
International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia, Biphobia
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
May 21, 2023
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 10

Wow - that was a long scripture reading. Did we really need to hear all of that? Well, I think so, yes! But I suppose it depends a bit on what you think the point of the reading is. Because there are a few different ways to take it. And to be honest, I think the real point of the story comes in the beginning, and in the end. I like the middle bit too though because I never cease to be amazed at how much repetition there is even within a single chapter in the Bible - especially knowing that people used to have to make copies by hand. But I digress.

[image: syncretism]

What today we call the Christian faith grew out of many influences. Jesus and all his friends were Jewish of course, and we find ties to apocalyptic Judaism within Christianity. But Christianity took many things from other cultural groups as well - including the Greeks and the Romans. As one example, in the story in Acts today we see how a Roman centurion was welcomed into the expanding and changing Christian faith.

Today, this story perhaps does not surprise us. These days, churches are desperate for any new people that come in the door. But 2000 years ago, groups were far more tribal. Or in modern language, far more racist and exclusivist. In our reading, Peter (who was Jewish) makes that point himself. Twice.

First, Peter objects to eating foods that he thinks of as “unclean”. And God has to tell Peter 3 times, “What God has made clean, you must not call unclean”. And later on in the story, Peter reminds the crowd of the social convention of the day, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with a Gentile”.

[image: “What God has made clean, you must not call unclean”]

Peter seems to be a slow learner. But eventually he does figure out that “What God has made clean, you must not call unclean” is not just about food. It was also about people who are not part of your social group. Because - at that time at least for Jews -

people who were not part of your social group were considered unclean and should therefore be avoided.

The inclusion of Roman and Greek (and other) ideas into Christianity was not a simple process. Our long reading reminds us of that. But if Christianity had not embraced new ideas, it would not have become what it is today. And if Christianity does not continue to embrace new ideas, it will not become what it needs to be tomorrow.

And of course, we do not just need to embrace new ideas. We also need to embrace new people. Now who is it that we might choose to embrace today? Well, I can think of a long list of people we might choose to embrace more fully today.

[image: IDAHOT]

But since it is May 21, I want to lift up people who have non-traditional genders and sexualities. Because this past Wednesday - May 17 was the “International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia”.

We have discussed this before of course. Let’s go back 2 years for a minute. On May of 2021 I preached, “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.”

Fast forward 1 year. In May of 2022, I read the paragraph that I just shared. And I added this, “So here we 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 even buy you coffee ... or lunch.”

Fast forward to today. I’m delighted to tell you that in the past year some of you

have reached out to me and expressed your feelings to me. And I appreciate your honesty. Really. It is very important that we mature and do not just get older. And being able to state clearly what you think and feel right now is a very important step in that process.

Of course I feel a bit conflicted to relate to you that some of the people in this congregation are homophobic. And before we go any further I want to reiterated that I do appreciate your honesty. Without honesty there is no possibility of creating healing conversations. So thank you for your honesty.

[image: pride flag]

Besides, homophobia is not limited to this congregation. This year, Norwich Township banned pride flags on town property. They also refused to declare June as “Pride Month”. This move has generated a lot of heat. And yes, I know that some people in this congregation applaud that move.

The actual decision - to be clear - was to ban all “special” flags from municipal property, not just pride flags. But let us not ignore the fact that the original motion explicitly named (and only named) “Progress or Pride banners”. The motion was amended to name “special flags”. But the origin of the motion is homophobia.

[image: progress flag]

In response to the banning of flags, the “Big Brothers Big Sisters of Oxford County” is considering returning the grant that they receive from the township. Kristen Ralph wrote to Norwich politicians, “The agency uses the Norwich grant to help children and youth work toward positive identity, mental wellness, social inclusion and empowerment. ... This (council) decision, however, has and will do the opposite of what these funds were intended for ... it will have profound ripple effects, embolden hatred and create new adverse childhood experiences for young people already facing hardship.”¹

[image: division]

I have listened carefully to both sides in this debate. Some people argue that pride flags create divisions in the community because those flags divide people into groups.

That is ridiculous.

¹ <https://lfpres.com/news/local-news/norwich-pride-flag-ban-a-new-symbol-joins-backlash>

The truth is that marginalized communities - including the LGBTQ+ community - are not creating divisions. Divisions are being created by the majority when they/we discriminate against people in marginalized communities.

Flags - including the pride flag - do not create divisions in society. It is divisions in society and our irrational rejection of some people that create the reasons that marginalized groups feel the need to fly their flags in the first place.

And let us not forget that 1 year ago pride flags in Norwich were vandalized, torn down and even burned by community members. The vote to ban flags is a vote to let hate win. Banning all flags is not the middle ground here. The middle ground is not letting hate win.

It's 2023. So why is there still so much anger towards homosexuals today? I asked ChatGPT to weigh in. Here is what it had to say. And some of these comment certainly resonate with conversations I have had in this church.

[image: chatgpt]

"The anger and hostility towards homosexuals can stem from various factors, including cultural, religious, and personal beliefs. It is important to note that not everyone feels this way, and attitudes towards homosexuality have been evolving over time. However, some common reasons people might express anger or negativity towards homosexuality include:

- Religious beliefs: Certain religious teachings consider homosexuality to be a sin or morally wrong. Adherents of these religious beliefs may feel obligated to express their disapproval of homosexuality based on their faith."²

[image: gay is not a sin]

That is certainly true. Christianity has promoted hatred towards homosexuals for a long time. One place this comes from is Leviticus 18:22, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination". I don't have time to give you the full history now, but modern scholarship suggests many limitations to that translation. When we consider context, that part of Leviticus is about incest. Leviticus 18:22 should perhaps be translated as, "Sexual intercourse with a close male relative should be just as abominable

² From ChatGPT in response to "why do people get so angry about homosexuals"

to you as incestuous relationships with female relatives.”³ Understood that way, the text is not a prohibition against homosexuality. It is just a statement about incest. And there are one or two places where Jesus preaches love too So it is hard to know why Christianity has historically fixated on the very small number of verse that promote hatred.

