

Clothe Yourselves in Love
[Colossians 3:12-17](#)
Stewardship 2018
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This morning I want to share with you some tales from the basement. I'm talking about our church basement. Yes, the First UCC basement, that confusing maze of narrow hallways and tiny windowless rooms. Some unusual stuff happens down there.

That sounds a little spooky, right? Not inappropriate for the season, with Halloween just a few weeks away?

Don't worry, these aren't scary stories.

At least, I don't think they are.

Our humble church basement has been the site of some of the most vibrant, life-affirming ministry I've ever experienced.

I'm speaking about two programs for youth that this church has supported.

The first is Our Whole Lives, or OWL, a high-quality, comprehensive sexuality education curriculum developed by the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship and the United Church of Christ. We've been offering OWL in alternating years to middle and high schoolers for over five years now. It is a completely voluntary program; parents receive an orientation to make sure it's a good fit for their family.

And the second program is CYAN, a welcoming space for LGBTQ youth to gather and connect with each other and supportive adults who also identify as LGBTQ. Over fifty youth have visited CYAN at some point since it began, and each year we've had a solid core of attendees who make up the heart of the group.

Now, I can't just report to you in detail about what happens in OWL and CYAN, because both of these experiences hinge on the promise of confidentiality. What happens in OWL stays in OWL, what happens in CYAN stays in CYAN—with all the usual caveats that come when working with young people. The youth know that when it comes to safety, there are certain secrets adults can't keep.

But I think I can tell you about the spaces we try to create. OWL and CYAN would not happen without the help of incredible volunteers, from both within and without First UCC. (Shout-out to Lisa Moore, John Saurer, and Don Perkins.) In both these programs, we seek to cultivate a space where:

- Sexuality is not a source of shame or secrecy. Instead, we talk about it as a normal and important part of human experience.
- Sexual diversity is not to be feared. In OWL and CYAN, we acknowledge a range of healthy ways to express love and connection, and that a natural part of growing up is figuring out what love and connection look like for you.
- Gender diversity is welcome in OWL and CYAN. There are so many ways to be a man, and so many ways to be a woman. Some people's sense of gender changes over time, or doesn't match the label they were given at birth, and some people don't identify with the terms "man" or "woman" at all. That can be confusing, and, in the eyes of the world, scary. But in our church basement, we are not alarmed. We are curious. And affirming of each person's sense of their own personhood.
- And finally, in CYAN and OWL, we strive to embody this value: that it is possible to engage around difficult, sensitive subjects with youth. Not only is it possible, it's imperative. For their wellbeing, and for the wellbeing of our culture at large.

I've been feeling that last point very keenly these last few weeks. Did you, like me, watch the testimonies of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford and Judge Kavanaugh? I think anybody watching brought their own stories, their own memories, their own ghosts to it.

For myself, as I took in their words and read all kinds of commentaries after, one thing struck me as incredibly tragic. The fact that, for many in our country, the sexual assault described by Dr. Ford had an air of inevitability to it. Like, it's simply what happens when young people hang out, because that's how boys are and that's how girls are and that's how party culture is, and what can be done?

I saw an editorial cartoon after the hearings, entitled "Teenage Angst in the #MeToo era." It showed two teenagers at night in a car, staring at each other. There's a boy, and he's thinking: "Wait, what am I doing here? This could come back to haunt me in thirty years when I'm up for a big position." And the girl is thinking, "What is he waiting for? Doesn't he like me? What's wrong with boys these days?"

There are so many implications here:

That the boy's future is more important than seeking a girl's permission.

That a girl thinks there's something wrong with a boy if he doesn't make the first move.

That it's a boy's *job* to make the first move.

That it's a girl's job to *welcome* it.

That this is romance: not feeling confident or safe enough to say what you want.

That this is sexuality: not something that we cultivate in ourselves and share, as we choose, with others, a mutual creation over time, but an act that we *do*, or that is done to *us*.

I believe there is a lot here that is toxic. Toxic ideas about what it means to be male, what it means to be female; about desire and who gets to act on it and when; and about bodies, how we treat our own and those of others. I believe this toxicity to be all around us. We are steeped in it. Even when we try to resist it in our own relationships, our own families, we see the old power dynamics play out in media, in the workplace, on the national stage.

