**"An Expanded Welcome"**
*A Homily by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May*
*First Parish in Wayland*
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Twenty-one years ago this month, I learned that I was pregnant with my son. I was newly married and a student in seminary. As I absorbed the news, I remember distinctly asking myself, "What will I teach my child about God?"

As it turned out, my pregnancy would disrupt my seminary studies. By the time I returned to finish them, I had become a divorced, single mom. Much of my academic work explored the intersections of marital status and religion—and, more broadly, social status and religion. Despite the constitutional commitments to legally separate church and state, there is no doubt that religious beliefs have deeply shaped our laws as well as social opinion and political climates. Over the last fifty years, we have seen religiously grounded public battles over the right to abortion, the role of women, the morality of same-sex relationships, the AIDS epidemic, the definition of marriage, access to bathrooms, and more. Teaching my child about God would necessarily require a response to all of this public religious talk.

As a student of religion and culture, I raised my son with the liberal fervor you might expect from a parent committed to gender fluidity and a range of sexual identities. His toys included barbies and skateboards, silky dress-up clothes and plastic swords. And, of course, that game beloved to children of many genders: Pokémon. As he aged into middle school and then high school, I intentionally did not use gender specific language when referencing his potential romantic partners. Then, one morning before high school, he simply showed up wearing a pink t-shirt with the word Queer across the chest. To bring home the point, his next t-shirt was a rocket ship taking off with a rainbow striped smoke plume. The caption read: "Too Gay for this Earth." And that is how my son clarified his sexual identity to me. When I asked him if it was ok to share this with you, he simply looked at me annoyed. He isn't trying to hide anything.

Except that when he looked at colleges, I noticed that he did not look outside the Northeast where he felt safe. And, it's pretty clear to me that his disdain for homophobic religious conservatives runs pretty high. He's taken OWL and identifies as Unitarian Universalist in a crowd, but like many young adults of *any* sexual orientation, he's not running to religion as a core part of his life. After all that public debate he's seen in the last 20 years, I'm not surprised that religion does not appear to be a place where he belongs.

Sometimes it's easy to forget just how many people continue to believe that religion is only compatible with heterosexuality. And its not just people who are *in* religious communities



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that believe this, but also those who stay away from religion because they believe this is what religion is about. This is why it continues to matter that we send a clear message about our commitment as a *welcoming congregation.* It is why we proudly place a rainbow flag on our website, on all public fliers, and prominently on the steps of the Meeting House. When we do these things, we are making a theological statement. We are saying, in effect, that we believe that God loves you if you are LBGTQ. Or, put differently, we believe that the ultimate nature of the universe is an inclusive love and that the right thing to do is to welcome people of diverse sexualities and gender identities.

Does making such a strong moral stand mean that we've surrendered our deeply held values of religious freedom? I do not think it does. We reached this stance by a process that reflected wide congregational commitment. We found consensus around the outcome of becoming a Welcoming Congregation even if we vary in our theological language and ways of explaining our point of view.

Since this initial commitment to lesbian and gay folks, the ethos of being welcoming has expanded. If you look at the original Welcoming Congregation poster from 20 years ago, there was no mention of transgender, queer, or intersex folks. And yet, in recent years we have hosted a transgender panel and all or our restrooms are intentionally marked as gender neutral. Also, for many years, our commitment was represented outside by a small rainbow flag on the street sign while the large rainbow flag stood inside the Vestry. Then, after the June 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting, the Parish Committee voted to move it outside. These things because point to an expanding welcome within *this* community.

So what's next on the horizon? In the last year or so, rainbow flags with added stripes in brown and black have begun to appear in the U.S. These brown and black stripes symbolize an ethos of inclusion that expands beyond sexual and gender identity to include racial and ethnic identity. These added stripes are a challenge to congregations like ours to consider in what ways we do or do not send messages about how friendly and welcoming we are to people of color . . . to LGBTQ people of color. Would we replace our current flag with this new flag? Would that be enough to become welcoming to black and brown persons? Or, what else would we need to change to be more truly welcoming?

I am proud that First Parish has been a leader in Wayland on LGBTQ issues for more than two decades. And, I look forward to our continued work together as we look for ways to expand this welcome in a time when it is so sorely needed. The public debate of religious expression and sexuality continues to be manifest—just this week the federal government created a department to allow medical professionals to refuse service to LGBTQ folks for religious reasons. One friend posted a cartoon asking if there might also be a law where



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atheist medical professionals could refuse care to religious persons. While I chuckled, I also noted that this cartoon left no space for liberal, even atheist, religious voices. I know that some of us wiggle uncomfortably with an identity as 'religious'. But, I hope that in recognizing the religious nature of these debates we might loudly and clearly add our liberal religious voices to the public debate in 2018 as we have done in prior years. Not only might this help create more welcoming and just laws, but it also might reinforce the message that all religion is not hateful or biased against LGBTQ folks or against black and brown folks. Our public square needs a different message of love, of value, and of belonging as you are. May we all spread this message in our lives as individuals and as a community, as religious and ethical persons, and as friends, neighbors, and family members to those in need of this welcoming love.

So may it be.
Amen



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