

God Clean

Rev. Joe Connolly

“And the voice spoke again, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’” — Acts 11:9.

Over the course of the last twenty-three years, my time here at the United Church of Christ in Norwich, you have heard me say what I am about to offer dozens of times. Of course, some in attendance may be here only a short time or may be here the first time and might not have heard me say this at all, so I do need to offer a brief version of this story yet again.

Bonnie and I met when I was thirty-nine and she was thirty-eight. We hit it off right away. We knew we were meant for one another when we started to trade terrible puns and jokes.

Bonnie, of course, lived in Brunswick, Maine and I lived in New York City. This was clear from the get go: if we were to do anything as foolish as to get married Bonnie would not moving to New York City. I can't imagine why she was of that opinion.

In any case a year later, when I was forty and Bonnie was thirty-nine we got married. It was the first marriage for both of us. One of the things I say about getting married for the first at that advanced age is it made us demographically unacceptable.

For instance, most of our friends had been married with children for quite some time. In a sense it was evident we were abnormal and there were times we actually felt that way, felt we did not fit in.

In short, society was not quite in tune with where we were at. Outcast is certainly too strong a word to apply to our situation. But the point is we clearly defied some cultural norms and, on occasion, felt left out, different. Which is also to say society makes many groups feel left out, different, simply for not being in some specific, pre-determined, easily definable, identifiable group or category. (Slight pause.)

One of my mentors in seminary said one job a pastor clearly has is to be the local theologian. However, there are times in the Connolly household when one Bonnie Scott Connolly acts as my local theologian.

That happened recently when women who are members of this church graciously gave a tea party in her honor. Bonnie wrote out what she wanted to say, how she wanted to thank people.

And then she revised it slightly for a ‘thank you’ in the Newsletter. Many of you may have seen this. There was one section which was deeply theological. It was both spoken at the party and written in the Newsletter. I want to repeat it.

(Quote:) “I love my church and I love my church family. The Norwich U.C.C. is an Open and Affirming Church. This is often seen only as referring to sexual orientation but I personally see it as much more.”

“There are many things society doesn't really affirm or accept that I feel my church family is open and affirming to— such as accepting women who might not be mothers or grandmothers; women who are terrible cooks; women who are a different weight every year or who tell terrible jokes. I guess what I am really saying is thank you for accepting me with all my foibles.” (Slight pause.)

You see, there are some things society expects of people and not everyone conforms to those expectations. Bonnie hit on a number of those. And yes, outcast is too strong a term. So perhaps left out or different is more

accurate. And yes, this church welcomed us, despite our foibles and eccentricities. (Slight pause.)

This is from Luke/Acts in the section known as Acts: “And the voice spoke again, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’” (Slight pause.)

There was an interesting online post by *New York Times* columnist David Leonhardt this week. He quoted a *Washing Post* article. Based on the *Post* article, he posed a question— see if you can name this group of Americans:

It is one of the largest and fastest-growing demographic groups in the United States. It suffers from substantial discrimination.

About 40 percent of Americans say they wouldn’t vote for someone from this group to be president. By comparison, 7 percent say they will not vote for an African-American candidate, 8 percent say that about a female candidate, 18 percent say that about a Mormon candidate and 24 percent say that about a gay candidate.

Eight state constitutions even prohibit this group from holding public office. Surveys have shown Americans don’t want anyone from this group marrying their children or teaching their children.

Not one of the 2020 presidential candidate comes from this group or at least admits to coming from this group. What group is being described? (Slight pause.) Atheists. [1] (Slight pause.)

You sometimes hear arguments that religious people in the United States suffer from discrimination and that’s true in some sense. Specific religions do suffer discrimination.

And yes, in some parts of secular America, there is a skepticism about religion which can veer into disrespect. But disrespect is disrespect no matter where or what its origins. (Slight pause.)

Over the course of the last twenty-three years, my time here at the United Church of Christ in Norwich, you have heard me say what I am about to offer dozens of times. But to reiterate, Luke and Acts were written by the same author at the same time.

There is no good reason to give the section of the Christian Scriptures know as Luke any more credence than the section known as Acts. In fact, there is a very good reason Acts should be given at least equal standing with Luke.

Why? Acts relates something about the movement of the Spirit of God, the reality of the Risen Christ, theology in the early church among the followers of the Way, the followers of Jesus, the followers of the Christ. Acts is about how the Spirit of God pushes the early church out of any comfort zones it might have had, the preconceived notions it might have had concerning understandings about God.

In this reading from the 11th Chapter of Acts Peter gives a synopsis of the story offered in Chapter 10. For me this is the clear point of the story: in Christ we are a new creation. In Christ old things have passed away. In Christ *our* old things have passed away. (Slight pause.)

Let me put that into language which might sound a little more contemporary. The way God was understood by early Christians is totally changed by the reality of the resurrection of the Christ. The way God is understood by us is or should be totally changed by the reality of the resurrection of the Christ.

Indeed, the Christ was not raised only for Jews. And remember the followers of Christ initially are only Jews. The Christ was not raised only for gentiles. Christ was raised for everyone, the entire human race, no exceptions.

With the resurrection of the Christ this became clear: no one—*no one*— is outcast, excluded. With the resurrection of the Christ we are made whole and the human race is made one. The resurrection of the Christ gives clarity to the idea that God loves everyone, no exceptions. (Slight pause.)

To come back to what my favorite local theologian one Bonnie Scott Connolly said, the Norwich Church is an Open and Affirming Church. This is often seen only as referring to sexual orientation which in and of itself is a wonderful thing. But there is so much more.

In fact, here is how all encompassing the newness of God's creation in Christ really is: it would not matter to God that atheists do not accept God. God accepts atheists. Atheists— a group Americans apparently do not accept— are accepted by God. (Slight pause.)

Now, there is one thing which is unacceptable in the eyes of God. What is unacceptable in the eyes of God? Breaking covenant. And one of the few times we might break covenant is to assume or even to say God thinks any group is unworthy, unacceptable, unclean, outcast. (Slight pause.)

The resurrection of Christ— *the resurrection of the Christ*— makes the message God has for the human race easy to understand. God embraces each of us and all of us with unconditional love. We are, each of us, all of us, children of God.

God loves us. God invites us to love one another. Let us pray we up to the task. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “Let me offer this quote from theologian Walter Brueggemann (quote:) ‘The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair.’ This is the social truth Brueggemann is addressing: God loves everyone. What part of everyone do we not understand?”

BENEDICTION: Hear now this blessing: God is with us, always. When we love one another, God is pleased. And may the steadfast love of God and the peace of Christ, which surpasses understanding, keep our minds and hearts in the companionship and will of the Holy Spirit, this day and forever more. Amen.

[1]

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/13/opinion/atheists-religion.html?searchResultPosition=1>