

“While you heard me reading these words just now they were coming true.” Luke 4:21

The fact that you are inquiring and engaging the process of becoming an affirming community testifies to the true nature of it already alive within this community.

In a way I would say “Your coming out!”

Everyone has to come out.

In our household, we celebrate this and we prepared for it when our children were younger by giving them a framework of possibility.

Each night we would sing them this lullaby by the “Flirtations”:

You can be anybody that you want to be
You can love whomever you will
You can travel any country where your heart leads
And know I will love you still
You can live by yourself
You can gather friends around
You can choose one special one
But the only measure of your words and your deeds
Will be the love you leave behind when you're gone.

Some girls grow up strong and bold
Some boys are quiet and kind
Some race on ahead, some follow behind
Some grow in their own space and time
Some women love women
And some men love men
Some raise children, and some never do
You can dream all the day, never reaching the end
Of everything possible for you.

Don't be rattled by names, by taunts or games,
But seek out spirits true
If you give your friends the best part of yourself
They will give the same back to you.

You can be anybody that you want to be
You can love whomever you will
You can travel any country where your heart leads
And know I will love you still
You can live by yourself
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Armed with this blessing, our children emerged. Both came out in their own time: our son at age 9 and our daughter at age 15. Neither of them emerged with the same sexual orientation as their parents. How this happens is still a mystery to me 😊 .

My point in sharing this with you is to highlight the truth that we all need to come out in our lives. We need to come out with how we express love with how we see ourselves in the world and we even need to come out about our prejudices and biases. The reason for this is that identity is an evolving thing. We are regularly invited in our lives to revisit the question of who we are and how we live this out in the world.

So you're coming out! Congratulations! Or should I say, congratulations? At some level, by the very fact that you are having this service today, you have embarked on the process of leaning into the margins of justice. Perhaps you thought you had already launched this process. As Christians, as followers of the teaching and example of Jesus Christ, we often think that

our whole initiative is about justice. How does becoming affirming or thinking about becoming affirming change one's vision for justice?

To become affirming as it is delineated by the United Church of Canada means to be overt about one's alignment with those who live their lives on the margins. As soon as we are overt about something, as soon as we give language and voice to a reality that we align ourselves with, we engage a process of coming out. In this case, in the case of becoming affirming, the United Church's focus is really about "justice and inclusion for all peoples in all areas." True, the focus of this call to justice is a validation of our inclusivity of all people regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender diversity and diverse expressions of love. But this call to affirmation, to name yourselves as affirming, is a return again to the basic call to justice and inclusion for all in all the diverse circumstances, including those excluded by ageism, racism, sexism, accessibility, and socio-economic differences."* You are coming out! And coming out rather than being a one-time act, is a process.

One of the first steps in this process is to state in a positive manner what you are coming out about. This is what it means to affirm. What makes this become alive for us and for others is the act of saying it out loud, in a public fashion. Often when people come out about something, they speak about it to someone. They make a public statement. There is a part of our process of self-identification that requires witnessing. Our soul needs this at some level because it helps us to engage this new awareness in the world and functions for us like an anchor.

* "Open Hearts", 2011. <http://ause.ca/wp-content/pdf/OpenHearts.pdf>. Pg. 1.

In the United Church, the act of coming out publicly about becoming affirming is specific. The United Church of Canada is clear that Churches need to become public about this because before they chose to become affirming, Churches publicly excluded people who were different in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity. The United Church of Canada is inviting every community who wishes to become affirming to admit their culpability in the marginalization of minority groups like the LGBTQIA community. To become affirming is not like turning the page, or opening a new book. It is not a clean slate. This is why becoming affirming is a process and not a destination. We could say, “the journey is the destiny.”

So to become affirming is a journey that is ongoing. It is in the heart and mind of the United Church of Canada, a conscious call to a personal and communal commitment to justice. This is the type of call that is renewed with every breath. This is the type of justice that begins in the human heart and reaches outward toward divine mystery. The justice that is sought in becoming affirming is divine justice. It does not seek to end exclusion nor to enforce inclusion, it seeks integrity, the integration of all the parts to create wholeness.

I’m talking here about a wholeness that begins with each one gathered here today. Sometimes we think that wholeness is equal to wellness, in that wholeness refers to those times that we feel good, strong and healthy. In truth wholeness means the inclusion of all the parts as they are. Not just the parts that are working or that shine, or that fit in. It means all the parts.

In the first creation story, each time God created something God would then pronounce a judgement on it. Every created being received a judgement and every judgment was “it is good.”

To say that you wish to become affirming is to reiterate this judgment in the first creation story. It is to say about all people that they are good no matter their age, shape, race, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, or their diverse expression of love. All are good.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the idea of judgment is presented pictorially as a city gate. Those who come to the gate to be judged are joined by those who do the judging. The city gate is localized in the human body in the space of the heart. All those who are gathered must open their hearts to the act of judgment. This means that everyone gathered is both judge and judged. Today we call this type of judgment discernment.

City gates were traditionally in high places so that it could be easily protected. As a result city gates were also threshing floors. They were the space that was used to discern the chaff from the grain because they were generally windy spaces perfect for rolling the grain and then throwing it in the air to allow the wind to take the chaff and let the grain fall into the baskets. In other words, these spaces were mixed spaces. Both the grain and the chaff had a place there. The city gates were also the place where both city dwellers and foreigners would pass through everyday. It was a mixed space. A space where all the parts had a place and all who gathered had a voice.

We need to know this when we enter into the task of judgement, the task of affirmation. This is a task that takes place in the human heart and unless we invite all the voices to sit at the table of the heart we cannot hear clearly the voice of God.

There is a city gate in each one of you and collectively you create a city gate in your community. As you walk through this process listen to your heart. This needs to begin with the

individual and then move to the group. Do not be afraid to name your own guilt in the ways that you have resisted integrity. All of us have done this as individuals and we have contributed to it communally. The more we bring these less desirable parts to the table the more whole we will feel. When we function from a place of integrity we are able to create a world that supports the wholeness of all, all people, all races, all creeds, all ages, all abilities, all sexual orientations, all gender identifications, all ways of loving, all species. All of these diverse created expressions are our relations, we need to treat them as we ourselves would like to be treated: The Golden Rule.

Finally, this journey you have said yes to is an invitation into a liminal space, a marginal space. It not uncommon for liminal spaces to take time to create a new language, a new way of being together, a new way of seeing ourselves in the world. Take the time to do this dare to let go of language that separates and embrace the language that integrates. This may mean that you speak slower, or less often, or with less words. Trust this process, trust your heart and trust the great Mystery that some call God.