

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
May 12, 2019 – Elizabeth Bryce**

Reading: Revelation 7:9-17

Sermon: Sanctuary (Easter 4C)

So what is the difference between a church that is welcoming and a church that is affirming?

By definition I believe that all churches are meant to be welcoming. When the doors are open for worship, I don't know any church that would send some people away. Most churches have greeters and ushers and cards to fill out if you are a newcomer. There are friendly faces and there are people who want to get to know you, and a calendar of events to lure you in to a deeper relationship with that congregation.

Yes, it's true: there are a few churches out there where you don't feel exactly welcome – maybe you've broken their unwritten dress code and worn your jeans in church. Or you behaved incorrectly.. If you shout out "Amen!" in the middle of the preacher's sermon or you take communion when you weren't supposed to - you might get some frosty stares. But even those uncomfortable churches likely have a sign out on the street that says: Everybody is welcome!

Over the years I've yet to meet a congregation or a minister who doesn't think they are friendly, open, welcoming, inclusive, perfectly nice.

But what does it mean to be "affirming"?

The other night I was out shopping with my daughter. And, because I wore my rainbow buttons home from church after the bell concert, I pinned them to my jacket to make sure they made it back to church for worship today. And the sales clerk said to me: "I really like your buttons." Then she flipped the collar of her shirt up and showed me that she wore a rainbow pin as well, but under the collar.

"But I wear it here," she said "it's on the "down low" – you know, because Work."

"Yes, I understand." I said. "Actually I'm wearing mine because our church is having a vote next weekend about whether we will be identified as affirming." (Then no one has to be on the "down low".) And I think she must have known more or less what affirming meant because she said "That's great. Can I ask what denomination it is?" I told her it was United Church, and she said Yes, her mother in law goes to a United Church but she goes to a Roman Catholic church. I said something about seeing St Joe's parish march in the Pride Parade.) And when she said "Have a great weekend," I think it really meant something – it sent a message that was more than just words.

That's the difference. A welcoming Christian or welcoming congregation says: "I'm friendly, come and join me." An affirming person or an affirming congregation says: "Come and tell me about YOU."

An affirming designation, just like the rainbow and the transgender pin, it stands out. People are looking for the sign, and they are relieved when they see it. Because it sends the message: You are welcome, yes, I mean you.

We are often asked the question Why do queer people need special treatment? As a church, I believe that we have particular responsibility on this issue. After many, many centuries of actively discriminating against, punishing, excluding and condemning people from a variety of gender identities and sexual orientations, we have the burden of proving that we no longer hold those beliefs. We have to be public and say that we believe that diversity is a blessing, given by God to enrich us.

So when other Christian churches protest the inclusion of gender transition or same gender relationships in school curriculum – we have to stand up and say: “You don’t speak for all Christians - here is what I believe.”

When we go shopping, and wear our pins, we should tell people that we are part of a church where this is – not just okay – not just tolerated - but understood to be a blessing. We should have it in the sign outside, so that people going by can say: “I thought all churches were against that. That’s good to know.” It’s all in the signs and the symbols – they say so much more than “Everybody is welcome”.

The book of Revelation is a book full of signs and symbols. Many of them are frightening images. Wars and desecrations and violent beasts and so on and so on. In the passage we heard red today, however, the revelation vision delivers an amazing hope-filled moment. Barbara Rossi, a biblical scholar, calls it a “salvation interlude” before the final judgement. This is a moment of hope which assures God’s people they are protected, they are sheltered, that they have found sanctuary with God. In the trials that lie ahead, the people of God should persevere in their faith. For they are those who have “come out” of the great ordeal. And they know that God holds the future.

This salvation interlude reminds them that God shelters them – they will not hunger or thirst, nor will any scorching wind or sun touch them. After the opening of the sixth seal, the revelation threw out a challenging question: Who is able to stand? In this sanctuary moment, before the 7th seal, the faithful respond: “With God’s help, we ALL stand.”

I want to tell you about some friends of mine: We met Robin and Karen at the United Church in Pugwash, where we have a family cottage. Garth and Dorothy Mundle introduced us and the 6 of us decided we would form a “clergy couple” row in the congregation over the summer.

Robin and Karen are both ministers of the United Methodist Church in the USA. Robin is a deaconess, who has worked in a variety of educational and service ministries. Her partner Karen is an ordained minister, who was a pastoral minister in a congregation until she was elected bishop of a regional conference a couple of years ago. When Karen was elected, it was with full public knowledge that she was married to Robin, another woman.

But someone objected. According to the traditional doctrine of their church, anyone who is not heterosexual, anyone who is divorced or who co-habits with a partner before marriage - is not eligible to be in ministry or leadership of the church. The objectors

forced the question of whether or not to uphold the traditional book of discipline against Karen and, last summer, the court of the whole church supported their objection.

Ultimately, if Karen does not resign or retire permanently from ministry, our friend could be brought to trial to answer a charge of immorality. Those words alone are enough to make me a passionate supporter of Affirming Ministries in our United Church, congregations who have explicitly committed themselves to supporting both lay and their clergy's vocations for ministry, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. In the global and theologically diverse Christian church, these affirming congregations are true "sanctuaries" and signs of hope for all who don't fit the traditional norms and stereotypes of Christian morality. Whatever happens, with any luck, the next time we see Robin and Karen, we will be in the same row at Pugwash's United Church, where they have found, at least, a summer sanctuary from being a target of fear and rejection.

I'm going to close with the blessing that bishop Karen shared with her folks one Saturday night:

I thank God for the power of forgiveness.

How fragile and vulnerable we are when we come to stand on the Holy Ground of the sanctuary. We come seeking healing, hope, nourishment, growth, a place to serve, a community to call "home."

And we sometimes discount another's vulnerability, and wound them through our words and deeds. These wounds fester and stunt our relationship with God and with others.

So many of our congregations are fractured places of pain. Instead of coming open-hearted to church we are cautiously guarded because of misunderstanding and slights. This creates a dis-ease in the Body and the witness we make in the world is diminished.

It's why confession and forgiveness are so necessary. We aren't perfect people or perfect places but we strive after it through love's power.

Tomorrow (Sunday) is a day to make things right: it's a day of new beginnings!

May Rideau Park make a new beginning this Sunday. With the love of God, the grace of Christ and the power of the Spirit, we are sanctuary together, Amen