

# Will We Open the Door?

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Geoffrey Knowlton  
United Church of Christ  
Pelham, New Hampshire  
October 18, 1998

***Psalm 119:97-104 Jeremiah 31:27-34 Luke 18:1-8***

*Preached the Sunday after Matthew Shepard's funeral.*

Those of you familiar with my style know that I like to begin a sermon with a lighthearted story or a joke. However, I must confess I do not feel lighthearted today. This has been a rough week. A rough week for the whole nation. For all of us have been forced to face just how devastating hate can be. I would imagine all of you, no matter how you will vote in about an hour (on the question of becoming Open and Affirming), were shocked and sickened by what happened in Wyoming this last week. However, I wonder if we have all thought about the meaning of what transpired. Frankly, after some thought, I almost decided not to preach on it today. I did not want anyone to think I was using Matt Shepard's death as an opportunity to get votes. However, the more I thought about it, the more it was clear I could not avoid the tragic events of this last week, and their meaning for us all.

Details were sketchy and conflicting at first. But, as the whole mess unfolded, we discovered what happened. Sometime last week, Matt Shepard was at a bar, frequented by many students of the University of Wyoming. Matt was popular with other students and his professors. He was known as a good student and gentle soul. A friend would later comment that Matt was hard to hug, because he was short. But it was worth the effort because when Matt Shepard gave you a hug or shook your hand, you knew he really cared for you. Sounds like a great guy, and he was. But Matt Shepard had one problem. He was an openly gay man in a culture that is often very hateful toward gay and lesbian people.

On that night, two men lured Matt into a pick-up. Once in the truck the two men beat him savagely. They weren't done yet. They drove Matt out of the city and then onto an old jeep trail, no more than two ruts in the ground, and on a rise they tied him to a split rail fence, and while he pleaded for his life, they beat and pistol whipped him even more. They robbed him, and left him to die, tied to that fence in 30-degree weather.

Eighteen hours later, another college student, Aaron Criefels, went on a solo mountain bike ride. It was cold that day, and the road was steep. Several times, Criefels considered turning back, but he kept going. At one spot, he hit a piece of limestone and did a header over the handlebars, landing on a spot about ten feet away from where Matt Shepard hung. At first, Criefels thought Matt was a scarecrow. If you have ever had the unfortunate experience of seeing someone beaten that way, you will understand why. The victim's head swells and looks like a pumpkin. Then Criefels noticed some hair, and to his shock, realized that was not a scarecrow but a person near death. Having been a high school track star, Criefels ran as fast as he could for a half mile until he got to a phone and called for help. He did not go

public with his statement until a few days after Shepard's assailants were captured. You see, Aaron was afraid of reprisals from hate groups. When he did speak, he said he would not have noticed Matt Shepard if he had not hit that rock. He figured God made him fall off his bike that morning, because God did not want Matt to die alone. I think he was right. I'd say God was the first one to cry that day, and first to become angry at what happened to this gentle soul.

In an ironic twist, Matt Shepard was aided in an emergency room area just four doors away from where one of his attackers was helped with a fractured skull he received in a fight after he beat Matt. This assailant recovered. But Matthew Shepard died five days later.

When I heard of Matt's death, I thought I had heard the worst.

But I was wrong. Shortly after news of his death was made public, gay and lesbian people around the country got faxes, e-mails, and phone calls saying, "Matt Shepard is dead; you may be next." During a homecoming parade at Colorado State University in Ft. Collins, a float sponsored by a campus fraternity and sorority, featured a scarecrow tied to a fence with a sign around its neck. The sign read "I'm a fag." But perhaps the very worst of all, the pastor of the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka Kansas announced that he and some of his parishioners planned to picket Matt Shepard's funeral.

For the love of God, folks, let us weep for the abuse of the Word of God by Fred Phelps and his church. The city council of Casper, Wyoming (where the funeral would be held at Matt's home church) met and made an executive order, banning all protests at funerals. However, Fred Phelps, some of his church members, and a hand full of people from Texas were there anyway. News reports said they carried signs, reading, "Fag Matt in Hell," "No Tears for Queers," and "God Hates Fags." *I thank God* for the folks who surrounded Phelps and his cronies to block them from the sight of grieving family members. When Phelps and others shouted out their hate, the crowd sang "Amazing Grace."

Since all of this happened, a few folks have said they were glad to know this was an isolated incident. Well, they were wrong. In 1996, the FBI reported that more than 1,000 acts of hate crimes, violence and even murders were committed against gay and lesbian people. Some estimate the rate shot up since then, and now may be higher than hate crimes committed against ethnic minorities. And most of these hate crimes go unreported.

Some have said, the church should not be involved in politics. Someone had better explain to me just how this could possibly be political. It is, in fact, a deeply religious and spiritual issue. For I cannot understand this in any way other than as an act of pure evil. Jesus said, "That which you have done to the least of these, you have done to me." Two men in Wyoming, Fred Phelps in Kansas, and countless other hateful people have done what they will always do. The question for us is: What will we do? What will we do *today*?

