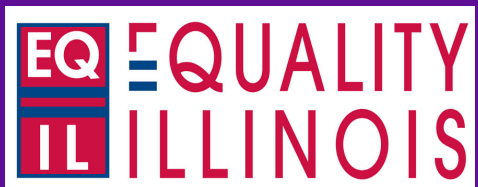




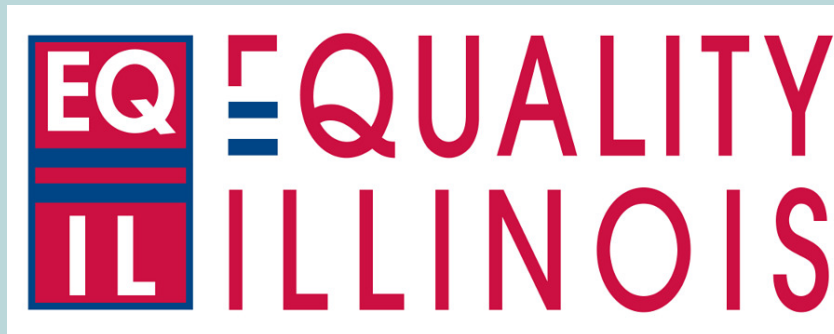
SEASON OF INCLUSION



Season's Greetings!



From all of us at



Contributors



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Epiphany UCC*

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God Says Yes To Me

Submitted by: Rev. Barbara Bolsen, Epiphany United Church of Christ



*I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic
and she said yes*

*I asked her if it was okay to be short
and she said it sure is*

*I asked her if I could wear nail polish
or not wear nail polish
and she said honey*

*she calls me that sometimes
she said you can do just exactly
what you want to*

*Thanks God I said
And is it even okay if I don't paragraph
my letters*

*Sweetcakes God said
who knows where she picked that up
what I'm telling you is*

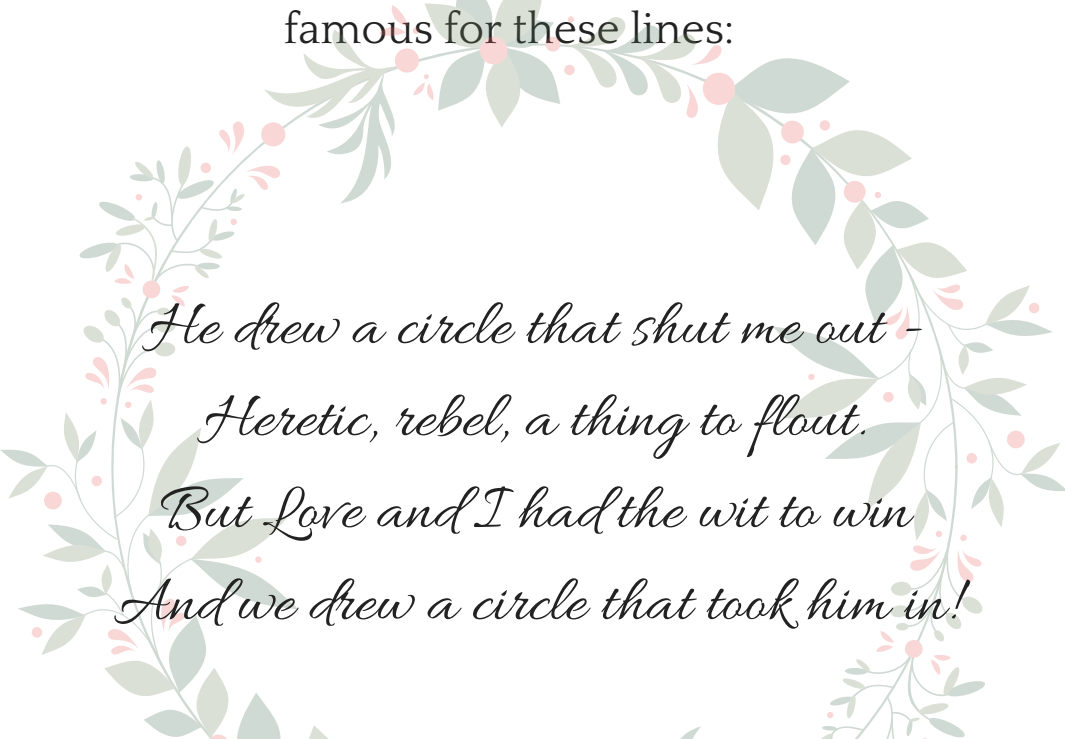
Yes Yes Yes

No one seems to know very much about Kaylin Haught, the author of this poem. The magazine, *This Land* (thislandpress.com), says that she lives in a small town in Oklahoma in a house older than the state itself. She's the daughter of a preacher who says she now finds God in nature. I love this poem because it speaks to me of my intimate connectedness to God. It reminds me that I am created in God's image and that God is forever and always loving and affirming me in my particular body and soul.

