

“Do Not Let God’s Love Become Lost in Translations”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

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Texts: John 6:35-40

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

“anyone who comes to me I will never drive away”

~ John 6:37b

Prayer

**God whom no imagine can encompass
And no human language can fully define,
Come to us now as the Disturbing Comforter
Who deepens our faith and broadens our hearts.
We make this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ
Who promised that anyone who comes to him, he will never drive away. Amen.**

Every thoughtful preacher wrestles with the same homiletical question every week: how much of our own life experiences and personal stories to weave into our sermons.

Theology, Scriptures and faith only begin to make sense when they become part of our lives. We seldom sense God’s Presence in the precise language of creeds or in preaching that skirts the relevant issues that affect us every day or even in the ancient and well-known words of the Lord’s Prayer. It is only when the Word of God speaks into our hearts and often in unexpected ways takes flesh in our own living that we feel the nearness of God’s Spirit. This is the reason our faith tradition puts so much emphasis on the sharing of our faith journeys with one another; because the place we are most likely to encounter God anew and in a way that can have a lasting impact on our hearts and minds is in each other’s life stories. I am certain that all of you can think of at least one person whose life story made God’s love and grace more real and personal and transformative to you.

Stories have power, especially when they are shared from the pulpit. They have the power to draw people in, encourage them to open themselves to the Living God and evolve spiritually, but when spoken from the pulpit, a pastor’s story can also get in the way. It can shift the focus from God to the preacher. It can turn the sermon into an emotional striptease that creates an unhealthy relationship with the people in the pews. Still, there are times when preachers do make themselves vulnerable and bring very personal stories into their sermons, hoping that their sharing may open the doors to a more robust and faithful understanding of the church’s mission in the world. Please keep this in mind when you hear part of my own story a little later this morning.

Five years ago, our congregation adopted an Open and Affirming Covenant. The unanimous congregational vote was a watershed moment in our church's history. After at least two years of honest dialogue, difficult conversations, many educational offerings, intentional engagement with Scriptures and incessant praying for discernment, you all decided to take seriously Jesus' words in the Gospel of John, **"*anyone who comes to me I will never drive away*,"** and practice this extravagant welcome and acceptance at the heart of the Christian faith. Our Open and Affirming Covenant, which, by the way, is not a church policy or declaration, but a solemn promise we have made before God to welcome all persons who are hungry and thirsty for the life-saving teachings of Christ, affirms our very public commitment to include communities that historically have not had a place in the pews or in the ministries and leadership of our church. And I suspect that the need for the extended period of dialogue, reflection, study and prayer that prepares congregations to become Open and Affirming has to do mostly with the explicit inclusion of LGBTQ+ Christians. Embracing and affirming the full humanity, worth and love of sexual minorities is still an uneasy, emotive, and potentially a very divisive topic for Christians, even for many Christians sitting in the pews of Open and Affirming congregations, who ground their discomfort with and opposition to the affirmation of LGBTQ+ individuals in a handful of Bible verses that are often taken out of context and have been not only misinterpreted but mistranslated also.

This may come as a surprise to many of you, but the word "homosexual" did not appear in the Bible until 1946. The decision to insert the noun into the text of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 was made by a group of 22 Yale scholars – all male academics born between 1870 and 1917 – who were on the translation committee of the Revised Standard Version of the American Bible. They combined two Greek nouns, including an obscure compound word that Paul apparently made up since it doesn't appear anywhere else in the Greek literature of the time, and placed a particular sexual orientation on the list of dishonest, abusive and violent behaviors that, in Paul's theological worldview, would prevent people from having anything to do with the Kingdom of God. In 1946, for the first time since 1611 when the King James Bible was published, for the first time in any language and in any translation, the word "homosexual" became part of the Christian Scriptures here in America, making even the simple state of being an LGBTQ person a grave sin that barred gay people from the Presence of God.

Paul and the early Church would have been utterly dumbfounded by the Yale scholars' choice of word. There was no clear concept or understanding of sexual minorities in the first century and Paul's list describes a way of acting, a certain conduct that heterosexual people could also display rather than a kind of person. While scholars have done their best to translate the text of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, the truth is that no one knows what those oblique words in Paul's Letter mean exactly. Throughout the history of the Church, those two words have been given widely different translations, depending on the cultural, societal and, especially, the temporal context of the translators. But, an eye-opening documentary film titled *"1946: The Mistranslation that Shifted the Culture,"*

that premiered in 2022 at DOC NYC - the country's largest documentary festival held annually in New York City – shows how this accidental insertion of the word “homosexual” into Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians in the early half of the twentieth century became a major catalyst for the emergence of a strong homophobic sentiment and an acrid anti-LGBTQ+ movement in the church that continues to have to this day real consequences, sometimes deadly, for the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people.

