

Celebrating 30 years of being ONA

September 18, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Jaz Buchanan

Texts: Psalm 139: 1-14, Luke 15: 1-10

Psalm 139:1-14

L: O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

**C: You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.**

L: You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.

**C: Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.**

L: You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

**C: Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.**

L: Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

**C: If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.**

L: If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

**C: even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.**

L: If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and night wraps itself around me,
even the darkness is not dark to you;

**C: the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.**

L: For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

**C: I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.**

Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So, he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until they find it? And when they have found it, they lay it on their shoulders and rejoice. And when they come home, they call together their friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Every time a person bravely speaks the words out loud for the very first time, “I’m gay or bi or queer, or I am non-binary, or these are my authentic pronouns” I imagine angels throwing a party and dancing in heaven.

Singing the words from our psalm, “you are fearfully and wonderfully made” whole heartedly celebrating a person’s journey returning home – to themselves. For this person just declared, no matter what anyone else has ever said to them, that they are the very beloved person God formed and knit in their parent’s womb.

If only every queer and trans person was greeted with that kind of love and affirmation that I imagine the angels sharing. Especially in churches.

Today, at First Church in Cambridge, we celebrate that those doors, our doors, have been open and affirming for thirty years. Becoming the 52nd church in the United Church of Christ to take a stand. Believing that God welcomes, affirms, and celebrates every person not despite of, but because of their sexuality, gender identity and gender expression.

And then you, First Church, publicly declared that truth. That day marked the beginning of desperately needed justice work. By flying a rainbow flag proudly on your lawn with intentionality and care, you signaled to the Cambridge neighborhood and world, that justice work is far from complete, but the messy, good, and holy work is happening here.

Making a public declaration like that in 1991 had and still has an impact. I wish little me, a kid in the 90s, could have seen the work you were doing. Growing up, I didn’t even see a woman pastor and I definitely did not see any openly queer or trans people in the churches I was a part of.

As a kid I could feel I was different, but in the suburban NJ town I grew up in, I did not know, understand, or have the LGBTQ language to describe how I was feeling. And when I did begin to learn the language from adults and peers, I quickly internalized deep shame and tried to separate myself from any queer identity markers as much as I could – when really, I was just separating myself from my own self.

Public declaration and affirmation matters. If we ever wonder do we need LGBTQ+ flags on our lawn, the answer is yes. The answer is going to continue to be yes for a very long time. It matters. As a queer woman, if I do not see any kind of rainbow anything on a church, I question. I hesitate.

Even when I hear “all are welcome,” I tilt my head sideways and wonder... because welcoming and affirming are two different things. Welcoming is not enough.

When I listen to our passage today and hear the pharisees and scribes grumbling, questioning the very people Jesus is welcoming and affirming, I think about Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin’s Last Supper

photograph (a recreation of Leonardo da Vinci's The Last Supper). Lee, if you wouldn't mind sharing this photograph on the screen for us.

Here, a photograph of a gender nonconforming Jesus surrounded by LGBTQ apostles. First appearing in Sweden in 1989.

Ah Yes, this is what I imagine. Jesus at a table at with so called "sinners." Sharing a meal. Even more shockingly, Jesus wearing fabulous very high heels. Take a moment.

Thank you, Lee.

When I hear pharisees and scribes grumbling, I imagine Jesus holding hands with a queer man just diagnosed with HIV/AIDs in the 80s. Kissing him on the cheek and then breaking bread with him.

I imagine Jesus in a gay bar with a Cosmo in his hand singing to Diana Ross's "I'm Coming Out." I imagine Jesus in the NYC dyke march, wearing all leather on a bike, with his long hair blowing in the wind.

When the pharisees and scribes grumble and judge Jesus, Jesus responds with a parable. He begins with a somewhat leading question that I am like sure, yes, but when I have thought about it more deeply, I am like wait a minute...

Jesus says, "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until they find it?"

The honest answer is probably no one. A shepherd with a hundred sheep, IN THE wilderness, probably would not risk leaving 99 to go find 1, to just return to what maybe 80? Maybe 60 sheep? Depending on how long it took them to find the one lost one?

This signals to me as someone just listening to the parable, that maybe I should put aside any Greek and commentaries for a moment, because perhaps Jesus is nudging us to put aside quote on quote "reason" and "logic."

Maybe he is asking us to listen and respond more with our heart. To trust the 99 sheep will take care of themselves and to go and find the lost one. Because that is the work God does. And so, I invite all of us to listen and read with our hearts this morning...

Last Sunday, I attended MCC Boston's 50th anniversary. MCC stands for Metropolitan Community Churches. It is a queer and trans Christian denomination founded in 1968. Rev. Jim Mitulski who is a MCC minister and a UCC minister was preaching. And he was preaching on the parable of the lost sheep and coin – listening to him inspired me to preach on the same parable today.

And it feels important to share that Jim also holds a very special place in my heart because he is the reason why I started looking into UCC four years ago and why I am now pursuing ordination in UCC.

After reading the parable of the lost sheep in his sermon, he turned to us with tears in his eyes and proclaimed, “sheep don’t just get lost.

The use of the passive voice conceals acts of exclusion. There is no lost sheep. Sheep get sidelined, asked to leave the fold, they get shown the door, but they don’t get lost.”