Outwitted

Submitted By Rev. Dr. Rex E. Piercy, Congregational United Church of Christ of Arlington Heights, IL

The 19th-and 20th-century Disciples of Christ poet Edwin Markham is famous for these lines:



*He drew a circle that shut me out -
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win
And we drew a circle that took him in!*

I like to think that the whole meaning behind Christmas and the theology which supports it - "incarnation" - is precisely this: **God in Christ outwitting the powers and principalities to widen the circle that others would draw tight and close.**

As a people who often find ourselves "shut out" from the circle - from family, church, etc., to understand that this holy tide of Christmas is all about inclusion is to see and feel God's extravagant welcome. Boldly claim Christmas! And have the wit to embrace what it really means: that no matter who you are, or where you may be on life's journey, you are welcome.

So come on in!

Come On In

Submitted by Rev. Peggy McClanahan, Pilgrim Faith United Church of Christ

Long ago, a poor couple heavy with a child already trying to come out went door to door knocking and asking to come in. "No room for you" each one told them. "Go away, no room for you here." Finally, one kind soul offered a warm, dry place with the animals. "Come on in" said the innkeeper. That night God's Love came into the world in a whole new way. The One who came that night never forgot.

"Come on in" he said to the hated tax collector Matthew. "Come journey with me and live in love."

"Come on in" he said to blind Bartimaeus when others tried to shut him out.
"Come see how good life can be."

"Come on in" he said to the children who were told to go away and be quiet.
"Come on in and be blessed."

"Come on in" he said to the woman who washed his feet with her tears. "Come on in and show your love. Those folks who shun you just don't get it."

"Come on in" he said to the Gentiles who wanted his help. "No conversion needed to share in God's love."

"Come on in" he says to all who have been shut out, shut up, sent away, bullied, shamed and told to change. "Come on in, God's love is right here. Come on in and love one another and bless the world with your love."

"Come on in" God says at Pilgrim Faith United Church of Christ. "Come and share in the love that keeps coming out to gather everyone in. Come share Christmas and every day with this community of Christ's love."

