

The Joy and Possibilities of Unconditional

Love

By Rev. Dr. Martha Jacobs

After the shooting in Orlando, I heard about how families were pained to learn, only through death, that their loved one was gay. I cannot imagine the pain that those families felt, realizing that their now deceased loved one didn't trust them enough to tell them about their sexual orientation. To have to live a part of who you are in secret can be so painful, not only for the person but for those that surround them.



With a young congregant, Eric Bilodeau

I know, because I spent the better part of my 20s and 30s not talking with my parents about my own sexual

orientation. While I was already with the person I loved and planned to spend the rest of my life with, and who made me very happy, and while my parents welcomed her and treated her in a way that was loving, we never discussed the truth about our love and our life together.

When I finally got the courage to talk with my parents about it, they were accepting, but I think that a part of them was hurt that I didn't trust their love for me enough to tell them 15 years earlier. Their acceptance of Pat and me didn't change, but there was a shift, as my dad started introducing Pat as his "other daughter."

My parents had dealt with many challenges I presented to them over my teen and adult life (I had also con-

verted from Judaism to Christianity), and yet they continued to love me. They were both amazing role-models of love without conditions.

In the mid-1980's, I started attending The Riverside Church in Manhattan. There I heard from The Rev. Dr. William Sloane Coffin that all people, no matter their race, class or sexual orientation, were welcome and that God didn't judge people for who they are but rather for how they treat others. I found myself accepted for all of who I was! To know that God accepted me, despite my being gay, was more than I could ever have imagined! That was totally new to me and opened up a whole new world of people who accepted me for who I was, which had previously only been available to me in my work in the theater.

This acceptance helped me to eventually answer a call to serve God.

My parents and my church showed me their unconditional love and modeled how to love unconditionally. This enabled me to do the same with people who were dealing with HIV/AIDS, whose families, in the late 1980's and 1990's, were not unconditionally loving to them. That unconditional love also enabled me to go through seminary, learn about treating all people with love and respect and welcoming everyone—even those who thought I didn't belong at their table—to my table. Working as a chaplain in a hos-



Rev. Dr. Jacobs with her partner Pat Youst

pital forced me to confront my own racism, my own classism, and my own anger with people who did not want to accept me for me.

When I found myself looking to move from hospital chaplaincy to parish ministry, I knew I wanted and needed to be in a church that welcomed all people. Of course, they would have to welcome me as a same-gender-loving person, but more than that, they would have to welcome everyone—no matter their skin color, culture, or social status, whether or not they were otherly-abled or LGBTQ, or even what kind of God they felt drawn to worship. God led me that amazing place—First Congregational Church.

When the church decided to call me as their minister (in the United Church of Christ, each congregation calls its own minister), there was no discussion as to my sexual orientation or the fact that I was a woman. This church is living out its decision to be an "Open and Affirming Church"—one that welcomes all to our church. I could not be prouder or more humbled by this congregation I serve. We proudly say, "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." And we mean it!

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