Sexuality and politics have always been intertwined. If we think about it, we can all probably name lots of ways that lines have been drawn around our bodies, around our relationships and around our sexuality. Just this week we saw the president talking about birth control benefits and the justice department going as far as it can to allow and protect discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. As long as there have been laws, there have been attempts to legislate these things. I suppose this is because, like everything, we try to understand something complicated and we try to create an “order” around it. But whenever we do that, we often end up limiting what God is up to. But we do it anyway. That is true in politics and in religion probably because religion and politics were all one thing thousands of years ago.

And what did religion and politics have to say back then- circumcision was the topic. As we can see in the Old Testament, circumcision was a common practice in ancient Judaism and throughout many ancient cultures. But why did they start doing it? What purpose did it serve? Historians have oh so many theories about it from fertility ritual to tribal warfare to merely a rite of passage. We don’t really know exactly why the practice was started in history, but we do have these biblical accounts of what it meant to this community.

What is interesting about circumcision to me is the relationship between the individual and the community- the individual and God. Earlier in religious
evolution there was far less relationship. Before that it didn’t matter to God to be in a two-way relationship with people and it really didn’t matter for God to be a relationship with individuals in a community. Before the earliest forms of Judaism, religion was mostly a one-way street with communities of people worshiping deities and offering them gifts. But that all changed with the concept of being chosen by one God (remember last week- God is God and God chose you). With that first covenant, God entered in to a relationship with Abraham. God wanted more than just sacrifices on an altar. God wanted relationship. And God didn’t just want relationship with the patriarch alone. God wanted all the individual men to participate. It mattered that they made the commitment too. So circumcision was a sign that they were also chosen as individuals to be in relationship with God.

So still no women, no children. And still the very permanent, very physical, very sexual act of circumcision. Still rules and bodies. But a shift.

And then here we have in Deuteronomy- another change. *Circumcise the foreskin of your heart.* Throughout these last weeks we have been looking at what it was like for the people of Israel to evaluate the covenant in light of their current circumstances, their current enslavement. Was God still there? How should they be in relationship with God? What if they can’t perform their usual rites of worship like circumcision? Does that mean they don’t belong to God anymore? And their answer was “no,” we can make a change.

*Deutero*” means “second” like in duet, and “nom” means “law”. So Deuteronomy is the second law, the copy, the reinterpretation. So being people of the
promised land, people of ten commandments, people of the written law and people of circumcision- that was all part of the first covenant.

And then we get a second try, a second law in Deuteronomy. The fact that they did this re-interpretive exercise in the point in history is AMAZING and IMPORTANT because it opened the door to all future re-interpretations. As Walter Bruegemann writes, “The text itself, with its full canonical authority, is not the last word in the interpretative process.” The text retains its full authority but it isn't the last word. In other words, Deuteronomy is the original “god is still speaking” campaign!

And so what was God still speaking? What was the second law? Circumcise the foreskin of your heart. What does that mean? This was a shift, a reorienting of priorities. The writers still affirmed that we serve God and the connection to God and community is important. But how we do that could be rethought. There could be other signs of the covenant, other ways to make a commitment to God. It didn’t only have to happen with this one physical sign. It was a miracle, an epiphany.

As I’m sure you have gathered, this new interpretation was also a movement away from legislating bodies and sexuality. A movement away from bodies and sexuality being the link to religious goodness. It was a reorientation toward the heart- toward the emotional and spiritual. Each person still mattered. God still mattered. And their emotional relationship mattered more than a ritual on the body. It was not only a reinterpretation, it was an expansion.

AAAND because we all know that men aren’t the only ones with hearts, this
change would pave the way toward greater inclusivity for women and children too. Eventually it would allow Jesus and Paul to make arguments to include non-Jews in the covenant. It would allow the UCC to develop and open and affirming process and more. Those writers 5000 years ago could not have imagined that I would be standing here today, a woman preaching on this to a bunch of Gentiles of mixed age, gender, race, and sexual orientation. But they made a change.

This verse is everything. In this one verse, they achieved reform.

They were able to do the two best things in reforming - stay true and reaffirm what really matters and make a change that BETTER reflects those core values. See reform means those two steps - core values and then a shift that better reflects those values. Without the core values, a change is just a change and not always a change for the better. Reform comes from asking those deep identity questions and then moving forward to live into those values more fully.

This year we are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the reformation - a period in the 15th century in which Christians asked themselves similar questions - what still matters? And how can we make changes to live that more fully? They advocated for an expansion of God’s grace. And we live in that legacy today.

What do we need to hear that will make us rethink what we thought we knew? What questions do we need to ask to allow for God’s love to expand? What will people 5000 years from now look back and say, that United Church of Christ didn’t know how their faithfulness would affect us, but boy it mattered.
It is time again for reformation. As we can see in politics and in religion, some in our culture are looking to go backward and start legislating bodies and sexuality again. As we see in the culture around us, there is also a temptation to withdraw to individualism and say that no covenants, no commitments, and no relationships matter. That in my opinion isn’t the answer. Instead, we need to take seriously the text from today. Circumcise the foreskin of your heart is to make a serious heart commitment to community. It is to bind ourselves together in a way that matters. The writers of Deuteronomy made it possible for us to ask these questions today, for us to re-evaluate and to reform. We owe it to them to take it seriously.

There are lots of reformers today to help us wrestle with these questions. Young people especially are challenging the church to be real, to be relevant, and to be impactful. They are challenging us to see the limitations of the old ways of being religious.

One of these reformers is Glennon Doyle. She has two things that people are longing for- authenticity and action. She certainly has a circumcised heart, her heart bleeds all over the place. She helps God’s love expand by helping people understand that their experience is ok. They can still be part of community even if they are drunk on the bathroom floor. She has a sincere heart and then she also has a call to action. As she says here- God requires something of us. We need to be real, to be healed and then we need to make something beautiful with God.

That is the challenge before us- what will the next reformation be? I think we have some big questions in front of us- why be in community? Why be religious?
What is the point? I don’t have the perfect answer for what today’s REFORM will be. We are in the midst of it. Just like the writers of Deuteronomy couldn’t imagine when they wrote “circumcise the foreskin of your heart” that I would be preaching on this today. But I believe that these questions are important—what does faith look like today? What does it matter to me as an individual to be in community? Does it matter to God to be in relationship with communities or is God content to be in relationship with individuals? In other words, could we all just pray at home?

God’s love is expansive. That love asked the writers to write Deuteronomy, the second law, thousands of years ago. That love asked the people to expand beyond the old practice of circumcision. That love asked Mary to have a son and to name him Jesus. That love asked Jesus to teach us the ways of peace and justice. That love asked Paul to preach and teach to Gentiles. That love asked Martin Luther to write 95 theses. That love asked Martin Luther King to march at Selma. That love asked churches to become Open and Affirming. And now, what does Love ask of us? Amen.