WELCOME

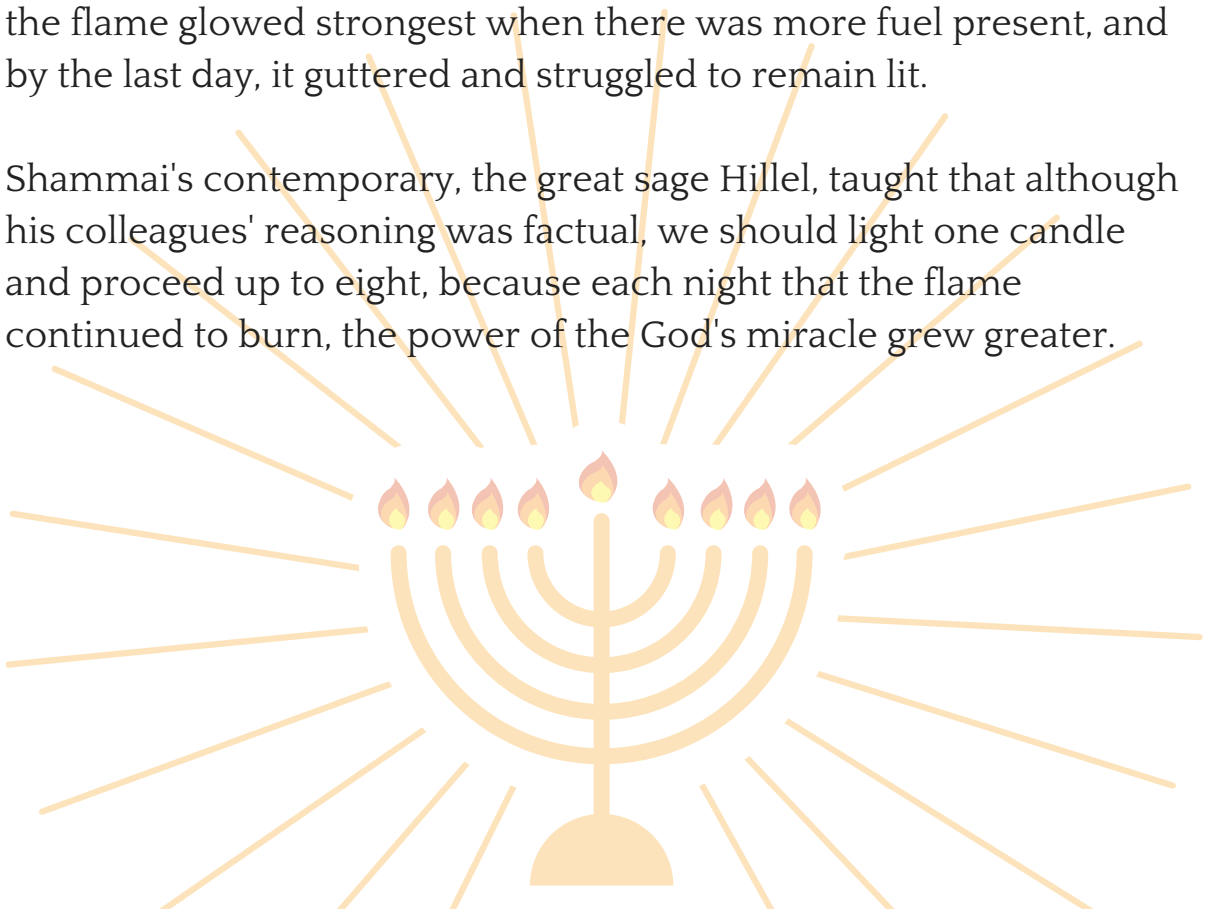
Striving Towards the Light

Submitted By Rabbi Sidney M. Helbraun, Temple Beth-El, Northbrook

The most well known symbol for the holiday of Hanukkah is the eight branched menorah, also known as a Hanukiah. For eight nights families gather to sing, eat foods fried in oil, recite a blessing, and kindle the lights, until on the final night the Hanukiah shines brightly, informing all who see it of the Great Miracle that happened; that a vessel containing enough oil to burn for only one day somehow lasted for eight, time enough for more pure oil to be brought to the Temple in Jerusalem, so that the light that shined did not go out. It was a sign that even in the darkest of times, God's presence remained with our people.

While the custom of kindling the lights is well established today, the manner in which the Hanukiah was lit was once a matter of debate. Nearly two thousand years ago the great rabbi, Shammai, taught that on the first night all eight lights should be kindled, and that on each successive night a light should be removed, until on the last night only one flame would remain. His reasoning was that this procedure would correspond more closely to what took place at the event; for the flame glowed strongest when there was more fuel present, and by the last day, it guttered and struggled to remain lit.

Shammai's contemporary, the great sage Hillel, taught that although his colleagues' reasoning was factual, we should light one candle and proceed up to eight, because each night that the flame continued to burn, the power of the God's miracle grew greater.



While at first glance the rabbi's debate appears to be quite trivial: an argument over how many lights to kindle each night, when we look a bit closer we find that their disagreement deals, not with flames, but with a philosophy of life. If we choose, we can follow the approach of Shammai, and engage in the world as it is. Or we can adopt the posture of Hillel, who sees that there is great beauty and holiness that surrounds us each day, and we can strive to elevate ourselves and our world, letting God's light shine through.

Our Jewish goal is not to see the world only as it is, but to dream, work and build something even more beautiful and holy; to recognize the potential in every soul, to reach out to those who have been overlooked or pushed aside, to call out to those who don't know where to turn, to open doors and embrace those who might have been afraid to enter. Rather than imagine that the world will always be as it was, Hillel tells us to see open our eyes to holiness and to strive towards the light. It is a goal for us as individuals, as a community and a challenge for our world. May this holiday season be a time of warmth, welcome and seeking light and finding love.

Amen.



God Doesn't Need Much to Make Miracles Happen...

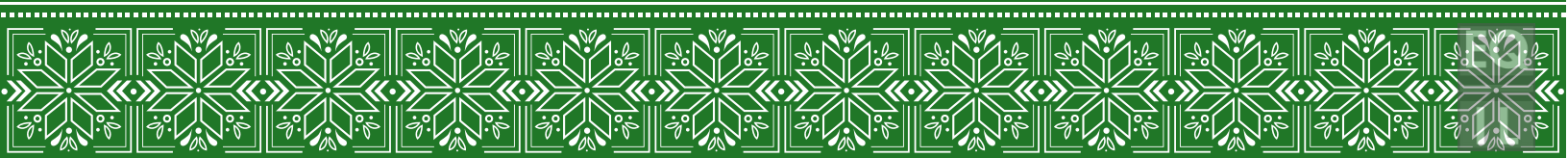
Submitted By Rev. Mark Winters, First Congregational UCC

I'm thinking of the innkeeper – the one who did not have a room for Mary and Joseph, probably caught up in the business of running an inn, having a hard time making room in the busyness of his life, to find a space for Mary and Joseph. But he found them just a little space in the stable, an offering so small and simple, but enough so that the baby Jesus could be born, albeit among farm animals, laid then in a feeding trough.

