

Are We Home Free?
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U. U. Congregation of the Outer Banks
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You may not have really noticed this, but our opening hymn today, “We Are a Gentle Angry People,” is usually the closing hymn, the place we arrive at the end of a service that’s focused on sexual orientation or gender identity. Today, we started where we so often finish because in this year when the United States Supreme Court has finally affirmed that civil marriage is a civil right for all people in America, it’s tempting to feel like we are home free. Love has brought us so far, and we want to celebrate!

And we should. The decision affirming marriage equality was a crowning moment in a struggle that has been long and hard and too often heartbreaking.

I remember being in Virginia, as minister at our Charlottesville congregation, when the proposition limiting marriage to one man and one woman was on the ballot there. Some of us dared to believe that it might fail. We knocked on doors, we went to public events, we had rallies, we carried signs at polling places. The congregation decided to hang a large banner with a rainbow border on the front of our building saying: “This Church Supports Marriage Rights.” But equality lost that year.

I remember moving to California in 2008. The California Supreme Court had established marriage equality there the year before. I celebrated my first legal wedding for two men that fall, signing a marriage certificate with a joyfully clear conscience for the first time. Then came Prop 8. Our congregation put up signs; we canvassed on phones, we knocked on doors, we spoke at public forums, we rallied on street corners. We were almost sure we would win.

But equality lost that year. The margin was smaller, but equality still lost. Rev. Bill Sinkford, who was then President of our Unitarian Universalist Association, described this experience as “losing forward.” He said he was tired of it. So were a lot of us.

And then it seemed the shutters came down all at once and the light of love and justice was pouring through everywhere. The end of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” The fall of the so-called Defense of Marriage Act. Prop 8 went down. The Justice Department said that transgender people should be protected from employment and housing discrimination. Suddenly the legal barriers to equality for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer people seemed to be falling all around us.

And then, this year, there was Obergefell vs. Hodges. Marriage equality became the law of the land. The spectacle of a county clerk in Kentucky defying the law just showed the magnitude of the shift—resistance to the progress of equality has become the rearguard action, the last-ditch

efforts of a culture of bias which has lost its status as the legally dominant reality. Justice is winning. Love is winning.

All this feels like it happened quickly, but we know this rush of progress came after decades of work, decades of gentle, angry people singing for our lives, decades of incredible courage and perseverance by “the marginalized of the marginalized,” decades of people taking their hearts and their lives in their hands and coming out to their families and to the world, asking only that their civil rights and their worth and dignity as human beings be respected. And we have been there, faith communities like ours, not perfectly, but we have been there as far as we could, taking our place in the struggle, standing on the side of love.

If that isn't the holy power of love made visible in the world, I don't know what is. Oh, we should be celebrating. With our lesbian, gay, and bisexual sisters and brothers, with our transgender and queer siblings, we should be celebrating, oh, yes. We should wheel, dance, shimmy, and shake. Well, some of us should. I probably shouldn't. It doesn't look good on me. We have reached a place of greater equality, and that is well worth celebrating. But are we home free?

This spring, before I arrived here, First Flight High School became a victim of the hate group calling itself the Westboro Baptist Church, who stood on the street telling our LGBTQ children that they are evil and worthless, hated by God. Last week, the folks who rallied around that County Clerk who believes her religious opinions supersede the Constitution were very clear in their belief that only heterosexual women and men who were born into the gender they identify with are worthy of respect, or of equal protection under the law.

But those are just easy, obvious examples of something that's still pervasive. We still live in a culture framed by the more subtle but still painful kind of discrimination that happens when the rules, the language, and the customs of the public world assume that everyone is a heterosexual, cis-gendered male or female. From drivers' licenses to health insurance forms, from public restrooms to sports, the false assumption that humankind is divided into people who were born girls and people who were born boys still rules. LGBTQ people are still invisible in most school curricula, whether it's history, literature, or sexuality education. It's still common for young people who identify as lesbian, gay, or bi, or who are transgender or gender nonconforming, to be bullied in school and outside it. At home, at work, in school, and in churches, temples, mosques, and worship centers, queer folk of every description still face rejection, hatred, and violence.

