

“Pride: Love Wins”

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Today is a day for several holidays. We have already acknowledged the dads here in honor of Father’s Day. Today is also Juneteenth, a day of celebration when freedom finally came to more than 250,000 enslaved Black people in the state of Texas, when Union troops arrived in Galveston Bay and announced that the people were free by executive decree. Today is also National Martini Day. So, if you like a martini, you might have an extra one in celebration.

The month of June has been designated as Pride Month in the United States, and today we are celebrating by having a Pride Sunday in our church. We are not celebrating by throwing parties or having a parade. We are not having rallies or speeches. We *are* celebrating by coming together, lighting candles, and holding sacred space for all queer people, allies, and others. We *are* celebrating by acknowledging the love and inclusivity that God wishes for all Her children. We *are* celebrating by acknowledging the progress made for LGBTQ people and recognizing the work that still needs to be done.

Why celebrate LGTBQ people? Why call it Pride? Why dress up and party like it’s Mardi Gras in June? Why the designation of an entire month to one population? How would Jesus view the issue of LGBTQ pride? How do we view the issue of LGBTQ pride?

Why the word "Pride"? The word "Pride" to represent the LGBTQ community dates back to the Stonewall Uprising in 1969. Brenda Howard, a bisexual woman, who is known as the "mother of Pride" for her work in organizing the first LGBTQ Pride March, as well as organization of an entire week of activities around the Pride March, the basis for the Pride celebrations we see today, was the first person to coin the word Pride in this context.

Others in the Queer community supported and publicized the use of the term "Pride" at its beginnings. On Christopher Street after the Stonewall Uprising, a speech given by Sylvia Rivera, a trans woman, played a monumental role in the development of Pride. Rivera worked to give particular focus to the transgender and gender non-conforming parts of the Queer community during this time.

Why the word "Pride" was chosen is still a mystery. There appears to be no written records as to why the word "Pride" was chosen and why the word has stuck. During this time, LGBTQ people were persecuted, jailed, locked in mental institutions, denounced by families and society at large, oppressed, and marginalized. The Uprising gave a voice to LGBTQ people and a way to be “out and proud.”

Since the birthing of the Pride movement, much work has been done and ground gained in equality, fair treatment, and protection for members of the LGBTQ community. At the time of the 1969 New York City Stonewall Uprising, there were already groups fighting for rights for Queer people, but a tipping point was reached in June of 1969. This movement grew rapidly as people began to fight back and demand more protection and freedoms. The raids, discriminatory practices, laws, and legal persecution that made the lives of LGBTQ people hell had been long standing and devastating. In New York for example, it was illegal for people to wear more than three pieces of clothing of the opposite gender. Serving alcohol to LGBTQ persons was also illegal. In the late 1960s, it was still illegal in most states to be gay and not a single law protected gay people from discrimination. Without the brave people of that time, what we are doing today might not be possible. We would not be an open and affirming congregation. We would not be openly celebrating in accepting, inclusive and loving ways. I would not be standing here delivering this message today.

We celebrate LGBTQ people because God celebrates all his children. We celebrate because God teaches us to honor, acknowledge and love each other in all our diversity. We celebrate to create a world in which gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender teenagers and adults are loved, accepted, and celebrated, in every gathering and every congregation. We celebrate so they/we know that they/we are not alone. We celebrate to shine a light in the darkness and show a source of love to those who have no one and feel they have no place to go. We celebrate and worship here today to share the glorious news that God loves and includes us all. We celebrate to bear witness to those who continue to be marginalized and terrorized for who they are. Those that hide who they are because of fear and rejection. Both rejection by other people and fear of rejection by God. We are an inclusive and loving congregation. We have an Open and Affirming statement in our entry way that says, "Come in. You are welcome here."

In our scripture readings for today, we are told that in Christ we are all equal and all Children of God. That Christ came so that in faith we will all be put right with God and that there is no difference between us as children of God. God's love is all encompassing, equalizing and in that, we are all in union with Christ. Jesus tells us that the greatest commandment above all others is for us to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind and to love each other and ourselves. We are commanded to love and compelled to see each other as equal. Our Open and Affirming statement says that we do this in our church. It says that we are accepting and that we will not judge. It says you are safe here. What do we do beyond the doors of our church? What do we do in our own lives and as a living body of Christ? How do we embody the commands that Jesus gave us, and do we see others as our equals?

I think for many of us this is a tall order to live up to. Life is full of opposing ideas, fears, worries, differences, and struggles that are too numerous to list. Everywhere we look there are forces pointing out our differences and voices challenging these commands. Fear, real or

perceived danger, exhaustion and fatigue can keep people from action. Blatant differences and our own sense of distance from the struggles of others can often blunt our senses and keep us from action. Maybe we do not agree with the “lifestyles” of others, or we cannot understand all the changes and language associated with a particular population. If we have biases or prejudices or lack knowledge or understanding, do we feel safe voicing these things in this place or in others? Do we keep silent because we are afraid of being judged or condemned by those around us? Are we kept from our own potential growth because of fear of judgement if we voice biases, questions, or lack of understanding?