As a professor in the summer of 1928, J.R.R. Tolkien, was grading papers from his students, when he came across a blank page. Apparently, Tolkien was a bit of a doodler, and this blank space was all the inspiration he needed to write the sentence, “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” That sentence went on to begin one of the most famous novels of 20th century English literature, *The Hobbit*.

What amazing things can God do to inspire us, with just a tiny opening, just a place in a stable, just a blank piece of paper?

Fourteen years ago, a young man attended a Youth Outlook meeting at our church. Youth Outlook is an organization that supports lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender teenagers, giving them a place to be among friends, without fear of judgment or condemnation. Here, in our building, these young people gain acceptance, respect, pride, and courage to be who God created them to be. This young man is now a hairdresser, around 30, and he met up with one of Youth Outlook's board members, completely by luck, a few years ago. As the two spoke with each other, the young man was flooded with warm memories of his time in our building, a building which was the only place where he as a teenager could really be himself. And all we did was give them a room, and turn on the lights and the heat.



God does not need much - just a blank piece of paper, just an empty room to be yourself, just a place in a stable. It's not the things that fill space that are meaningful, but rather, the space between things. What would music be without space between the notes to appreciate melody and harmony? To paraphrase chapter 11 of the Tao Te Ching, clay can be shaped into a vessel, but it's the empty space within it that makes the vessel useful.

It was the blank page that inspired a legend. It was a meeting room that made a young man feel he could be himself. It was the space in the stable, the openness in the manger, that allowed God to enter into human life, and existence.

You may think you don't have room in your life for spirituality. The good news is, God doesn't need much room to make miracles happen.

Peace be with you.

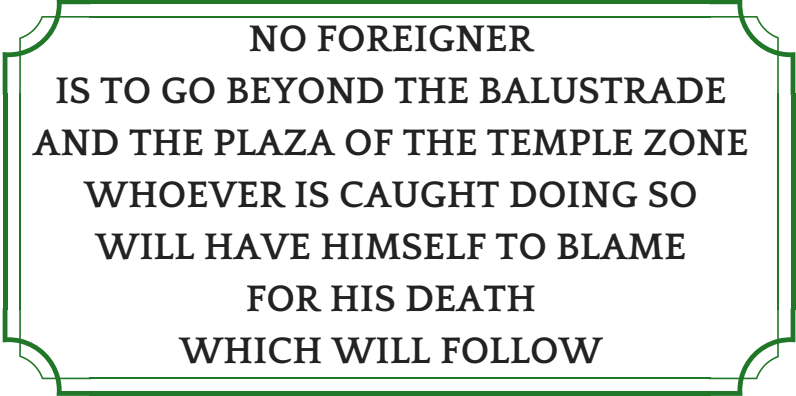


A sermon based on Acts 8:26

Submitted by Pastor Scott Oberle, First Congregational United Church of Christ - Downers Grove

About an Ethiopian Eunuch: He was hopeful. He wanted to worship God with God's people. Jerusalem and the temple mount had taken his breath away. The throngs of people, walking through the massive walled gates... climbing the streets to the temple itself. He washed, for this was required, and then followed the masses of crowds entering into the courtyard of the gentiles... where he was greeted, when he got to the steps to the temple courtyard, by a sign.

It's dimensions were 2 feet high by 3 feet long. Each letter was nearly 1 1/2 inches high and originally painted with red ink against the white limestone.



**NO FOREIGNER
IS TO GO BEYOND THE BALUSTRADE
AND THE PLAZA OF THE TEMPLE ZONE
WHOEVER IS CAUGHT DOING SO
WILL HAVE HIMSELF TO BLAME
FOR HIS DEATH
WHICH WILL FOLLOW**

The stone was dated to the first century AD when Herod the great had the temple constructed, contemporary to the life of Jesus. You see the idea was that pagans, non-Jews, could come to the temple site, but had to remain in the courtyard for the gentiles, so they would not defile the ground nor the temple- of the chosen people of God. A wall kept them out. To cross it, was to take your life in your own hands.