A queer cartoonist, former pastor, David Hayward, created a series of a cartoons that shares a similar response to Jim’s. Lee, if you could show his comic strip on the screen for us. [Jaz read the image]

We can see the sheep is colored in with the trans flag and the shepherd corrects the herd’s mis gendering.

This, this is queering. We see David Hayward and Jim Mikulski theologically centering the experiences of queer people in this parable.

As Rev. Jim continued to preach, tears began to fill my eyes, for I quickly realized he was talking about sheep and he wasn’t. I began to wonder how much Jesus was really taking about sheep, too in his parable.

For Rev. Jim went on to say, “there are no lost people. people don’t get lost from families or disappear. People are told to change or to leave, they get shown the door, but they don’t get lost.”

I could feel that I was not the only one struck by his truthful words as I looked around me and saw other’s eyes filling with water.

Queer and trans people, know the pain of exclusion. It is such a deep seeded pain. Not just experienced by churches and religious communities, workplaces, but sometimes by our own families, loved ones, and friends.

According to a True Colors fund, nonprofit organization working to end homelessness in the LGBTQ+ community, about 1.6 million youth are homeless each year and up to 40 percent of them are LGBTQ+. Because LGBTQ+ youth represent only 7 percent of total youth, that is an alarming disproportion of homelessness.

When we look at our UCC denomination, a lot of LGBTQ+ justice work has been done since 1986, and there is more to be done, as of today, 37% of our churches are ONA.

Just a few weeks ago we saw that one of our sister churches, across the river, United Parish in Brookline’s trans flag was burned and torn.

Over the past several months, we have seen more and more hateful and what I would say -sinful state laws – being passed, attacking our trans and nonbinary siblings.

Telling people what they can and can’t do with their own bodies. Restricting people’s access to communities that we gender like sports and boy/girl scouts. Showing each and every trans and nonbinary person, here is the door – we want you to disappear, and then masking that with the words, “they are lost.”

Friends, Jesus shows us today that hard truth – that some of us based on our identities, our experiences, our abilities, are often shown the door. But none of us – I assure you – none of us, no matter who you are and where you are, YOU are not lost, and YOU are not alone.

Because the holy truth is, when we are shown the door, God is already on the other side of that door greeting you and placing you on God's shoulders, ready to carry you. Just like the shepherd.

All throughout Jesus's time here on earth, he lived in and ministered in the margins of the margins. Grumbling people followed him wherever he went questioning and judging him. They were so uncomfortable.

Because Jesus challenged social expectations and norms. He healed a bleeding woman in the crowd, he shared a drink with a Samaritan woman, he cared for the poor and most vulnerable, he touched the very flesh of people who were sick and who were exiled because of it. He befriended tax collectors who were despised. He shattered rigid binaries, social boxes, stereotypes, barriers all around him.

The barriers and walls and binaries around us, we created, not God.

When God created the world, scripture tells us that God did so with a wide breath of beautiful diversity. The creation of humans has been misused throughout history to condemn LGBTQ+ folks. We hear hateful chants like "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" but when we really look at the creation story, we see that God created male and female like God created light and dark, land and water.

Queer theologians have taught us that these are not rigid binaries. These are spectrums. Do we not experience dawn and dusk? A beautiful sunset and sunrise? We see creatures inhabit both land and water. Why then would we impose such rigid boxes around male and female? And what it means to be male and female? Or that you have to be either male or female?

God's creation is not rigid. It is vast, it is diverse, and it is beautiful.

After Jesus tells us about the shepherd and sheep, he tells us a second parable about a woman who is missing a coin. She takes a lamp, sweeps the house and searches carefully until she finds it.

Jesus teaches us, through his stories and through his ministry, that acts of exclusion and alienation never just happen by accident. And that like the shepherd and the woman in the parable, we must own that fact.

We must take a lamp and shed light on the ignorance, sweep and uncover the oppression. Then do the hard justice work needed.

That is the work you, First Church, publicly declared thirty years ago. Owning the justice work that needed to be done, owning the justice work that still needs to be done. This is the beginning of messy, good, and holy work.

And then there is – what I see as - a queer twist to the parable. For what does the shepherd and woman do when they own that there has been exclusion and alienation?

When they find the missing sheep and coin? They rejoice! And what looks like to me – and many other queer theologians – they throw a party.

Not a party that welcomes the 1 back to the 99, but a party that starts something new. A party that welcomes the 99.

What do many of us queer and trans people do, when we find our chosen family (and some of us still blessed with the families we were raised in), we celebrate.

What does Christ invite us all to do? Celebrate.

Celebrating does not mean that we all, queer, straight, trans, cis, ignore the pain and harm we have experienced.

We celebrate because we need to. We celebrate with the angels in heaven, who are rejoicing with us. We celebrate that we are fearfully and wonderfully made -each and every one of us.

We celebrate that we were never really lost. We celebrate that we were never and will never be alone.

We celebrate with God who lives with us in the margins. And we celebrate and give glory and honor to the same God who made us.

First Church, after worship today, the table is set with a large cake. I see that table very similarly to our Communion table. That table with rainbow confetti cake is God's, inviting us all to celebrate and partake. I hope you will come celebrate with us, celebrate our ONA history, and celebrate the work that we will continue to do together. Amen.