

Stances of Faith

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By The Rev. CJ McGregor

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Richard and I celebrated our sixteenth wedding anniversary yesterday. Who knows if our rights will be stripped away and it will be our last? We've been together 31 years which means we lived in sin for 15 years before tying the knot. Anniversaries are a good time for reflection. I remember the day I realized I was gay. I was in fifth grade and overwhelming feelings came over me when a classmate Kevin breezed by me. I didn't understand the feelings I was having, but if you were to use emoji's it would be stars beaming from my eyes, cherubs circling my head, and a heart pounding out of my chest. My first official boy crush. I kept my same sex attraction a secret for years. I had been taught by my church and Catholic school that it was wrong to be feeling this way. I remember around eighth grade constantly telling myself that I had to accept that I would be alone the rest of my life and I had to accept it. I was brave and accepted that I would not be able to partner with anyone, get married, have children and so on. I accepted that I would need to figure out how to be alone.

I eventually laid down those thoughts and came out to my family when I was 20. It wasn't traumatic. My family had a lot of experience with gay people. For generations it is reported and documented that all the left handed people in my family have been gay-including me. Without perpetuating stereotypes, I can report that the 1900 Canadian census says my great, great, great uncle Cornelius was an Interior Decorator. He was likely left-handed. My cousins watch their children closely when they begin to draw and write. No one cares which hand becomes dominant, it's just for familial amusement. Three years after coming out to my family my mother died. My father died 4 years earlier. I tell you this because a close family member told me that my mother told her that she was glad that my father had never known me as gay. She said he would have been devastated. This hurt. Firstly, I know my father would have not loved me less or treated me differently if he had been alive when I came out. I know this in my bones. Secondly, my mother was projecting these feelings onto my father because of her deep Catholic beliefs. This hurt because until then I had not known any lack of acceptance from my mother.

Religion has often played a role in the oppression, rejection, and murder of LGBTQ+ folks. Religion, faith, is about love, kindness, compassion, and mercy. Our study of history tells us something different. We learn that religion has been about power, wealth and oppression. Religion has murdered, battered women, been the basis for genocide, mass shootings, war, slavery, the enemy of freedom, and used to oppress LGBTQ people and even to justify the discrimination and killing of these people. Bias is masked as a tenet of faith. Non-affirming religious beliefs about same-sex relationships and transgender identity contribute to serious harm in LGBTQ people's lives. Richard and I have had friends that were murdered because they were gay. One beat in the head with a cinderblock until he was dead and then stuffed into the trunk of a car. Richard and I have experience violence because of who we are. Because of a rainbow decal on our bumper we've been run off the road with our children in the car. I lost a job because I went to Richard's mother's funeral because we were not married and didn't have the

right to marry at the time. We've had to explain what faggot meant to young children because they had heard it being yelled in the face of their fathers. A Unitarian woman stood on the steps of the Unitarian church the day of our wedding protesting same sex marriage.

The issue of LGBTQ+ equality, the full acceptance of gay people, and same-sex marriages are perhaps the most divisive issues facing contemporary Christianity. Indeed for many conservative Christians, the litmus test for faith is less a belief in Jesus Christ than a rejection of homosexuality, which is bizarre in that the subject is hardly ever mentioned in the entirety of Scripture, and Jesus never refers to it at all! One of the most volatile and important issues facing the Church today is the question of homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle. The Church cannot duck this question. The collision between LGBTQ concerns and concerns of religious freedom, exemplified in the case of the Colorado baker who refused on grounds of conscience to supply a wedding cake carrying a message endorsing same sex marriage, along with the U.S. Supreme Court's re-definition of "marriage" to include same sex unions, have thrust this question to the front and center of American culture.

Some denominations have already become what is often known as "affirming", others are almost at that stage, but most evangelicals—a deeply significant group in the U.S.—remain steadfastly conservative. The Roman Catholic Church states in its catechism that "homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity" are "contrary to natural law," and that "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered," but most informed commentators believe that at least a third of all priests are gay, not all of them celibate.

Many folks — LGBT and otherwise — have been disappointed by the stance their faith has taken and the community's policy of exclusion. Some walk away in sadness or anger, others stay on but feel betrayed by a community that once felt like home. Allies of the LGBTQ can make enormous strides within their faith communities by "coming out" as individuals who are inclusive and loving of all people. By clearly stating your personal stance, you immediately provide a safer environment for LGBTQ people, and you create the potential for greater hope and greater honesty.

As a growing number of faith communities draw on their values of love and compassion to take a public stance for LGBTQ equality, people who left those communities — or left the very idea of faith — are considering a return. Doing so can be a complicated process and requires care and consideration. LGBTQ folk and their allies might find that a beloved faith community has significantly shifted its stance, and is a place where they can now feel welcome and proud. Others might discover that it's impossible to be fully themselves — to feel at home — in the community where they were raised. But that doesn't mean giving up on faith. It means that it's time to start looking for a community-like All Faiths. From a movement standpoint, all of these changes are welcomed. We can clearly see a new day emerging where no one has to choose between who they are, whom they love, and what they believe. Greg told us that this morning when he welcomed us. However, these changes can be deeply confusing for the person who is looking for a new spiritual home, returning to an old one, or considering becoming more open in their place of worship. Because faith is central in the lives of many of us, it is worth finding a congregation that fits with your spiritual and cultural values while not demonizing you for who you are or who you love.

The research shows a disproportionate reliance on anti-LGBTQ religious voices commenting on LGBTQ people and issues, and an underrepresentation of religious voices from traditions that are

supportive of LGBTQ equality. In fact, three out of four people whose religions have formal policies opposing LGBTQ equality.

Religion has been a source of both solace and suffering for many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans. For while most LGBTQ Americans have been raised in an organized religion — and many continue to cherish their faith community — too many have been forced to leave those communities behind because of condemnation of LGBTQ people.

Many members of the LGBTQ community say they long for a church family with whom to worship, but religious divisions over same-sex marriage and other LGBTQ issues have left them feeling conflicted and sometimes unwelcome. In the coming weeks, the results of an election will define the country for a generation. These are perilous times. Over the last four years, much of what we hold dear has been threatened – democracy, civility, truth, justice and acceptance. The country is at a crossroads. The Supreme Court hangs in the balance – and with it, the future of abortion and voting rights, healthcare, climate policy and the rights of the LGBTQ community. Science is in a battle with conjecture and instinct to determine policy in the middle of a pandemic. At the same time, the US is reckoning with centuries of LGBTQ injustice – as the White House stokes division.

To the people that want to return to faith, have left their faith, you have a home here at All Faiths. We understand that wholeness doesn't exist without a connection to spirit, to justice, to compassion, to equity, to inclusion. We are that community. If you're listening to this message, I ask you to come home. Come home to faith, come home to spirit, come home to self.

At All Faiths no matter who you are, wherever you are on your journey and no matter whom you love, you are welcome here. Come home.

May it be so.