[image: chatgpt]

- “Traditional values and cultural norms: Societal norms and traditional values can shape people's attitudes towards homosexuality. In some cultures, homosexuality may be seen as a departure from traditional family structures or societal expectations, leading to negative reactions.”⁴

[image: women’s suffrage]

Absolutely. But cultural norms change over time. Some people argue against same-sex marriage using the argument that marriage has always been between a man and a women. But don’t forget that voting used to only be between a white man and the government. But are you glad that women and non-white people can vote now? Cultural norms change! And history teaches us that cultural norms do not change easily. We need to ask ourselves, “Which side of history do we want to be on?”

[image: chatgpt]

- “Ignorance and lack of understanding: Homophobia often arises from a lack of knowledge or understanding about sexual orientation and gender identity. Some individuals may hold misconceptions or stereotypes about homosexuality, leading to fear, discomfort, or anger.”⁵

[image: Campbell’s soup]

This is a huge problem. As one example, Campbell’s soup once created an ad that showed 2 fathers feeding their child soup. And people complained that Campbell’s was promoting homosexuality. But if the ad had featured a father and a mother feeding their child soup, nobody would have said that Campbell’s was promoting heterosexuality. That

³ <https://blog.smu.edu/ot8317/2016/05/11/leviticus-1822/>

⁴ From ChatGPT in response to “why do people get so angry about homosexuals”

⁵ *ibid.*

ad was not about sexuality at all. It was actually about soup.

[image: chatgpt]

- “Fear of the unfamiliar: Fear and discomfort can arise from encountering something unfamiliar or different. Homosexuality challenges traditional notions of gender and sexuality, and some people may struggle to accept or understand this diversity.”⁶

[image: fear]

Fear is huge. The terms homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia all have “phobia” in them, and phobia means fear. Fear is a very effective weapon that people who want to control us use against us. But if you are afraid of the unfamiliar, the solution is simple. Go spend some time with a person - a real person - who is homosexual and you will very quickly realize that they are a person like you. You will realize that there is no reason for fear.

[image: chatgpt]

- “Personal insecurities: In some cases, individuals who express anger or hostility towards homosexuals may be dealing with their own internal conflicts or insecurities about their sexual orientation. Such individuals might project their frustrations onto others.”⁷

[image: no sex we're british]

I live in hope that ChatGPT stole that idea from one of my sermons. Because I have always felt that homophobia - the fear - comes from a person's own deep insecurities about their own sexuality. And traditional Canadian culture is to never talk about sexuality at all - homo, hetero or otherwise. I grew up in a world where people pretended that sex did not even exist. And it can make us feel insecure when we meet a person who is actually in touch with their feelings and is comfortable discussing the own sexuality.

[image: chatgpt]

“It is important to emphasize that discrimination or hostility towards any individual or group based on their sexual orientation is unjustified and harmful. Society

⁶ ibid.

⁷ ibid.

has made significant progress in promoting acceptance and equality for the LGBTQ+ community, but there is still work to be done in combating prejudice and fostering understanding."⁸

[image: stop homophobia]

Wait a minute. Did ChatGPT just say that homophobia is wrong? Wow. That violates one of my rules about sermons. In sermons, I'm supposed to open a window to show a new way of thinking. And then you are free to decide for yourself. I'm not expected to categorically tell anyone that they are wrong, right?

Except that hatred is wrong. Homophobia is wrong. Transphobia is wrong. Biphobia is wrong. That is why I put this on the church sign this week.

[image: Being homosexual is not a choice. Being homophobic is a choice.]

Being homosexual is not a choice. Being homophobic is a choice. Choose the path that leads to love, not hate.

[image: rainbow]

I want to close with a brief discussion of rainbows. Not on flags, actual rainbows.

[image: raindrop refraction]

Rainbows are formed because white sunlight refracts twice and reflects internally once inside a raindrop. That's why the component colours in the white light spread out. You know this. It's like a prism - sort of.

[image: rainbow orientation]

Rainbows are always centred on what in this image is called the "anti solar point".

[image: rainbow geometry]

And that is why rainbows always form and are centred with the sun directly behind your back. Which means that if you and a friend are standing beside each other, looking at a rainbow, you see completely different rainbows. Because rainbows do not exist in the sky. There is no piece of sky that is green. The piece of the sky that you think is green - if you looked at that same piece of sky from a different angle, it would not be green. Rainbows are an optical phenomenon that occurs at the precise location of your eyes. In fact, even your two eyeballs see different rainbows, because rainbows do not

⁸ ibid.

exist in the sky. At all.

[image: rainbow]

Each person has their own unique experience of the phenomenon we call a “rainbow”, even though they do not exist. And in our world - whether we want to recognize it or not - each person has their own unique experience of their own sexuality and gender.

No one view of a rainbow is correct. Nobody should ever tell you what your rainbow looks like. You have to figure that out for yourself. And no one view of sexuality or gender is correct. We have to figure that out for ourselves. And I want to live in the kind of world where we can help each other figure that out. I want to live in the kind of world where people are allowed to be whoever they are. I want to live in the kind of the world where the church creates space for the healing and hope to live.

Hate does not get us anywhere. We need love. Fortunately, Jesus told us to love each other, so this is really not that complicated.

Now go. And love the world. All of it!
Amen.