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International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, Biphobia  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
May 15, 2022  
By Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 13:31-35

When I was at seminary, I was frequently told that I seemed like a very patient person. I often wanted to ask what that meant, but I did not have the patience for that. But the longer I spend in ministry, the more I think I believe that I am quite patient. And that was reinforced for me this week when I realized that it's time again for the annual celebration of the "International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia". So as I often do, I started my preparation by seeing what it was that we discussed last year at this time.

[image: 3 pauls]

Last year you had to put up with 3 of me's. I seem to remember having a good argument with myself that day. I do not recall who won so I will assume that I lost. Anyway, here is a short extract from my sermon last year. "Tomorrow - May 17 - is the 'International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia'. So this is our annual reminder that we need to name, expose, and confront people when we witness hatred or hostility against people with non-traditional sexualities and genders. Before I agreed to come to Sydenham-Heritage United Church I was assured that this congregation welcomes everyone, including people with non-traditional genders and sexualities. So I'm going to assume that I do not need to preach the idea to you. And please let me know if I'm wrong about that."

So here was are one year later. And absolutely none of you have told me in words that I was wrong. But I have seen some non-verbal clues that I was in fact wrong. That I DO need to preach to this idea. And please keep in mind that your search committee told me that this congregation welcomes everyone. Perhaps I am wrong about that too. And if I am wrong about that, please do not wait 12 months to tell me. If anything I'm about to say upsets you, please reach out to me. I would love to know what you really think. I'll

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even buy you coffee ... or lunch.

So here we go. I suppose we should start with the purpose of this celebration.

[image: flag with words]

According to the web site, [may17.org](https://may17.org), “The International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia was created in 2004 to draw the attention to the violence and discrimination experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex people and all other people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities or expressions, and sex characteristics.

The date of May 17th was specifically chosen to commemorate the World Health Organization’s decision in 1990 to declassify homosexuality as a mental disorder. The Day represents a major global annual landmark to draw the attention of decision makers, the media, the public, corporations, opinion leaders, local authorities, etc. to the alarming situation faced by people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities or expressions, and sex characteristics.”<sup>1</sup>

Well that seems like a pretty clear statement. People with non-traditional genders and sexualities have frequently been victimized in a number of ways, including being murdered. They have also been bullied and attacked in ways that has led to much higher than typical suicide rates. This is an enduring problem that we need to confront.

[image: murdered transgendered tree]

I don’t know how many of you recognize this tree<sup>2</sup> which was installed at the Brantford Public Library. It is a temporary display. This particular picture is from the November 2020 installation. There are 387 leaves on the tree. Each leaf bears the name and location of a transgendered person who was murdered during the previous year. The victimization of transgendered people is real. Many of these murders happened in South America. But I know for a fact that discrimination against people who are transgendered is very real here too. This picture is from the Expositor. But now I do know Gwen Howarth, the woman in the turtleneck. And next year, I’ll take my own photo!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://may17.org/about/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.brantfordexpositor.ca/news/local-news/memorial-tree-marks-transgender-day-of-remembrance>

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[image: world bank cost of exclusion]

Believe it or not, even the World Bank cares about this topic. The World Bank published a video entitled “Cost of Exclusion”<sup>3</sup> which you can find on YouTube. The video talks about the economic cost of excluding people because of their gender and sexuality. The very short version is that bullying and exclusion lead to poorer performance in school, which leads to more limited employment options and prevents people from using their full abilities and gifts as adults to contribute to society. The latest figure I heard was that discrimination against people based on sexuality and gender is estimated to have a 1% negative impact on the global economy. 1% may not sound like much. But it is huge. And let’s face it, our world has lots of problems. We do not want to hinder anyone from bringing their full creativity and potential to help heal the world.

[image: crosswalk]

Perhaps the most obvious question is why this has been the case. There are a variety of reasons of course. But some homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia come from religious thinking. So it seems appropriate to talk about that aspect of the problem here. The Bible affirms homophobia explicitly. For example, In Leviticus 20:13 we have, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.”

Those verses and other similar ones have often been used to “prove” that homosexuality is wrong. When the United Church of Canada took a stand on sexuality in the 1980’s, we lost many of our members because they could not resolve these texts. And ever since the 1980’s, many churches in Canada do not believe that people in the United Church of Canada are actually Christian. Partly because of our acceptance of people who are homosexual. But also because of our ability to read the Bible in non-literal ways.

I myself have had countless arguments with people on both of these points. Both in person and online. Some Christians argue that since the words in Leviticus are so clear, there is no room for interpretation. They say there is no wiggle-room in these texts. And on that point, I do agree with them. The texts are clear. Absolutely. Incidentally, I do not

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qeGqmU9halM>

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believe that the Bible actually touches on transphobia or biphobia. But some verses in the Bible definitely support homophobia.

Since homophobia, still exists in Canadian society, I suggest we all need to be prepared to respond these parts of the Bible. As Christians, we need to be able to confront people who use the Bible to justify homophobia.

Over time, I have used at least 3 different methods to push back on these texts.

