down the walls, enlarging the circle. God is pushing out boundaries of fear, of custom, of tradition to say, "You belong—whomever you are."

Not your race, not your past, not your sexual identity, not your mental or your physical ability, not whether you agree with everything said in this sermon, not whether you have it all together—none of this is a barrier to your belonging. So come and keep covenant with us. You too, can belong— truly, fully belong to God's called out people.

John D. Paarlberg
The First Church in Albany