

*In The Name of The Father, Leviticus 18:22*

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May I preface my comments by saying that some of what I have to say may be a bit raw? It is, however, certainly *not* my intention to offend anyone here this morning. I understand, all too well, feelings of offence, hostility, discrimination and prejudice, as do most gays and lesbians. Having said that, it may well be that some *will* take offence with what I wish to share. If you do indeed find yourself among those few, I would invite you to take an introspective look at the reasons for your feelings of offence. You may well be surprised by what you find.

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It was October of 2007, while walking past this church, that I decided to give “religion” one last try. Imagine my surprise when I was warmly welcomed, at the door, by a smiling lady wearing a name tag that had a small Pride rainbow ribbon on it. That lady was, of course, Doreen Peever.

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I had tried denominations from Catholic to Pentecostal, and almost everything in between. All, ALL left me feeling either tolerated or an outcast and an “abomination”. So it came as quite the surprise when I didn’t experience any of that at the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara.

The unconditional acceptance was, for me, quite simply, unbelievable.  
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It was the Unitarian Universalist Principles that attracted me, and indeed, made me feel that, at long last, I had found a spiritual home.

May I take a moment to repeat those seven principles?

*We, the member congregations, of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:*

*The inherent worth and dignity of every person;*

*Justice, equality, and compassion in human relations;*

*Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;*

*A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;*

*The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;*

*The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;*

*Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*  
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I wonder if each of us has really thought carefully about these amazing seven principles and understands what they truly mean, in part and in whole? Certainly, for one who has experienced judgment and

persecution, they truly come as an invigorating breath of fresh air.

Imagine a church that dares to treat *everyone* with respect and dignity.

Imagine a church that *truly* believes in justice, equality and compassion, not just for some, *but for all*.

Imagine a church that doesn't expect you to park your brain, along with your car, before you enter in.

Imagine a church that encourages you to think for yourself; to search for and develop your own spirituality and understanding of "God".

Imagine a church that does not force - feed creed or dogma.

And imagine a church that is a departure from the mainstream, *a departure of unparalleled proportions*.

For me, that church is *truly amazing*.

That *IS* the Unitarian Universalist Church. And for this church, I can only say "*Thanks be to God !!*"

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Having shamelessly plagiarized from the books I have placed out for your inspection, I fully expect the copy write police to storm the building at any moment. So if I am dragged kicking and screaming out the door, the service leaders should be prepared with an

immediate hymn. I would invite and encourage you to review these thought - provoking books, many with which, no doubt, you will already be familiar.

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The Christian church has a tradition of *evolving theology* as the meaning of scripture is better understood with each generation. It is not static; it has adapted to change many times and indeed, continually, over the centuries. “God” is constantly revealing God’s self to us in a variety of ways. The Unitarian Church seems particularly open to this ongoing revelation and change.

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Unfortunately, not all churches are as welcoming and accepting as the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara. Misinterpretation of the Bible has led to generations of hate. Hate may not be a family value, but it certainly seems to be a sustaining one. How can you hate someone you’ve never met?

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*1 - LAURA SCHLESSINGER*

**John Boswell, in his comprehensive study of homosexuality in medieval Europe, states: “The Levitical regulations had no hold on Christians and are manifestly irrelevant in explaining Christian hostility to gay sexuality. Even in the case of exceptional Christian theologians who *did* refer to Leviticus 18:22 or 20:13, the opinions therein cannot be seen as the origin of their attitudes, since they rejected the vast majority of Levitical precepts, retaining only those which suited their personal prejudice. Their extreme selectivity in approaching the huge corpus of Levitical law is clear evidence that it was not their respect for the law which created their hostility to homosexuality but their hostility to homosexuality which led them to retain a few passages from a law code largely discarded.” *end of quote.***

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**On April 2, of this year, Doreen Peever, Joan Storm, Ray Robitaille and I saw a production of “*The Laramie Project*” at the Sean O’Sullivan Theatre, at Brock University. Many of you will be familiar with the story of Matthew Shepard. Matthew died Oct. 12, 1998, at a hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado. We’ll soon be honouring the tenth anniversary of Matthew’s death. I wonder if Matthew’s parents will ever be able to**

forget their long, long vigil, by their son’s hospital bed, as they waited for him to die.