One way to push back on these texts is to try to educate the person we are speaking with about different valid ways to read the Bible that are not literal. We do not even have to denigrate a literal reading. We just need to demonstrate that there are other valid ways of reading the Bible. We actually embody this with the scripture we read in this church, when we open with the words, “Whether you take what is written in the Bible as fact, metaphor, myth or story, listen to these words now for the teaching they hold for you today.” That introduction - that we read every week - is an invitation to realize that there are many ways to read the Bible.

A second way to push back on these texts is to lift up other biblical texts that preach love. We read one earlier. From John 13, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” To me, that text is also very clear. And it clearly states that we should love each other. And that command leaves no wiggle-room either. We should love everyone and therefore there should be no homophobia, transphobia, or biphobia. Hatred is not love. And Jesus commands us to love.

A third way to push back on these texts is to lift up other very clear passages in the Bible that absolutely nobody agrees with or follows. Not even Fundamentalists. For example, we have Deuteronomy 14:8, “And the pig, because it divides the hoof but does not chew the cud, is unclean for you. You shall not eat their meat, and you shall not touch their carcasses”. That text is very clear. And it says that we should not eat pigs. And while many people might be able to live with that on the surface, I need to remind you that includes bacon! And most Christians simply ignore those texts. I actually had this argument once with a Fundamentalist who was eating a ham sandwich at the time. He

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had no problem saying that the prohibition on eating pork did not apply to Christians. I told him that the prohibition on homosexuality does not apply to Christians either. He just walked away. He did not even offer me a bite of his sandwich.

And then we have perhaps the most devastating text in the entire Bible for people who believe that they actually follow the Bible literally themselves. I do not even bring this text out unless the other person is being particularly annoying. From Deuteronomy 21:18-21, “If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. ...’ Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid.”

The Bible tells us that if our own children do not obey us, we should kill them. We are even told exactly how to do it. If people followed that advice, the human race would be extinct in 1 generation. Nobody follows the Bible literally. Nobody. And that leads me to wonder what it is about the human condition that even Fundamentalists can ignore biblical texts completely if they do not like the texts. And at the same time take biblical texts that limit human sexuality as literally true and free of any context or need for interpretation.

I have one answer to that question. 1 theory. And I would love your feedback on this idea later.

[image: evolving christianity]

I need to summarize some content from my book, *Evolving Christianity* here. On the one hand, it seems like all forms of discrimination are similar. In many respects, sexism, racism, and xenophobia are different versions of the same underlying mental defect. All discrimination involves creating artificial barriers to separate people into “us” and “them”. And the different barriers that we ourselves create are numerous. “Sex, gender, race, religion, ethnicity, age, economic status, and other artificial social dividers collectively known as ‘accidents of birth’.”<sup>4</sup> If you are a victim of any of these forms of

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<sup>4</sup> *Evolving Christianity*, page 81.

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discrimination, it feels very personal. But in many cases, the root cause is the same. There is a common root to all forms of discrimination which is creating these artificial mental barriers at all. Different barriers lead to different names like sexism, racism, agism and others. But the common defect in all forms of discrimination is allowing the barrier to be there at all. Sometimes it is helpful to lump all of these forms of discrimination under the umbrella term, “Otherism”. Which basically means objectifying “the other” person.

[image: idahot day]

But there is a particular way in which discrimination based on sexuality and gender is in fact a bit different. There is a potential extra dimension to homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia, compared to racism for example.

Consider this. Suppose - and this is not true - that I hate Asian people. Not True! All of what I just said applies - my own artificial barriers and all that. But there is NO PHYSICAL POSSIBILITY that I am in fact a closet Asian. But with homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia, there is a possibility for each of us that we have our own internal struggle with our own sexuality. It is at least possible I am a closet homosexual or bisexual. Some people are triggered by a person who has embraced their own non-traditional sexuality or gender because of their own inability to deal with their own sexuality or gender. That creates a cognitive dissonance that gets redirected into anger, hatred, homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia.

There are many televangelists who preached against homosexuality for decades, who years later came out as homosexual themselves. The fire in their preaching came from their own cognitive dissonance, not from the word of God.

So my theory - which I invite you all to agree or disagree with - is that as a society we have bigger issues with discrimination based on sexuality and gender because it makes some of us uncomfortable with our own sexuality and gender. And that just does not happen with racism and most other forms of discrimination.

[image: crosswalk]

Last week we talked about the “nones”. These are people who on a census will tick the box that says that their religious affiliation is “none”. And I pointed out that these “nones” are not strangers to us. They are like family to us. Because for many of us -

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including me - our own children are nones. We have to stop thinking of “nones” as strangers. The nones are family.

This week I encourage us all to consider people who have non-traditional sexualities and genders. Because these people are also not strangers to us. They are also like family to us. Because for many of us - including me - our wider families include people with non-traditional sexualities and genders. We have to stop thinking of these people as strangers. People with non-traditional genders and sexualities are family.

Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Now let’s get out there and love each other. It is not that complicated.

*Amen.*