Human beings are good at building walls, as the old adage goes good fences make good neighbors. At defining who has a place, and who is not allowed... whether it's a bouncer at a bar, a lunch table of school kids where some of the less desirable are not allowed to join, borders of nation states as people flee from drug cartels violence or oppressive dictator governments, OR religious persecution of Christians and Kurds... no hope for a better tomorrow... Or a church... that says dogmatically you have to be baptized, saved, non-divorced, the list goes on.... to be a member.

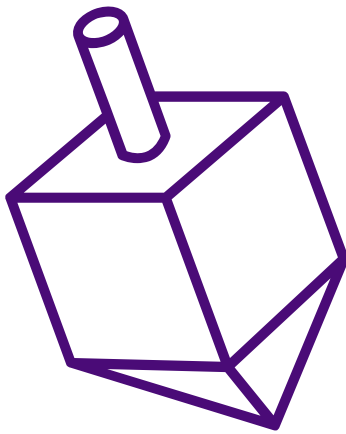
Every church says it is welcoming. Most church signs say welcome, there are greeters, coffee hour after church - if you're real lucky some cookies or muffins... some even give out little coffee mugs, Frisbees, fresh baked bread. But the reality... when you spend some time within most circles in the body of Christ is... you are really only welcome to a point. If you just came in after sleeping on the picnic tables in the park- you might have to sit in the back, if you are a young unwed mom—well, that kind of thing is frowned upon here, if you are gay, transgender, or lesbian... well we have some programs from that... and the list goes on... and on... Welcome in the doorway, but no room at the table. This is not what God intended.

In the story about the Eunuch, Phillip told him about Jesus and his healing love, and he was overjoyed that the nothing stood his way him being baptized and feeling God's love. There was nothing to hold him back, no prejudices or preconditioned responses, no judgments or qualifications, but just to come, and feel the warmth of a God who knows you by name, by color, by identity, and loves you as you are, right now, in this moment and continues to love us too, shape us into new lives that believe that the power of God's love is transformative, life changing, and full of great joy, great hope, and unbelievable, uncomparable love.



The Meaning of Hanukkah

Submitted By Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg



About 2200 years ago, Antiochus IV, then the emperor over what's now the land of Israel and much of the Middle East, outlawed the practice of Judaism and defiled the holy Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. A small group of Jewish resistors fought back, saying: No. We will not submit to your terms. We will not assimilate. We will not hide what we know to be true. This is who we are. Watch us claim the mantle of freedom. Hanukkah literally means,

"dedication," referring to the rededication of the Temple once it was returned to the hands of those who cherished it. For this, too, is part of the work: After fight to claim freedom, after winning against those who would take away the fundamental right to express love—one of the deepest human expressions of the holy, the sacred—there is so often work to do on the other side. What has been defiled must be purified. What has been scarred must be healed. What has been covered over with hate must be drenched in love, in compassion, in connection, in caring. When someone tries to extinguish our light, we must rededicate ourselves to burning eightfold, against the odds, illuminating not only our own deepest self but helping to light the way for others. As Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel, wrote, "Everyone must know that within them burns a candle--and that no one's candle is identical with the candle of another, and that there is no human being without a candle. One is obligated to work hard to reveal the light of one's candle in the public realm for the benefit of the many. One needs to ignite one's candle and make of it a great torch to enlighten the whole world."

May the lights of Hanukkah this year help you rededicate the holy in yourself, and to shine out your great gorgeous light in all directions, showing the way for everyone who needs it.

We Are Blessed

Poem by Rev. Barbara Zeman © 2015

Inspiration comes when experience can be transformed
into the life giving energy that moves our being.

We are one with God.
We are one with each other.
We are one within ourselves,
Without any outside intervention.

One Spirit
One life
One moment
A trinity of creation ...

Giving all who see it the awareness,
Helping all who feel it shine through,
Making all who connect with it structure,
Letting all who belong to it go.

Surrender to the moment ... and soar.
Live on the edge ...and become.
Be the change ... and live.
Know yourself ... and discover the Divine.



Showing Through

By Rabbi Michael Zedek, Emanuel Congregation

I am both fond of and challenged by a story which tells of a 4 year old girl who is leaving a family worship service with her mother.

She speaks up. "Mommy, the Rabbi's talk [the sermon] confused me." To which the Mother responds, "Why is that, Honey?"

"Well, Mommy, the Rabbi said God is bigger than we are. Is that true, Mommy?"

And while the Mother will tell her daughter that is correct, I urge the reader, no matter one's confidence and/or uncertainty about deity, to assume the conviction to be true, at least for the moment. After all, the Universe is bigger than we are.

But the child continues. "Mommy, the Rabbi said there is a part of God in everyone of us. Is that true too?"