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Dr. Chris Sciabarra wrote the following comments after he too saw

“*The Laramie Project*” .....

*2 - (The Laramie Project: Fighting Gay Panic and The Culture of Hate)  
by Dr. Chris Scibarra*

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I have internet pictures of Matthew, and the two gentlemen who crucified him, and then beat him to death. I’d like you to see them.

*2B - (Internet picture of Matthew, Russell and Aaron)*

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Matthew’s father pleaded for the lives of Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney, Matthew’s killers, in spite of the fact that neither Henderson nor McKinney paid any attention when Matthew pleaded with them to stop beating him. Consequently, Henderson and McKinney are both now enjoying two consecutive life sentences in Nevada State Prison.

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The following will no doubt be offensive to many; *but remember* that the one speaking claims to be anointed by his God and to speak *In the Name of The Father*. Listen to the words of the good Rev. Fred Phelps, pastor

of the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas .....

*3 - (Westboro Baptist Church News Release – Feb.16/07)*

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**The Rev. Fred Phelps, and his supporters, picketed the funeral of Matthew Shepard. They stood by and yelled obscenities at Matthew’s family and friends as they buried their loved one. Hate, the family value as Phelps reveals it, speaks to a flood of ignorance that must be damned, once and for all.**

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**Fred Phelps, and company, also picket the funerals of American Service men and women returned home for burial in the United States of America. ??? The reason for this mass picketing of American funerals, although probably none of the service men and women was gay .....? ?**

*4 – (“America, Cursed of God”)*

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**It is truly a mind-altering experience to visit [www.godhatesfags.com](http://www.godhatesfags.com).**

**Don’t miss the opportunity to expand your horizons. From their website, God hates America, Sweden, Canada, Ireland, Mexico and so many more. It turns out, not surprisingly, and according to the Rev.**

**Fred Phelps, that God hates almost everyone. *Not too much love there.***  
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**If Fred Phelps' efforts, along with his merry band of followers, weren't quite so dangerous, they would be considered a joke. But Fred Phelps is *not* trying to be funny. He is serious - *deadly, deadly serious!!* I wonder at the incongruity of the Rev. Fred Phelps, and others of his ilk, who sincerely believe themselves to be Christians. One cannot help but question if these happy literalists simply have not read their Bibles.**

**Or are they just hopelessly misinformed?**  
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**Biblical literalists almost invariably end up deciding that they will take literally *some* of the laws and ignore the rest as not applicable to them. Biblical literalists, moreover, usually have not been trained to think through a particular verse or passage in relation to its context – whether that be a few verses or a few chapters. Nor do they customarily appraise it in the light of its particular place and time of origin, which is scientific, historical criticism. Biblical literalists must argue, with anyone who dares to question, because they cannot rationally discuss their sacred scripture.**  
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The great danger, for the Biblical literalist, in believing oneself to be especially *chosen*, is that it becomes easy to view those who are not of your people, as God's especially "*unchosen*". The step between being God's unchosen and being God's rejected, constitutes a very small distance in human emotions. It is then absolutely amazing to watch the fundamentalists operate with their God - guaranteed superiority over everyone else.

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So much prejudice and discrimination emanate from select interpretations of the Bible. Fred Phelps, and so many others, appeal to the Bible to justify and to sustain attitudes that are clearly passing away, attitudes of segregation, misogyny, anti-Semitism, and yes, even homophobia. Oddly enough, seldom is the love of God communicated during the expression of those prejudices by these "*people of God*".

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The *only* concern, of those quoting Biblical texts, is to maintain their prejudices and to avoid having to change their destructive attitudes. Those whose religious security is rooted in a literal Bible do not want that security disturbed. Irrational religious anger demands a target. Sadly that target is so often gays and lesbians.

