

Justice for All: a reflection on the 6th principle

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Just a few weeks ago, in Oxnard, California Lawrence King, a 15 year old was shot at school by a classmate. He died. Newspaper accounts say just days before, King had started wearing makeup and jewelry and saying he was gay. The day before he was murdered he had been confronted about his gayness by a group of classmates that included the boy who shot him.

Another student at that school was quoted in reports as saying; "even if he was different, he didn't deserve it."

Just a day later, in Fort Lauderdale, Simmie Williams, Jr., an openly gay Afro-American 17 year old, standing on a street corner and dressed as a woman was murdered by two men who reports say confronted him, shot him, and fled.

In a response to the report of this incident one person posted her thought; "the churches have been silent about hate crimes against gay people for too long."

Last week I received a phone call from the mother of a 17 year old here in Greenville. She told me that after her daughter came out as gay to her family and friends just over a year ago, she experienced so much harassment in her public school from students and teachers, that she had begun home schooling her daughter to protect her from harm.

This mother told me that she and her husband had struggled to accept their daughter's orientation. Now that they have re-affirmed their love for their gay daughter, they have realized that no matter how clearly and how lovingly they accept her as she is, they need help to deal with their daughter's conviction that God does not accept her. They called me, because even though their priest has been sympathetic, no one has yet been able to change her daughter's belief.

Why should we become a welcoming congregation?

Some of you say we already are.

We already welcome gays, bisexuals, even transgendered folk.

Let's not make a big deal about it!

We might be harassed.

We might expose ourselves to violence.

We might not be able to do things in this community that are MORE important...

We might be overrun with gays and lesbian and bisexuals and transgender folk...who only have one issue, one agenda...

Why should we, a faith community, that isn't all gay, take the risk of exposing ourselves to those who will exclude all of us, who will hate all of us, who will commit violent acts against us?

What can we (so far away from mainstream religion) possible say, or do, that would change any one's mind about who God loves?

Perhaps we can follow the examples of Unitarians and Universalists and Unitarian Universalists who have come before us, who were from such a small part of America's religious life, yet took unpopular stands in their days that changed the world.

Perhaps, we can say life is short and it is all we have. Perhaps, we can say louder than we have been that we are inspired by the message--from whatever source it may arise--that love is more powerful than hate. Perhaps, we can act on our hope for and commitment to an ever deeper, ever more expansive justice for all. Perhaps, we can act on our promise to be in caring, honest relationship with each other, discovering and thoughtfully examining our differences and finding again what makes us one people committed to justice for all.

Perhaps, we can say what we have always said, that working for justice is spiritual work...

Just before, I began again, in my thirties to become a minister, a close friend of mine from Divinity School which I had attended just after college, committed suicide. She had so internalizing society's disdain for her as a lesbian for so long that in a moment of deep despair, followed by decades of depression, she committed the ultimate act of self hate.

There is too much hate in this world. Fear of difference becomes hate, hate becomes violence. Violence against the body and the spirit, affects us on the outside and on the inside.

Committed to doing the work of justice, of treating each other fairly, we try and try again to make the world more loving. Murder makes the headlines. Yet, it is suicide that is the number one cause of death for gay teens.

My friend was well past her teen years when she killed herself, and so was I. Her death affected me. When she ended her life, I was moved to begin living mine in a different way.

I was lucky to have grown up in a large and loving church family. I was told and I believed that I was a child of God. I went to college and then seminary, ready to serve this loving, accepting fair God that I had been taught to believe in. Trying to integrate my sexual identity with everything else about me, I finally realized there was no place for me to be whole in mainline Christian denominations. That realization changed my life.

My friend's suicide changed my life again.

I felt compelled to find, or to be found by, a congregation that would welcome all of me, that loved all of me. Being gay wasn't the only important thing about me.

Until, homophobia made it was the only important thing.....

Almost a decade ago, while doing my internship year as a UU student minister, I learned about all the struggles and the conflicts and the acts of violence that the congregation I was with had been through to tolerate, accept and finally to welcome those who were different from the heterosexual majority there. I heard the many painful stories from the past from all sides, yet during my internship I was experiencing only genuine welcome.

After decades of hiding and avoiding talking about my sexual identity in "mixed" company, I found the welcome from straight UU's hard to really believe, hard to accept.

Fearful that homophobia was still alive behind the welcome, I finally spoke about my fears with my supervisory committee. An older gentleman who I had been told had been among those who had earlier most resisted the "gay invasion" that many expected would happen when this congregation became an officially Welcoming one, said to me during that conversation...

"You are no Big Deal!"

"We struggled to welcome you and those like you, and now we do. Let go of your fears and get on with it! We aren't stuck there anymore... We've listened. We've learned and we've grown, and we want you, we need you, to be all that you are."

I love this UU world where most of the time my sexual orientation and yours is no big deal.

Where so many have talked and listened to each other enough to come out of hiding and be ourselves and let go of our fears, where we are free to be authentic, different from each other, in mixed company and united.

Until we aren't...

Why should we become a Welcoming Congregation? Because being openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender is a big deal in Greenville. Because, people are hurting...parents, partners, teenagers, college students, young people, people of color are hurting and have so few places to go and be safe...and whole...know love...to be in "mixed" company and united.

Because, engaging in the welcoming congregation study where we can talk about and examine our differences is how spiritual work and justice work is done in this faith. It is not because some authority outside or over us tells us we should work for peace, work for racial equity, work to eliminate poverty, work for economic parity, work to make the world a safer, freer, more compassionate place...But as we are bold enough and open enough to be in loving, searching relationship with each other, listening to our stories and journeys, our fears and yearnings, where we let find the safety and the inspiration to let go of and dissolve the hard knot of rigidity and hate.

If we can sit still enough with each other and with ourselves to hear what the world looks like from another's point of view...each of us will become more than we were before...

Together finding our way...to let our compassion for each other, and for ourselves,... do justice work.

As we do deeply spiritual justice work, then we will know what it means to be allies with, to be in solidarity with those who are threatened, limited, reduced to just one aspect of who they are that overwhelmingly defines everything else.

That's why it is important for us to become a welcoming congregation.

It is not just because GLBT folk are the most discriminated against group when it come legal rights...

It is not just because we all have in common some place where we have stood on the outside yearning to be whole and crying out for things to be different...than they are.

If you decide to become a recognized Welcoming Congregation it will be because you will no longer be silent and stand by...while hate kills the body and the spirit.

The board has endorsed beginning the process. Members and friends are engaged on Wednesday evenings; over a dozen of packing ourselves into the library for what over and over again has been a deep and profound examination of our prejudices and preconceived notions, listening to each other's differences.

If this congregation decides to take a vote and then votes to ask for recognition as a Welcoming Congregation, it will mean that you have found enough unity to say we are here to those who might be looking for a faith community that believes that love is more powerful than hate. Becoming a Welcoming Congregation is one way to "claim" to be about the business of changing systems of violence. It says that you value transforming yourselves enough to live free and whole and with love for yourself and each other, where it is no big deal to be different.

If becoming a welcoming congregation saves just one child from a life of self hate and sure death, it is a risk worth taking...

Nameste...