

**“Clueless”**  
**Rev. Jim Manley**

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**San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ**

During grade school on the playground I heard words that I did not understand, directed at anyone who was being trashed. One such term I repeated in the classroom. During the history lesson Mr. Higgins asked if anybody knew who Benedict Arnold was. I shot up my hand. “He was a queer, man!” I proclaimed. Mr. Higgins quietly informed me that the term was used to slander a man who loved other men.

Clueless! First I’d heard of such things.

Well, I’d like to say from that time on I understood that such put-downs for same-sex love were inhumane and certainly unChristian.

But I was still clueless. As late as college it never occurred to me that one of my fraternity buddies was what we would later call “gay.”

Little by little I got to know people who were gay and lesbian, and while I grew up with all our society’s typical fears and judgments, somehow I knew better. At least in my head. My Christian faith was based on inclusion rather than exclusion.

During our decade in Hawaii, as boarding school chaplain, I invited the minister of the Metropolitan Church of Honolulu to preach at chapel. He was an excellent speaker and was warmly received. But after the service he and I sat talking on a bench outside while the high school students and faculty hurried by on their way to classes.

Suddenly it hit me. This man loved men. And besides that, some of the passersby just might think that I did myself! What was this negativity which I felt inside about such things, even though I was outwardly supportive of those who were different from me?

Could there be people as deeply drawn to those of their own gender as I was to the opposite sex?

But I was mostly clueless still. Gary, my jogging buddy, said during one of our after-school pre-marathon runs, “Our most important relationships should be a personal decision, as long as people don’t hurt each other physically or emotionally.” It still didn’t dawn on me what he was trying to say.

On the day of the Bicentennial Marathon we hit the finish line together, but I had other lines of understanding that still needed crossing. Only after returning to serve a church in California did I learn that my old running buddy was gay, and dying of AIDS.

So clueless.

But as time went by and I got to know more folk who were gay and lesbian, my head and heart slowly came into more concurrence. And in the churches I served, I began to counsel parents who were struggling with their children’s “coming out.” Then some of the youth came in to talk.

During this time, for several summers Judy and I were invited to Naramata Centre, the westernmost Conference facility of the United Church of Canada. Judy taught fabric art classes

and helped me lead the music. One afternoon I sat on a grassy hillock overlooking the pier jutting out into the Okanagan, a beautiful lake in British Columbia.

A young woman came and sat beside me, with something on her mind. She also played guitar and in the evenings joined in the music-making. We sat there together and watched the kids and adults jumping off the dock and the lifeguards trying to keep track of everyone.

Gradually Tricia, as I will call her, began to describe the inner conflict she'd known from grade-school on, as she had been attracted to other girls, not the boys. In high school she'd dated some, but there was no fire in it for her. Even in her first years of college she hadn't faced this painful difference between how she worked to appear to the world, and her own inner reality.

As she spoke, just above a whisper, she tried to control her feelings but her eyes filled with tears. And so did mine. I got it. She was coming to me for support and counsel, but unwittingly she was giving me the gift of fuller, more visceral understanding.

Being gay or lesbian was not a "persuasion" or a "preference" or a choice, but a root part of who she was, a God-given fact of her life. For so long she'd felt like someone on a trash heap, but it was about that time that a phrase was making the rounds: "God don't make no junk." And God does not.

As pastor Joyce has reminded us, our church doesn't discriminate in our hiring or membership privileges. But there is an additional, more positive step we may yet take: one of not just toleration but welcome, by becoming a church that is officially "Open and Affirming". This morning Joyce quoted from scripture as she spoke of Christ's "extravagant welcome":

- One body in Christ--we are all members one of another. Rom. 12:4ff.
- Love God and neighbor as yourself--the greatest commandment. Mk 12:31
- Judge not that you may not be judged. Matt. 7:1-2
- The Pharisee: "Thank God I am not like other people." Luke 18:9ff.
- The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to liberate the oppressed. Luke 4:18

Some years ago two women who had long been active in their United Methodist Church in Sacramento, and had served in national and regional church leadership roles, came to their pastor and asked if he would officiate at a wedding for them.

Everybody knew they had been a committed couple for over 40 years, but there was no way to legalize their relationship. Still, they wanted to be acknowledged by their spiritual community as covenanted partners.

The minister said yes, but the Methodist bishop said no. (There are other Methodist Bishops who have spoken a resounding yes.) Prayerfully, the pastor determined to proceed anyway. Well, word got around and more than 60 clergy of various denominations including our own UCC, participated in that great festive wedding. It was a profound moment as these two long-joined souls stood together at the altar and recited their vows, both traditional and those they'd written together.

I was unable to be there, but I sent a new verse to "Part of the Family" which they had requested to be sung during the service.

Here's how it goes:

Women loving women, men loving men  
The key is commitment, the blessing comes when  
We renew our devotion again and again  
For we are a part of the family.

Same sex and different, straight folks and gays  
We share in God's love that finds many ways  
So let us affirm the commitment today  
Between these dear ones in the family.

(congregation joins in)

So come in, come in and sit down  
You are a part of the family  
We are lost and we are found  
And we are a part of the family.

May we become an even more welcoming church as we take the steps to become officially, up front, consciously, prayerfully, joyfully, "Open and Affirming." May we extend Christ's extravagant welcome to all. To truly and deeply, say to everyone: "You are a part of the family."

Come in, come in and sit down  
You are a part of the family  
We are lost and we are found  
And we are a part of the family.