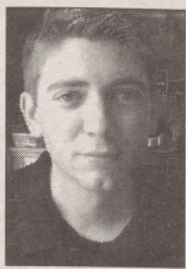


Relationships can help guide religious understanding

BY PETER WALKER
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



Peter Walker

This column is the latest in a series for Street Roots from Basic Rights Oregon.

My parents and the people I grew up around are kind, loving, caring people. Stereotypes are easy, but reality is always more complicated. I never learned hate from them, but there was a lot of fear. As Evangelicals, one of the things they feared most was homosexuality – it was sort of our “litmus test” of Christian orthodoxy.

Homosexuality was never identified as the worst sin. But it was the scariest because it was so foreign. Over the last three decades or so, fear of homosexuality has helped solidify conservative Christian communities into a politically homogenous force. Homosexuality served as the external “other,” an enemy threatening Christian families.

I have to confess that I joined in spreading the fear. I was in grade school when I helped gather signatures at the mall to ban rights for LGBTQ people in Oregon. When I was in middle school, I strapped on roller blades and went door to door distributing anti-gay literature in support of an anti-gay ballot initiative. I felt like my actions validated me as a good Christian.

My world view faltered a bit when I reached high school and made friends who were gay. I liked them. They were good people. So I started developing a dualistic world view, which is what I think a lot of Evangelical Christians do: what you believe from the Bible or the pulpit of your church is somehow separate from the people you know in the real world, as long as those relationships aren't too deep. Because relationships have the power to change everything.

In college, my world view began to crumble. I started to wrestle with the idea that what I believed and what I experienced in the people around me, friends of mine, were not congruent. Then several of my friends came out of the closet. When my best friend from childhood came out to me, I stopped believing being gay was a sin. I couldn't continue to allow my belief system to undermine the people I loved most. And my relationships mattered to me more than one small piece of religious doctrine that didn't seem relevant in the modern world.

Today, I have come full circle, while never abandoning my faith. Whereas once I argued with a friend that it's not “biblical” to have female pastors, now I'm married to one (which is pretty cool). Whereas once I distributed anti-gay literature on rollerblades, now I receive frequent emails and Facebook messages from Evangelical believers and leaders struggling with this issue. Whereas once I gathered signatures for anti-gay political work, now I am voting



Peter Walker receiving communion at First Congregational

PHOTO BY LAUREN HURT

in November to legalize gay marriage in Oregon, and telling my story of transformation.

God works in mysterious ways. Not everything documented in the Bible was meant to be carbon-copied to the 21st century world. Context is important. Relationships and people are important.

The way I see it, we are all children of God. We should love God and love each other. I married my wife because I love her and am committed to her. I believe that treating others as one would hope to be treated includes allowing same-sex couples to marry and that it is not for us to judge.

I have learned that arguing doesn't get anyone anywhere. A good argument didn't change my beliefs. Love did. Relationships did. If you are willing to sit in the same room with people who believe something different from you and simply listen, amazing things can happen. But relationships are not about changing people. Relationships are about loving someone just because they deserve to be loved. And Evangelicals deserve love just as much as gay people. So who do you struggle to love most? Who poses the greatest risk to you, if

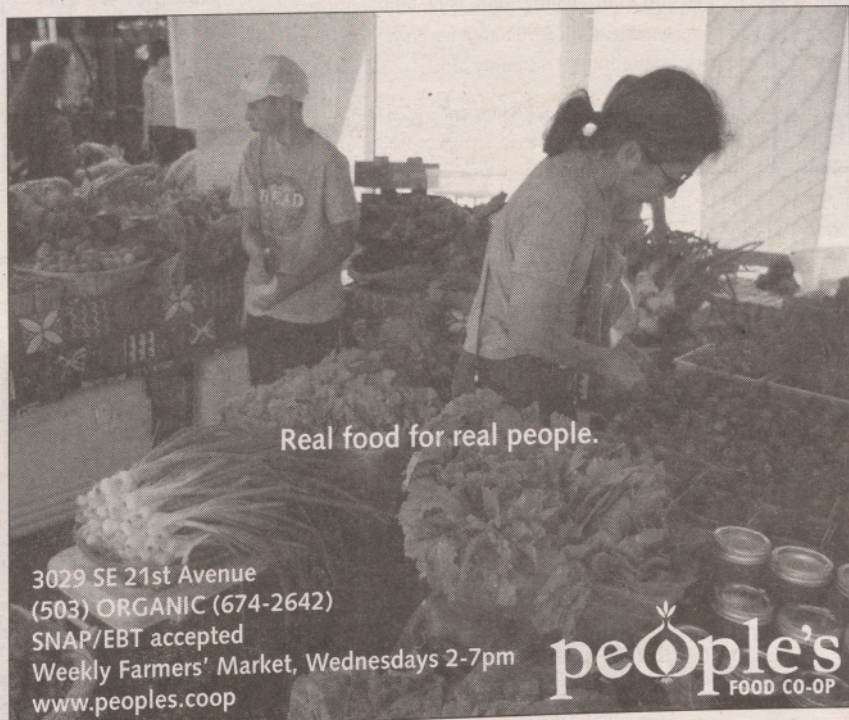
you would love them?

The world is full of crystal clear mirrors – people God leads us to. They help us see who and what we really are, so that we can see who and what God really is. The reflection is sometimes uncomfortable.

When we really pay attention to the truth the world reflects back at us, from the people we find hardest to love, we begin to understand how Jesus got himself into all sorts of sordid, scandalous, compromising, uncomfortable, dirty situations – from loving the people who were hardest to love in his time. He paid for his unconditional love with his life, in part to show us that it's not easy. But it is worth it.

To get involved with the Oregon United for Marriage Campaign go to www.oregonunitedformarriage.org

Whereas once I gathered signatures for anti-gay political work, now I am voting in November to legalize gay marriage in Oregon, and telling my story of transformation.



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