So no, we're not home free, not quite yet. When Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual youth are four times as likely as heterosexual youth to attempt suicide, when as many as half of transgender youth report having thought about suicide, and up to one quarter report having attempted it at least once, we're not quite home free. When a queer-identified teen's skirt is set on fire on a bus on the way home from school because a classmate thinks it's a funny way to teach them they should be wearing pants, we're not quite home free. When 23 transgender women have been

murdered so far in 2015, when news media routinely identify the victims as male even though they were killed because they were trans women, we are not quite home free.

Love has brought us a long way, and there is still a long way to go. Bias and exclusion are tenacious; fear of the other is a formidable power. They don't disappear when their legal justification ends. We have seen this with white supremacy, which has evolved and shape-shifted and remained insidiously powerful for more than 400 years in this land even as laws, attitudes, and language have changed. Heterosexism, homophobia, and the bias facing trans people are following the same path, disguising themselves as property rights, as free speech, as religious liberty. Domination never gives up easily.

That's where we come in. We stand on the side of love, and love doesn't give up easily either.

The thing is, it's those "marginalized of the marginalized," the people who started the movement for justice and equality, who are still caught on those margins, waiting for the movement to bring equality and justice for them. Marriage equality isn't the central issue in their lives. Trans men and women, people who don't identify with either gender, people who find themselves moving along a spectrum that is much more fluid than the simple female/male binary—they are still waiting. And something can get in the way, as we seek to stand with them.

If we are honest, we might have to admit that we may feel a little uncomfortable with some of the folks who are still waiting for sexual and gender equality. We may not know enough yet to fully understand their identities and their lives.

I have a family friend, a 26-year-old trans man. He's one of my daughter's closest friends, and has been ever since they were in middle school together, when he was my daughter's closest girlfriend. I've been privileged to witness some parts of his journey. I have not always understood him. But I am in awe of his courage and tenacity, his ability to follow the truth he absolutely knew about himself when almost the whole world, starting with his family, told him he was wrong, out of bounds, unacceptable. He lives a much more supported life now, but it has not been easy getting there. He's a Facebook friend; some of his posts touch my heart deeply, some are just hilarious, and some still make me very uncomfortable. And all of them, including the uncomfortable ones, show me a human being finding and becoming who he truly is. This young man whom I love and honor is teaching me things I need to know.

Not every discomfort is a growth opportunity, but if I'm not willing ever to be uncomfortable, I'm probably not growing. If you find yourself uncomfortable sometimes, still trying to catch up in understanding transgender identities and the ever-expanding range of possibilities that the gender-queer identity seems to express, don't turn away. Embrace that place of discomfort in yourself. Don't try to force it to disappear, or pretend it isn't there—it won't work. Try to recognize it as a space for grace, telling you where your mind and heart and spirit might find some room to grow. Twenty years ago, when our congregations were first going through the "Welcoming Congregation" program, many of us were very uncomfortable; many of us were not

ready to embrace the idea of marriage equality at all. Look how far love has brought us since then.

And as we learn, as we grow, love will guide us toward what we are called to do next. Because of course, caring alone isn't enough. We have to show up. No matter how sincere I may be, caring without finding a way to show up doesn't change anyone's life, including my own. It may let me feel good and righteous for a while, but in the end it will leave me feeling helpless and hopeless.

So how do we show up? Sponsoring and being a visible presence at Pridefest is showing up. Listening to the wisdom of the queer community for how to best respond to Westboro when they were here—that was showing up. Engaging our own discomfort and paying attention to our own learning is showing up. We're showing up when we learn to say to our trans and gender non-conforming siblings: we see you; we honor your life; we celebrate your love; you have a home with us, and we stand with you.

What's next? It might be as simple as putting up a sign or a flag that makes our commitment to welcome everyone visible. It might be as risky as speaking up on love's behalf, in a conversation with people we care about, or people who have power in our lives. It might be as complicated as finding a way to support the Gay/Straight Alliances at our local high schools, or advocating for equality issues in our community or state.

The first step is always asking where and how we're needed. That's the best way to find out what the next step might be.

And then we can take one more step, and one more, and one more. One more step toward the Beloved Community; one more step toward the land of justice, equity, and compassion we know is the final destination for the whole human family. Every step is like finding one of those shards of light from the shattered vessels of our story; every step is part of repairing the world.

So take the time to celebrate, oh yes, and then take another step on the journey toward that land of freedom and justice where love rules, which is ours to help create, and which is our true home.