"Yes, that's true", and then the 4 year old expresses the most extraordinary statement of theology.

"Mommy, if God is bigger than us and God lives in us, wouldn't God show through?"

In so many ways, it's been a good year, but no matter the time or circumstance, may we be moments/persons when something sacred, something of God, may just show through.

A Christmas Greeting

By Pastor Scott Oberle, First Congregational United Church of Christ - Downers Grove

Holidays

can be tough in the LGBT community, for some it is a reminder of the family one grew up with that has since cast you out, the once joyful experience of Thanksgiving dinners and Tree Decorating now a bitter memory of words and actions that no medication or psychotherapy can take away. When my roommate Larry came out to me in college I truthfully wasn't sure how to react. I listened, I asked some questions, and at the end of his sharing I told him the one thing I think super ceded anything he said, "You are and always will be, my friend."

Unfortunately, his family had not been so understanding. They did not want him to come home for Christmas. His father did not want to speak with him. His father's faith community had influenced him so much so that he could not reconcile his Biblical interpretations with his love for his son. It was heartbreaking and still is painful for Larry today. You may have had a similar experience. At the heart of many of those painful experiences is a bent version, a broken version of Christianity. As a pastor, and as one who once stood on the wrong side of equality due to my own narrow reading of scriptures, I want to say to you this day you are made in the image of God, beautifully Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual, Transgendered, or Queer. The love of God does not discriminate. And there is more than one kind of family. From your family of faith in Downers Grove First Congregational United Church of Christ may the love of Christ bless you richly this Advent and Christmas Season!

A Reflection

Submitted By Rev. Vernice Thorn, Broadway UMC Chicago

You might wonder how a black, straight woman, from a conservative family and faith tradition might end up at Broadway UMC. So, I share my story with you and I have to say the journey has God's hand print all over it.

After working in the corporate work for 20 years, I really felt that my field was just about as evil as any place could be. I had watched my personality change from an extremely nice, easy going person with a sense of humor, to a very angry person, just going through the motions. I felt there was still more for me to do, so I began looking for a masters distance learning program. I sat at my computer one day and found a program at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. I'd never heard of this school or the city of Evanston. As I scrolled through the home page a small voice spoke to me and said, "You need to GO to seminary." Immediately I felt in my spirit the rightness of the voice. I did not question why or how, I just began making plans to obey.

The challenge for me began the day I arrived at Garrett. My application process and campus visit had been met with enthusiasm and a spirit of welcome by the recruiting staff, but as I stepped on campus it immediately felt very unwelcoming. The word inclusion was a new word for me. I was introduced to it at Garrett, though there were plenty of examples to the contrary. And that contradiction was extremely painful for me. I expected to be plunged into a different world of love and grace and equity – something that Jesus taught, lived and died for, yet it felt very exclusionary and unwelcoming to me. I felt like an outcast because I was not United Methodist, I was not a Master of Divinity student and I was, and still am, a black woman. These aspects of my life were not the norm for the majority of students in attendance.

During my first year, we were to choose a church for field education which was a requirement for all seminary students. So I began to wait for the instructor to find a church for me and I continued to wait. Towards the end of June I began to get worried, everyone else had been placed and still I waited. Finally I received a call from my instructor that he wanted me to go and visit a church on the north side of Chicago, about 30 minutes from the seminary off the CTA-Red Line. He did not give me any details about the church or the pastor, just the address and phone number. I called to make an appointment and set out for Broadway UMC.

As I was introduced to the pastor, Greg Dell, and shown around the building, I thought to myself, “what have I gotten myself into?” In his non-traditional dress of Bermuda shorts and sandals, Greg discussed his trial and suspension for performing a same gender union service. He suggested before I agree to the assignment I should come to worship service and experience the congregation first. I agreed to do that.

I arrived for the service, walked into the sanctuary and was carried on this wave of energy and excitement. People were not singling me out, even though there were few black faces in the crowd. The service began and during a portion we call community and connection Greg made a statement similar to this:

“Community and connection is a time when we recognize and celebrate all the gifts that God has blessed us with. It’s a time when we welcome and affirm each person who is here. We are a church who does not tolerate people, but who celebrates people. We are diverse, and claim diversity as a gift; something worth celebrating. We celebrate the diversity of gender – male, female and transgender, intersexed; we celebrate the diversity of sexual orientation – gay, straight, lesbian, bi-sexual, asexual, queer and questioning; we celebrate the diversity of race – black, brown, yellow, white, red...all the colors of God’s rainbow are welcome here. These gifts you bring are valued, you are valued.”

