

Sermon by Ted Mosebach
First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

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Jesus Didn't Reject People, and Neither Do We

(Third in series, 'What Did Jesus Say?')
(Suggested Topics for Lent from the Congregation)

Matthew 7:1-2

For some years now the title of this morning's sermon has served as a slogan for the United Church of Christ. It was adopted in response to the modern controversy within western Christianity of whether or not a person's sexual orientation should ever exclude him or her in any way from the blessings of participation in the Christian church. As society has perhaps become more comfortable with open discourse about issues of human sexuality, the gay and lesbian community has sought equal public acceptance and equal benefits and opportunities under the law as there are for everyone else. No longer satisfied with hiding their orientation, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people want to be able to be honest about their sexuality without fear of reprisal. Recent years have witnessed the success of their efforts. It is now clearly illegal to discriminate in any way in business, government, the military, or any public educational institution against anyone because of his or her sexual orientation. But there is still one place where such discrimination can occur without breaking the law, and that is in religious congregations. Therefore, the United Church of Christ wants the world to know that the official position of the United Church of Christ as decided by the delegates attending its national assemblies over the last twenty five years or so, is that we accept and affirm lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people and invite them into the life of the church on an absolutely equal basis with everyone else. Jesus didn't reject people, and neither do we.

Among the first things that might need to be admitted at this point is that there are no stories in the New Testament gospels of Jesus either affirming or disparaging the sexuality of gay and lesbian people. There is little mention of different sexual orientations in the whole of the Bible. The Bible also seldom mentions pre-marital sex. The sexual experience that does get a lot of attention in the Bible is heterosexuality in the form of adultery. Adultery is roundly condemned in the Bible starting with the Ten Commandments through the New Testament. But the fact that there is no recorded teaching of Jesus in the Bible about gay and lesbian sexuality may itself suggest an answer to how he felt about it. If he thought it was a bad thing we might think he would have said something to that effect with enough conviction that one of the gospel writers would have remembered it and then written it. I know that our Lenten theme this year is "*What Did Jesus Say?*" Perhaps just for this morning we could emphasize what Jesus did *not* say!

We might only surmise how Jesus would have related to people of different sexual orientations by considering how he related to different kinds of people in general. The Gospels contain many stories of Jesus accepting all kinds of people: Jews, Gentiles, centurions, children, men, women, the sick and the healthy, the poor and the wealthy, the quick and the slow, the stable and the confused. He talked to them all, he cared for them all, he offered the love of God to them all.

Perhaps the closest we get to something that Jesus *said* about accepting different people are his statements within the Sermon on the Mount on judging others. In short, he says don't do it. On the other hand isn't it so easy to denigrate in some way those who are different from us? After all, most of us like ourselves. I mean, don't we? And don't we also like to believe that in most ways we are normal? Who here doesn't think you are normal? And isn't normal close to the way human beings should be?

Well, perhaps not. Really, what is a normal human being? The fact is that we are all different, aren't we? How many tall, skinny, bald, pointy nosed, white guys are here this morning? Well then, at least for sure in those ways I'm not normal! But someone might say that is just a physical comparison and the topic before us this morning is more of a psychological one. Okay. Would anyone want to admit that you have a personality exactly like mine? On the Myers/Briggs Personality Inventory I am a rare but not unknown type, an INFP. Descriptively that means that one—I am introverted more than extroverted, two—inclined to follow my intuition or subjective perceptions rather than sensory or objective perceptions, three—I put more weight upon my feelings than my thinking (some of you may be relieved to hear that), and finally, now don't laugh—I am inclined to wait until the end to make decisions rather than make plans. If you are like me in these ways than you might be an INFP on the Myers/Briggs Personality scale too. But even if we are similar in these basic attributes surely we are different in countless particular ways. So, how many people here this morning are just like you? Of course not. Each personality is different and sexuality is a part of our personalities.

But let us be clear, for some people raise an issue here. I think we all agree that there is such a thing as sexual immorality. But immoral sexual behavior is the same for everyone just as ethical standards and morality of every type should be the same for everyone. Immorality is when anyone of any orientation takes unfair advantage of another person, or betrays another person, or in any way abuses another person.

This is the first time that I have preached from this pulpit a sermon advocating acceptance of people with different sexual orientations into our faith family. And here is why. There has been no need for it. There have always been people of different sexual orientations among us and as far as I know we have always welcomed them and loved them as we do anyone else. They have been the sons and daughters of our members and the brothers and sisters in faith of us all. Until recently we enjoyed the singing of a choir member and soloist who was waiting and preparing for transgender surgery. This summer I was privileged to officiate at the first same gender marriage in our church. Now, in the United Church of Christ the local church pastor has the independent authority to officiate or not at anyone's wedding as the pastor chooses, but the building

belongs to the congregation and I think its use should be subject to congregational approval. So I asked the Board of Deacons if they had any objection to the use of the sanctuary by one of our members for a same gender marriage. No Deacon objected and almost all expressed support for the couple and celebrated being a part of a congregation like ours. I too have always been proud of our congregation for being open and affirming of everyone. First Church stands firmly within the tradition of the modern United Church of Christ. *Judge not, that you be not also judged.* Jesus didn't reject people, and neither do we.

A companion slogan to *Jesus Didn't Reject People, Neither Do We* is known as "The Radical Welcome" of the United Church of Christ. "The Radical Welcome" emphasizes the importance of being open and affirming not only to people of different sexual orientations but to all people: to the poor, the sick, the addicted, to those with special needs, to the lonely, the unattractive, the obnoxious, the wealthy, and to people of every different color and cultural background. In a sense it is a concept opposite to that of the ethnic church which most churches in America once were, where attempt is made to gather a congregation of as many similar kinds of people as possible. Sometimes churches continue to start now as ethnic churches. I understand the need for commonness of tradition and language and worship style when it comes to religion, but I like our way here better. I like when a congregation tries to become more diverse rather than more the same. When the New Hope Hispanic congregation met in the chapel I was supportive of their efforts but I had some mixed feelings about it. We wanted people of Hispanic background to join our congregation too! We are learning to practice *the radical welcome* at First Church. It is an exciting time to be a Christian community at the corner of Main Street and Connecticut Boulevard in East Hartford.

Finally, in this regard, a word about church membership in general. Consistent with the idea of welcoming everyone, I think the standards for church membership at First Church are low. I like that. I think they should be. How can we say that we welcome everyone but then set high theological or spiritual standards or any other kind of high standard for joining? That seems a contradiction to me. This also is different in some churches. Some churches have membership classes that prospective members must attend in order to prepare them for membership. To me that sounds close to getting them good enough. Such classes may be less questionable when they focus on the life of that particular congregation, but I have been told of many that are also about theology and what a person who is a Christian believes and how a person who is a Christian acts, and what is expected of a church member as a Christian. We don't have membership classes here. We accept everyone as they are. We affirm the faith people have and then invite them to join with us so that we will all grow as Christians together.

I am so thankful to be a part of a congregation that believes in being open and affirming to all different kinds of people. Otherwise, it would not have accepted me.

Scripture References are from the New Revised Standard Version.