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**“In The Name of The Father - I baptize you”, “In The Name of The Father - I run my sword through you”, “In The Name of The Father – I burn you at the stake”, “In The Name of The Father, *Matthew Shepard*, - we beat you to death”. “In The Name of The Father .....”**  
**– *such a useful turn of phrase.***

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The Rev. John Shelby Spong, Episcopal bishop of Newark, writes in his book *“Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism”*: **“I hold the Bible before my readers seeking boldly to free it from the clutches of a mindless literalism and, at the same time, presenting it as a dramatic and exciting document whose relevance for our day is both mighty and real.”**

Spong goes on to say **“The Bible, quoted to oppose the rising tide of consciousness, will itself be a casualty unless it is freed from the straight jacket of literal fundamentalism.” *end of quote***

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**Homophobia is a reality in sexual thinking that utilizes the pressure of Holy Scripture. This prejudice is so deep, so vividly assumed to be**

self-evident, that some major churches have in the past simply quoted the Bible to justify their continued oppression and rejection of gay and lesbian persons. There is, for many, no authority beyond the affirmation: “*The Bible says.....*” Among fundamentalists, the select use of a text, ignoring vast areas of reality, is commonplace. This practice evinces the fragile nature of fundamentalism. Equality and justice for gays and lesbians *undermines* the fragile security systems in the Biblical literalist.

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Biblical literalists, and homophobes, constantly drag out the old chestnut of one’s sexual orientation being a “*choice*”. Data suggests that homosexual orientation is *not* a matter of choice but rather a matter of ontology, that is, it is of the *being* of the individual, not of the *doing*.

Well, I have news for the Biblical literalist ..... To put this in a context that they will understand - It *IS* a choice - *God’s* - *not* ours!

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The authors of the Bible did not have the knowledge on the subject of sexual orientation that is available to us today. The sexual attitudes in Scripture used to justify the prejudiced sexual stereotypes of the past

simply are not holding in this generation. They are not in touch with emerging contemporary knowledge. The prejudices and cultural biases of bygone eras are simply being discarded by thinking individuals.

Has time run out on the Judeo - Christian tradition as it did on the gods of Olympus?

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Everyone's favourite, Jerry Falwell, once wrote: "The Bible is the inerrant word of the Living God. It is absolutely infallible, without error in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as well as in areas such as geography, science, history etc." *end of quote*. One can only conclude that this is a statement of one who is simply unaware of vast areas of reality that are common knowledge to people of this century.

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Homosexuality is so repulsive to the Biblical literalist that it is often not breathed in official circles. This is not to say that our cultural homophobia has disappeared. It is still lethal and dwells in high places. It is a subject about which ecclesiastical figures are deeply dishonest, saying one thing publicly and acting another way privately. Paul of Tarsus, the author of much of the Bible that many treat as holy and

literal, was probably gay. How else does one explain his self loathing

and attitude toward something in himself that he could not control?  
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Literalism, or fundamentalism, appeals to the need for emotional security by trafficking in religious certainty. Delusions can be immensely satisfying. Only something that shakes the fragility of one's life support system can elicit the kind of killing hostility that one sees exhibited toward gays and lesbians. Religious anger is always revealing. Equality and justice for gays and lesbians results in a fundamentalist realizing his or her infallible Bible is being replaced by an irresistible call into the insecurity of freedom. Religion is but one more mask that insecure people put on to cover their sense of personal inadequacy.  
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The primary mark of the Christian movement, that stemmed from Jesus' teaching, was that barriers faded. "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female" (Gal. 3:28) and, dare we add with the knowledge of our day, homosexual person nor heterosexual person?  
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The interpretations and constructions of theologians are of less importance than the living community, and this assumes freedom and

**emancipation from a rigid and authoritarian system.**  
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**The marks of death are present when the church rejects lesbians and gay persons because they do not fit the narrow heterosexist definition of “normal” humanity, and do not hear the pain of the oppressed and rejected homosexual community.**  
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**To be a humanist is to affirm the sacredness of life. It is an eternal call to love, to live, and to be. It is an invitation to work for those things that create life and to oppose those people, those attitudes and those systems that distort life.**  
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**To quote the Reverend Troy Perry, founder of the Metropolitan Community Church: “*The Lord is my Shepherd and He knows I’m gay.*”**  
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**I am so very grateful for having found the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara. A church, where because of its seven principles, I have been able to reclaim my spiritual life and find a true home.**  
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***In The Name of The Father I denounce intolerance, hostility, prejudice, discrimination, bigotry, homophobia - and hate crimes.***

***Amen.***