Some have asked, "What can the church do against this kind of evil?" Actually, there is a lot we have already done to make it as bad as it is. One author, Bette Greene, in preparation for writing the book, *The Drowning of Stephan Jones*, interviewed more than 400 men jailed for gay bashing. Most saw nothing morally wrong with their actions. Many said the beating of gay and lesbian people was sanctioned by their religion.<sup>1</sup> I would suggest that the church has been, at least, a major player in creating the hateful prejudice that exists against gay, lesbian and bisexual people. Now, through our silence, we, in fact, continue to support this evil. It remains, sadly, the last acceptable prejudice. And one that is killing God's people.

Some have said to me, if only gay people would not be so stuck on flaunting who they are, they wouldn't be in so much trouble. "Why don't they keep their mouths shut?" Folks, sexual orientation is not a private matter. Those of you who are sitting with your kids or your spouses this morning have declared your sexual orientation. I will tell you what: in the next week, you try to keep all your conversations free of anything that would give away your sexual orientation. That means you can't talk about your husband or your wife. You can't talk about the date you went on, your kids or the car you just bought that had to be big enough to hold your children, and so on. You try it for just a week, and then come back and tell me sexual orientation is a private matter.

Some say gay people invite this trouble on themselves because they are so pushy about who they are. To the contrary, I would like you to read this book. It is titled *Eight Bullets*<sup>2</sup> written by Claudia Brenner. Several years ago, Claudia and her partner, Rebecca Wight, were on a backpacking trip in the woods of Pennsylvania. They were not in a public campground, not even near a city, certainly not flaunting their sexual orientation. In fact, they would never go out together unless they were far away from the public eye for fear of reprisals. On this trip, they saw only one other person, a 'creepy' man. He caught one of them bathing in a river, and saw them holding hands. They thought they were safe and alone. But they were wrong. The man hiked to his car, got out a single shot, bolt-action hunting rifle. He stalked them, hunted them like animals till he found them at their campsite. Alone, away from people, they thought they were safe. But they were not. The hunter hid behind a tree and 70 feet away from Claudia and Rebecca. Then coldly and methodically, loaded a single bullet, slid and locked the bolt, aimed and fired. He fired eight bullets at those women.

The author of the book was hit four times, twice in the neck, once in the head and then in the back. Her partner was hit three times, the eighth shot missed. They hid behind a tree, covered in blood and in shock. When it was clear he had left, they began to hike out of the woods. Wracked with pain, and full of fear, their progress was slow. At one point Rebecca complained of feeling cold and in a lot of pain. She collapsed and died. Later, Claudia would learn that her partner's liver had been exploded by one of the bullets. At the man's trial, his only defense was that these women were to blame because they did not hide their sexuality. I believe they did try, but it was not enough. Not enough for a society bent on killing those who are different.

We like to blame the victims in cases like these. But, let us face it, our silence allows this kind of thing to go on and it allows people to excuse their own prejudice.

In our scriptures today we read from the prophet Jeremiah. He looked to a time when the law would be written on our hearts. *The law of the Gospel is the law of love*. Sometimes the law of love requires us to take action. Sometimes it calls us to go toe to toe with evil, draw a line and say, "This stops here." Some would have us water down the language of our Open and Affirming statement. Well, Fred Phelps, the man who beat Matt Shepard and left him to die, the hunter who fired those eight bullets, spoke with an unmistakable clarity. How dare we even consider a vague, watered down ONA statement? That is not love. Love is crystal clear. The time for wishy-washy, vague generalities about love and tolerance is over. We must speak with a courageous love, the kind of love that Christ taught and lived. We must clearly state; "We affirm your goodness, your value as human beings and we welcome you here."

Lest you think this kind of hate and violence could never happen in our state, it does. One woman, popular and respected in her small New Hampshire town, was discovered to be lesbian. She held a public position, and the town could not stand it. She received death threats on her phone machine,

threatening mail, her house was vandalized and her pet dog was shot dead in her back yard. This is only one example. How will we respond to this kind of hate?

It is uncanny that the Gospel lesson today includes the Lord's parable of the widow asking for justice. As a woman, she had very few rights; as a widow, barely any. The only things she had in her favor was her persistence, to wear down the judge. Today, our gay, lesbian and bisexual neighbors live in much the same way. For example, in our state, a person can be fired from his or her job simply because of their sexual orientation. They have not legal recourse. That is only one example.

Gay and lesbian people are not asking for special rights, they are merely asking for the right to live and work. One scholar wrote that the widow's persistence was not a gentle knocking on the judge's door, but a hard banging until knuckles bled and her hands were swollen. Like the widow in Christ's parable, lesbian, gay and bisexual people are asking for justice. They are pounding on our doors now. Their hands are bloody and swollen, and now there is flood on a fence in Wyoming. What will be our response? What are we prepared to do today? Let us open that door this morning.

Amen.

1. Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*, (New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, 1996), p. 146. The reference is to *The Drowning of Stephan Jones* by Bette Greene (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1992).
2. Claudia Brenner and Hanna Ashley, *Eight Bullets*, (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1995).