
International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia, Transphobia
Chapel in the Park United Church
May 18, 2025
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 13:31-35

This week we have our annual celebration of the “International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia”. So as I often do with special celebrations, I started my preparation by seeing what it was that we discussed last year at this time.

Here is what I said last year. “Friday - 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 Chapel in the Park 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.”¹

So here we are one year later. And I realize that you deserve a proper discussion on the subject. Because we have not talked about this subject in detail since I’ve been with you. And if you are wondering why we are still talking about this, we will get there later. But first, some history.

[image: flag with words]

According to the web site, 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

¹ <http://www.paulshepherd.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2024-05-12-Sermon.pdf>

alarming situation faced by people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities or expressions, and sex characteristics.”²

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 been bullied and attacked in ways that have led to much a higher than typical suicide rate. This is an enduring problem that we need to confront.

[image: united church crest]

And I want to provide a bit of history about what the United Church of Canada has been doing too. Because the United Church has been wrestling with questions of sexuality and gender for nearly 50 years.

In 1977, the United Church made its first public statement affirming the full human rights of homosexual people - a bold move at the time. Through the early 1980's, congregations across the country took part in a national study on human sexuality. These conversations were often difficult and emotional, one critical factor being whether openly gay and lesbian people could serve in ministry.

In 1988, after years of prayer, study, and debate, the United Church declared that sexual orientation should not be a barrier to membership or ministry. The statement was direct: “All people who profess faith in Christ are welcome in the church, and all members are eligible to be considered for ordained ministry.” It was a historic decision. It was also painful. Many members and some congregations left the church. But it helped define who we are.

In the years that followed, we continued to move forward. We affirmed same-sex relationships before same-sex marriage was legal. We pushed our governments to make same-sex marriage legal. And we celebrated when that happened in 2005.

In 2012, the United Church formally affirmed that trans and nonbinary people are part of God's beloved creation, deserving full dignity, safety, and inclusion.

And now - in 2025 - I believe the General Council of the United Church will be receiving a motion to consider developing an apology to the LBGTQ+ community at its meeting this summer.

² <https://may17.org/about/>

So yes, we've come a long way. But we're still learning what it means to fully live into the radical welcome of Christ - a welcome that sees people for who they are and honours their whole - and holy - selves.

I myself joined this conversation in the 1990's.

I started in seminary in 2006, and one of my classmates was a trans woman. She became the first trans person to be ordained by the United Church. We all learned a great deal from her. But I also I remember how hard it was for her when she went out on internship. It was not an easy journey for her. It is one thing to develop a policy around inclusion. Reality often lags behind. As Mary Ellen keeps reminding me - people do not like change.

I recall a conversation in one of my congregations when a person expressed a lot of anger towards trans people. And I was actually triggered back to the 1990's. Because the exact same accusations against homosexuals in the 90's were now being re-directed against trans people decades later. As I said, we have made progress, but there is still work to do.

As you know, I participate in many civic events on your behalf. Some events explicitly support the LGBTQ+ community.

[image: pride parade region]

Including the Pride Parade last June. I participated along with many church folk from Shining Waters Regional Council. It was the first time I had marched in the parade - a truly delightful and fun event.

[image: electric collar]

I care enough about public engagement that I made myself an electric clerical collar. I combined an LED matrix with a microcontroller which I program for different events.

[image: pride collar]

For Pride, I programmed my collar to show the Progress Pride Flag. Many people appreciated my clerical collar that day. I wanted people to see a visible symbol of a minister who believes in love - and technology too.

[image: TDOR flag raising at Queen's Park]

This photo is from Nov 20 last year at Queen's Park. That flag-raising was on the annual Trans Day of Remembrance. A day to memorialize those who were murdered because of transphobia. I was there with a number of United Church of Canada colleagues and other supporters.

[image: island pride]

Did anyone recognize the featured image for the week? Do you know where this rainbow road is?

[image: island pride + toronto island map]

The photo shows the 600 m long rainbow road at Hanlan's Point on the Toronto Islands.

So that's a bit of history.

And today, we still have the Pride Parade and other celebrations because sadly, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia are still features in our society - and yes, even in our churches. But why is that?

There are many 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.

One reason for homophobia is that the Bible affirms it explicitly.

[image: text below]

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 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 queer. 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. 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 text is clear. Absolutely. Incidentally, I do not believe that the Bible actually touches on transphobia or biphobia. But a small number of homophobic texts are found in the Bible.

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

Over time, I have used at least 3 different methods to push back on these texts.
[image: gospel and good news]

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. And we need to hold our ground when the other person disagrees. The simplest expression of this is to remind people that the word “gospel” literally means “good news”. And hatred is never good news.

[image: quote about love below]

A second way to push back on these texts is to lift up other biblical texts that preach love. Because hatred is not 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. 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. The command from Jesus for us to love each other leaves no wiggle room.

[image: text below]

A third way to push back on these texts is to lift up other very clear passages in the Bible that absolutely nobody follows. 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! Most Christians simply ignore those texts.

I actually had an argument once with a Fundamentalist who was eating a ham sandwich at the time. He 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.

[image: text below]

And then we have a devastating text for people who believe that they actually follow the Bible literally. 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.”

The Bible tells us that if our own children do not obey us, we should murder 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 says about the human condition that some Christians can ignore biblical texts completely if they do not like them. And at the same time take biblical texts that limit human sexuality as literally true and free of any context or need for interpretation.

The reality is that humans are not always very rational. I know that humans can live with a high degree of cognitive dissonance. And I know that some people feel insecure about their own sexuality and they are triggered by people who are able to speak openly and freely about their sexuality.

As one example, consider the televangelists who preached against homosexuality for decades, who years later came out as homosexual themselves. The fire in their

preaching came from their cognitive dissonance, not from the word of God.

I would love to hear your own ideas about why people get so triggered by human sexuality.

[image: idahot day]

Earlier I promised to return to the subject of why we are still celebrating these special events, like the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia, Transphobia. Here's my reason. But I need to start with a question. Which is simply this: "What people are been set apart in today's celebration"? Do you think of this Day as lifting up queer people? Interesting. Because for me, the celebration does not lift up queer people. It actually lifts up people who struggle with homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia. Because those are all barriers to following through on the command from Jesus that we should love everyone.

And if you yourself struggle with homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia, please reach out to me. And absolutely reach out if you are upset by anything I'm saying. I'm happy to chat. I'll even buy you lunch. I do care about you.

Events like today will disappear when the need for these events disappears. Today's celebration will no longer be held once homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia disappear from our own society. Personally, I would be delighted if I never felt the need to preach on this topic ever again.

[image: be careful who you hate. It might turn out to be someone you love.]

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 - including me - our own children and other family members 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.