And I am not surprised; these cultural forces are far older than any of us. Centuries older. In the great scheme of things, we are only just waking up to the possibility that the way we respond to the accepted ways of the world can be different.

In Paul's letter to the Colossians—you knew I would get there eventually!—Paul, or someone writing as Paul, is motivated to write, in part, because some members of that church have been led astray by some so-called “false doctrine.” This was a problem faced by the early church, as these fledgling communities tried to clarify what they believed and whom exactly they followed. The culture then, like now, was alive with competing teachings. The writer wants to get the church back on track. The section we read just now is meant reorient the readers; remind them of what is most important, most central, most grounding to them.

So Paul preaches to them using a metaphor they would recognize: “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” And then, “Above all, clothe yourselves with love.”

The writer recognizes that the Colossians need to shed - take off - whatever parts of their apparel that are hindering them from embodying the spiritual qualities that have the power to bind them together. But to do so requires daily practice, ritual. The metaphor of putting on one's clothes is perhaps even more powerful to modern ears, we who have so many clothes and looks to choose from compared to a first century listener.

Imagine you are hearing Paul's words as you get dressed in the morning. Instead of putting on an outfit that is ill-fitting, that is too tight in some places and too loose in others, that makes you feel uncomfortable in your own skin, embarrassed by your body and irritable with the world, what if you could put on something else? No matter who you are, how you were built, you put on clothes that made you feel at ease, that reflects who you are, that boosts your confidence and your ability to express your needs?

In other words, what if you could remind yourself, each and every day, that you are a beloved child of God and nothing can change that?

And what if, in addition, you decide to try on different things like compassion for others? Or, say, curiosity about what's going on for someone else, and eagerness to learn? And willingness to ask questions and check in, to make sure someone else is OK? What if you could put on the ability to give and receive feedback, to take risks but also tolerate disappointment? What if you could put on the practice of expressing 'no' when you need to, and expressing yes when you need to, and gracefully receiving it when others do the same? What if your clothes made you feel self-assured enough that you could do these things without the false courage of drugs and alcohol—something that many young people turn to because they don't have other tools?

When people have clothed themselves in love in this way—a basic regard for self, a basic regard for others—communication about sexuality and gender isn't that scary. Teaching about consent—seeking consent, giving consent, withdrawing consent, respecting consent—isn't that complicated.

This is what we're going for in OWL and CYAN.

If I were to say to the youth, "Clothe yourselves in love, Paul says so," they'd definitely give me some side-eye. But there are lots of ways to get the same point across. And we do. Through activities and discussion and the creation of supportive environments in which youth feel empowered to ask questions, get the information they need, support each other, and claim their own worth and dignity.

OWL and CYAN have the power to change lives. I know this, because youth who've participated in them have told me so. I've had youth at First UCC tell me stories of using their OWL skills "in the wild." I try not to cry, I'm so proud of them. They also tell me that they are proud that they learned about these things at *their* church. A phrase I hear often is, "My friends don't believe I can talk to my pastor about *that kind of thing*."

I had coffee a few weeks ago with a young person who who attends CYAN. They are not a member of our church, but they've spent a lot of time in our basement. As I listened to this person talk, I was filled with some badly-needed hope. This kid had plans, ambitions, and they were so, so *confident*, speaking with such a clear voice. I thought, I would follow this kid into the future, whatever it holds. And then they told me this: "CYAN has helped me so much. It helped me figure out who I am."

I got chills. And I felt such deep gratitude, for being here, for being able to do this work, to live out my faith in this way, to invite other adults to do the same.

These areas of my ministry have had a "soft start" this year, as Will and I recover from our difficult summer. But they are happening, and with your generosity, they will continue to grow. With increased staff capacity, we can recruit and train more volunteers, offer these ministries to more youth in our own church and, we hope, to greater Northfield.

Our nation is hurting. People are hurting. And you need only re-watch that infamous Senate Hearing to know the world is a scary place.

But our church basement isn't.

Amen.