As I listened to these words, my soul opened up. For the first time in my life, someone had named me, a black woman, as valuable. I knew instantly that this appointment was no accident. Because of my experience here I claim a ministry of inclusion and will stand against bigotry of all kinds whenever and wherever I experience it.

To my sisters and brothers who are LGBT, I want you to know that I am in that struggle with you, that I will continue to preach and teach equity, that I will continue to speak the truth of justice wherever and whenever I encounter injustice. I will continue to challenge myself in my own straight privilege and internalized racism. I will continue to model and fight for structural change in our institutions and I will remain in prayer for a fully inclusive, reconciled and transforming world that reflects the ministry of Jesus and claims the peaceful Kin-dom of God.

Your Story Matters

Submitted By Rev. Barbara Lohrbach, St. John United Church of Christ

In the beloved story of "The Wizard of Oz", Auntie Em tells Dorothy to find a place where she won't get into any trouble. Dorothy walks off by herself, talking to Toto, "Some place where there isn't any trouble. Do you supposed there is such a place, Toto ? There must be. It's not a place you can get to by a boat, or a train. It's far, far away. Behind the moon, beyond the rain...." This beloved story begins with one person imagining more...imagining what life could be like with freedom and openness...a place where she belongs, where she is listened to and loved, where her gifts and talents are valued.

Imagine a place...imagine a place where all belong and all are listened to and all are loved. For LGBT persons that may seem impossible even yet today, especially when it comes to matters of faith and religion. Many have given up on faith, even on God because they've been told so often that there is no place for them, no home in the church unless they give up an essential part of themselves. As a pastor, I've heard far too many stories to know that the struggle to be loved just as God created us is over. As the mom of a lesbian, I know firsthand the pain religion can force on a family. Sometimes we have to find family in other ways.

We found a home in the United Church of Christ (UCC) in an Open and Affirming congregation. In the UCC we have a saying--"No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here." For Open and Affirming churches of the UCC, we mean it! You can find an ONA church at www.openandaffirming.org. If you've given up on church, check us out, maybe even this Christmas.

Your story matters. It matters to God. God loves you and you can be gay and Christian or any other faith. I invite you to come to a place where your gifts are valued and you don't have to hide that essential part of who you were created to be. My deep prayer is that you will come to know that God loves you, just as you are.

Room in the Inn

Submitted by Rev. Jessica A. Harren



Luke 2:7b: “. . . Because there was no room for them in the inn.”

How often have we, as members and supporters of the GLBTQ community, felt like there was no room for us in the inn? Sometimes the inn means our own houses as parents, spouses, siblings, or children have distanced themselves, hurt us deeply, or simply, by lack of space, not allowed us the room to be who we are. Sometimes we are kicked out, and other times, there is simply no room to be all of who we are. Even as a Pastor, sometimes I feel like the church has no room for me or my family. No room for our political beliefs, no room for our identities, no room for us to be fully who we are.

Sometimes the room is cut off because of ignorance or too thick walls or doors because of the ways “we’ve always done things.” Sometimes, in some places, there is no room for us because of hate.

Luke 2:6-7a: “While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son”

For me, this scripture means that it is precisely the places where humans decide there is no room that God breaks into the world with hope, new life, and joy. God (with help from Mary, of course), breaks into the places where there is no room. Places where people are cut off. Places where it hurts and where exclusion happens. Think about it: Jesus was born into a place because he was excluded from having room in the inn. If Jesus, the Son of God, was excluded by human beings, but yet went on to save the world with hope and new life and the deep knowledge that after death we are always invited to have life – then maybe, just maybe, there is hope for us, too. There is hope for us, mere mortals, who are born into worlds that often exclude us and don’t have room for us, to also know that New Life. To also know that no matter how bad things are, Jesus is on our side because he came into a world without room for him, too. Jesus not only gets us, but Jesus redeems us. He takes his being born into a world that didn’t accept him and uses it as a gift to save the whole world with the promise that death is never the end of the story, because life is always possible.