One of the riveting scenes in the documentary takes place when it captures on video the discovery of a letter written by a young Divinity School student from a small town in Quebec, Canada, to Rev. Luther Allan Weigle, who was the Chair of the translation committee at Yale, on October 22nd, 1959. In the letter, David Fearon challenged the Revised Standard Version translation and suggested that the use of the term “homosexual” was a mistranslation of the two words of Paul. Fearon also expressed his concern that misinformed and misguided Christians might use the novel RSV translation of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 as a sacred weapon against a defenseless minority group.

Surprisingly, Rev. Weigle recognized the committee's inaccurate translation. In 1971, the updated publication of the Revised Standard Version replaced “homosexuals” with “sexual perverts.” However, by then, the RSV with the erroneous choice of word had been used as the basic text for several other versions of the Bible around the world that were circulating primarily among conservative Evangelical groups. In fact, other publishers peppered the Bible with the word “homosexual,” adding it to 6 different verses throughout our Holy Scriptures. These mistranslated Bible verses are the ones that are still wielded around the globe as “clobber passages” against the LGBTQ+ community. Many church leaders still use this mistranslation, even though we know better now, to stoke homophobia and incite a religious mindset of opposition to LGBTQ+ rights.

I felt the heaviness and harm of this mistranslation in my own life when I came out to my pastor in Brazil. I was in my early 20's and I could no longer pretend that I did not have feelings that the Bible in Portuguese appeared to call an abomination in the eyes of God. Even though I had doubts and many questions, I took my faith seriously. Reading the Bible daily was an important part of my spiritual practices. I had cried over those mistranslated verses many a night. I loved the Church. Every week, I looked forward to Sunday so I could gather with my siblings in Christ for worship in the morning and in the evening as well. I had heard some of my pastor's sermons on 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and other passages. I knew that our conversation wouldn't be easy. I was terrified about exposing my true self to my pastor, but the Church mattered so much to me that I wanted to talk to him first before I could speak to my own parents. I thought he would listen and would help me figure out how to reconcile my sexual orientation with my love for God and the Church.

My pastor was only a few years older than me and I did feel a sense of relief after I opened up to him. For a moment, it felt as if I were talking to a close friend. Then, everything changed. Aloísio told me that my nature was against God's will for humankind. He said that I would have to distance myself from everything and everyone that aroused those evil impulses, thoughts and feelings in me. I wondered how I would distance from my own self. My only choice, Aloísio said, was to keep denying myself my whole life so I could be accepted into the Church and into God's Kingdom. By then I was in tears, and I remember asking my pastor: "**Why me?**" He gave me a short answer. I was sinful and I would have to come to terms with the fact that I would never be fully happy in this life, but it would be better for me to be unhappy with God than happy as a practicing gay man.

I was devastated. I left my pastor's study feeling as if God had singled me out to live a life that would never bring me any joy. I struggled alone with my pastor's words for a couple of years until I felt so hopeless and so desperate that I finally realized I had to tell my mother. I was so ashamed of whom I was that I did not have the courage to talk to my own mother face-to-face, instead I called. When she picked up the phone I said, "**Mom, I have something to tell you...**" and I started crying uncontrollably. Between sobs, I came out to my mother and mom's response went beyond anything I could have imagined. The first thing I heard was, "**I love you.**" Then my mother told me that she had always known and her knowing was the reason why she overprotected me. She was afraid the world might be unforgiving and cruel to me. She assured me that nothing would stop her from loving me. She was emphatic. She said that no priest, pastor, rabbi or imam; no church, synagogue or mosque; no Jewish, Christian or Muslim Sacred text could make her love me less or believe that my life was a mistake, that my nature was an abomination or that I would not be able to find happiness and love as a gay man.

My journey as a gay man in the church hasn't been a smooth sail at all, but when things do get hard and the world is unforgiving and good Christian people are cruel, the words that fill my heart with hope and give me the strength to hold on to my faith in God's love and carry on are not the words of the pastor in Brazil but my mother's. Her words remind me that our translations of passages like 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 are limited by our specific historical contexts. In fact, the words Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth are time-bound themselves. They are determined by the culture and time in which they were written. We have to keep this in mind when we approach our Holy Scriptures. Rather than coming to the Bible with our religious assumptions and cultural prejudices, we have to practice being open to the Holy Spirit so the Spirit may re-size our hearts and minds to the breadth and depth of the love at the center of our faith that says time and over again, "**anyone who comes to me I will never drive away.**"

Thanks be to God that here in our church, we did not let God's love become lost in translations and, five years ago, we voted to become an Open and Affirming Congregation.

May it be always so. Amen.