I came to this church in 2009 as a closeted, fearful, anxious, and worried woman. I stepped into the sanctuary to shut up a friend, who kept bugging me to come. I was greeted with love and joy and the open embrace of many who are in this sanctuary. I kept coming back. Not initially for the message but for how I was received by the people in this body of Christ. You exemplified love and the commandment of Jesus to love others. I felt loved and accepted but did not share my secret with you. I had not shared this secret with anyone except a few people who were bound by laws and ethics to not tell anyone. Not my friends, nor my family and not anyone in the larger world. In the recent past before I came here, you had voted to become an Open and Affirming Congregation. Then on the heels of that came the equal marriage vote for the state of Maine. I watched as this caused great distress in our faith family and how divided it caused some of us to become. Fear, stress, and worry warred with others needs to be proactive and participate in the fight for equality. During this time, I came out in this congregation. I told members of this faith family before I told members of my own family. Why was I able to do this during a time of intense stress in our congregation? Because of love! You showed me what love was. You showed me that you loved me just as I was. You said it to me and showed me through actions and care. Never in my life had I felt the truth of love like I found amongst all of you.

Despite the differences of how we wanted to live into becoming an Open and Affirming Congregation, we all met as people living in union with Christ. We came together and were able to meet from a place of love. I believe this is why we can have this celebratory church service today. I know it is because of love. The love of Christ that is embodied in each of us and acted out within the walls of this Church. Our sitting through uncomfortable conversations and making a place safe enough to support each other in our own growth processes. I am thankful that I came to this church. I am thankful for the love and care that has allowed me to grow into who I am today. I am grateful that we can love each other and grow together through challenges and the difficulties of life. There have been many gains within our church and in the greater world but there is still much work to be done. In the first three months of this year there were 238 bills filed across the country that would discriminate against LGBTQ persons. That was up from just 41 in 2018. There are laws that prohibit Queer people from being able to adopt. Prohibitions on education in schools from educators mentioning LGBTQ people or issues in the curriculum.

Laws that persecute parents who help their children with gender confirming medical care and states where parents can be investigated for child abuse if they have a trans child.

There is so much work to be done but there is also good news! A recent nationwide survey found that 79 percent of Americans supported laws that protect LGBTQ people from discrimination in housing, jobs, and public accommodations. That same survey found that 70% of Americans supported same sex marriage. President Biden signed an executive order this past week that targets anti-LGBTQ laws, expands gender affirming care, curbs federal funding for conversion therapy and advances LGBTQ-inclusive learning environments in Americas schools. A poll conducted last June, showed that most republicans and over half of evangelicals under thirty supported same sex marriage.

These changes, I believe, denote a shift in acceptance, inclusivity, love, and an ever-increasing ability to celebrate diversity in our country. This looks to be in direct contrast to all the division and hate that has been present in our country and world in the last few years. I believe that the reason we are still moving toward an expanding acceptance and celebration of LGBTQ people is love. God's love as radiated and passed on by individuals in this church, in our communities and in our country and world. Ever an eternal optimist, I still believe that Love Wins! Because love wins, we can support each other as we come out. As we are called out of the places we hide. The shame of who we are and how we sometimes think and act. Because love wins, we can hear God calling us to be brave and support each other. To no longer be silent and not be our authentic selves. To not be afraid or ashamed by the ways we might think or behave or have acted. Our God is a god of resurrection. Of new life after devastation. Of hope in the grip of evil. And I believe these truths: I believe in the power of love. I believe in solidarity with the suffering. I believe we are each valuable. I believe our togetherness is transformative. I BELIEVE, we are all one in union with Christ and that Love wins.

I want to end with an excerpt from "A Prayer of Queer Thanksgiving," by Micah Bucey:

"I sing praises to this little boy, no more than seven or eight,
Who just pranced right up to me and interlaced his own tiny, nail-polished fingers
With my own, and cried out, "Twins!"
I sing praises to his choice of glittery green,
Which perfectly complements my shimmery purple.
I sing praises to his guts, his gumption, his presumption
That I am a friend, a familiar, a fellow fairy — family —
Even though we've never met.
I sing praises to the street that brings us together
And to the fabulous whomever he, she, they will become.

“I sing praises to the well-coiffed mother, bubbling over and teary-eyed,
As she exclaims, “He saw you all the way across the street and just had to say, ‘Hello.’”
I sing praises to the baseball-capped father, looking on with quiet pride,
As he asks, “Do you paint yourself or do you have them professionally done?”
I sing praises to the grandma and the grandpa, holding hands and smiling wide,
As they look one another in the eye and celebrate what their love has made.

“I sing praises to the dozens of witnesses to this family reunion,
The ones who hurry by and the ones who slow down,
The ones who look up from their phones to watch history being made,
The ones who set aside their cynicism for one, brief, shining moment,
So they can join in the smiles,
Join in the connection,
As I squeeze the tiny fingers of this seven-or-eight-year-old unicorn and proclaim: “Twins!”

“And I sing praises to the cloud of invisible witnesses that surrounds us,
And in the singing and the praising, I feel them appear around us.
This is fantasy, but this is real.
This is fantasy, but fantasy is what painted our nails in the first place.”
Amen.