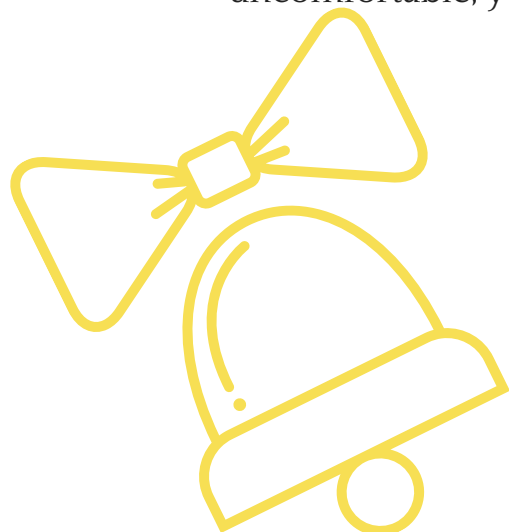
So maybe, just maybe, there is hope for all of us who know exclusion that we are promised New life in unique way. There is hope that one day, we, too, might be able to do something amazing in this world knowing that we are invited to have New Life all of the time, because Jesus is especially interested in making room in the world for those who need it most. When people say there is no room, God says, “That’s where I will go and make my presence known, and that is where my promises will begin, in a manger.” Even if humans can’t always see it, God promise that there is always room for us. Amen.

We Need You

Submitted By Rev. Gayle Tucker, Congregational Church of Jefferson Park United Church of Christ, Chicago

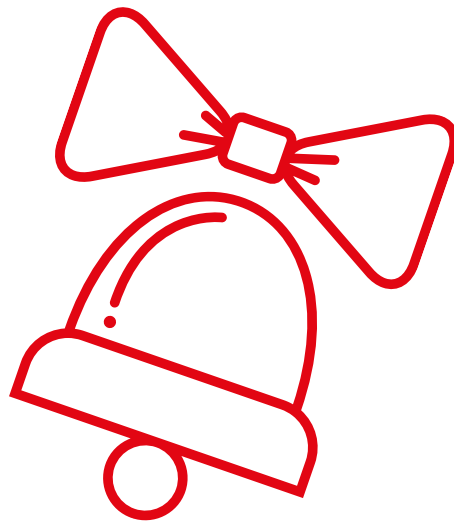
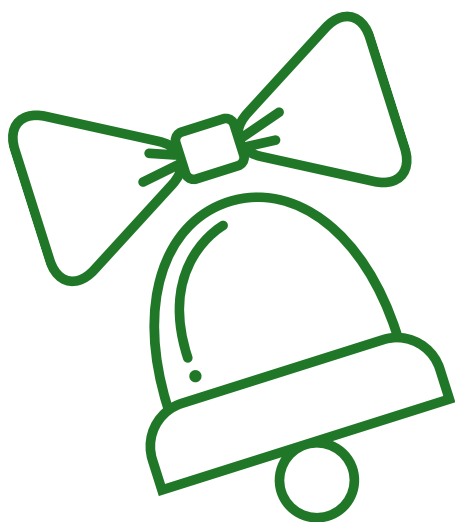
But a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go –the demon has left your daughter." (Mark 7:25-29 (NRSV))

Jesus has been teaching and healing among the Jews – his people – and decides he needs a break. He goes away to Tyre and Sidon – pagan land – and tries to hide out. And when this desperate Syrophoenician mother begs Jesus to cast out the demon that possesses her daughter, we meet the very human, very tired, very cranky Jesus. This desperate mom replies, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs!" (v. 28). She calls out Jesus on his bigoted, though culturally accepted, comment – and she gets to him. I imagine the wheels turning in Jesus' head after her comment and before his: "Oh, dear God! She's right! All that kingdom of God stuff I've been preaching... You meant that everyone is Your child, didn't You? When You sent me here with the power to heal, You meant that for all people, not just the children of Israel, didn't You?" Jesus is caught off-guard by the Holy Spirit speaking in and through the pagan Syrophoenician woman; even the Son of God has forgotten just how far God will go in working through the most unexpected people! Jesus is made uncomfortable, yet recognizes God's Spirit in this challenge.



This is the call our congregation strives to embrace, believing that all people are created in God's image, and are loved and blessed equally by God. This is why we formulated and approved an Open and Affirming statement that specifically includes persons of every gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, age, race, nationality, economic and social status, mental/physical health and ability, faith background, marital standing and family structure. This is why they called a young, introverted, queer woman with a music education degree to be their pastor. This is why they celebrated with me when I married my wife. And why they grieved with me when we got divorced.

We need to be challenged to listen carefully for God's word – especially when it comes through the unexpected. Through those whose lives, perspectives, and voices challenge us, especially those whom our society devalues. We need voices that move us toward a more expansive understanding and practice of God's love, like the Syrophoenician woman did for Jesus. We in the church need all of you. God can and does speak and act through all types of people. Let us celebrate this great and beautiful diversity!





Equality Illinois builds a better Illinois by advancing equal treatment and social justice through education, advocacy, and protection of the rights of the LGBT community. Learn more, act, and support our mission at www.equalityillinois.org.

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