

**Sermon – Pride Sunday – June 23, 2019**  
Isaiah 43:16-21; Matthew 12:46-50; Romans 13:8-10

I'd like to start by saying that I'm honoured to be preaching this morning, on Pride Sunday. I have been a proud LGBTQ ally for a long time and am still growing into that. I may have told some of you this story already, but when my son Christof was about 9 years old, he pulled me aside and said, "Mom, I have to tell you something. I don't think I'm gay, no offence." (He gave me his consent to share that with you.) I can't imagine having said something like that to my parents when I was his age. My upbringing, like many of ours, was unquestionably heteronormative. And I certainly didn't know about Pride until I was much older.

This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Stonewall uprising in Greenwich Village, New York. Pride events have historically been, in part, a commemoration of these riots.

On June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1969, the police raided a club called the Stonewall Inn – a place largely patronized by people from the LGBTQ community. Customers and employees were hauled outside, some arrested, and individuals who were suspected of being dressed in drag were physically "checked" to determine their sex to see if they violated the state's gender-appropriate clothing statute. This led to 6 days of protest, marching and, at times, violent clashes between the queer community and the police. This event was one of the galvanizing forces behind LGBTQ activism in the United States and around the world.

Gay bars and clubs, at the time, were refuges for LGBTQ people, including the poorest and most marginalized, where they could build community in relative safety. However, these bars were subject to penalties and raids by the police from time to time, since, before 1966, it was illegal to serve alcohol to individuals suspected of being queer. Many bars operated without liquor licenses and some were owned by the Mafia, who bribed the police into leaving them alone. They were then free to exploit the vulnerability of their queer clientele, who wanted to socialize in a place free from police interference. The Stonewall Inn was one such Mafia-owned bar which didn't have a fire exit, properly functioning washrooms or running water behind the bar to clean glasses and the owners blackmailed many of the patrons who wanted their sexual identity to remain a secret.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.history.com/topics/gay-rights/the-stonewall-riots> and <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1970/07/11/parade>

The whole scene might sound unsavoury, but consider the choices queer people had for community building at that time. These bars were some of the only options available.

We have long known that a sense of belonging is one of humanity's most basic needs. We don't just *like* to belong. We *need* to belong. Community is essential to our survival as human beings – both physically and psychologically.

But what does good community and deep belonging look like in light of queer affirmation and inclusion? This week I attempted to look at our scripture passages through a rainbow lens. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is told that his mother and brothers are standing outside waiting to talk to him, Jesus replies, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? Pointing to his disciples, he says, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’” (12:48-50). I used to read this as a kind of harsh rejection of Jesus' literal family, but I've started to read it differently. Jesus seems to reformulate what makes a family by including those with whom he is in community. In a kind of queer move, Jesus redefines the family and opens the door to a more expansive, inclusive family based on mutual faith and action.

I think that Queer theology and Queer biblical interpretation can open up the scripture to us in fresh ways. Theologian Gerard Loughlin describes the word “queer” as that which “seeks to outwit identity”. “Queer” “destabilizes” what is considered “normal”, for example, the strict binary separation of male and female, heterosexual and homosexual.<sup>2</sup> How often do we still hear people refer to another gender as the opposite sex?

When we think in binaries, we think in boundaries. Even our seemingly benevolent language of “building bridges” reflects the stubbornness of these binaries and boundaries. For what is a bridge? A bridge connects two points separated by a gap. If the church is asking, how can we build bridges between us and our queer members, this is a further act of exclusion and alienation. It says that *you* are not *us*. If you were us, we wouldn't need a bridge because we'd be on the same side!

Romans 13 tells us to “love our neighbour as our self.” A verse we know well. Jesus taught that our neighbour is anyone who is in need, but perhaps we can add another layer of meaning to say that to love our neighbour *is* to love our self. In the so-called “West”, we think of ourselves as separate individuals and our highest

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<sup>2</sup> See “Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology” by Patrick S. Cheng.

goal in life is to become autonomous, independent human beings who aren't reliant on anyone. This is reflected in the ruling politics of the day that cut spending for education and health care and other systems of support. Individuals should be able to find their own way and support themselves. Why should I pay taxes to fund the lazy freeloaders out there? As the mother of a son with a disability, and as a Christian, I would advocate for an alternative model of interdependence and mutual support.

I watched a short documentary called *The Examined Life* in which queer philosopher Judith Butler and disability activist Sunaura Taylor take a walk through the streets of San Francisco. "Nobody goes for a walk", Butler observes, "without having something that supports that walk, something outside of ourselves." What Taylor is able to do is conditioned by the fact that she is in a wheelchair, but what Butler is able to do as a so-called able-bodied person is also conditioned by her physical context. The camera is constantly focusing on the things that will determine their mobility: the road with all of its bumps and grooves, the flow of traffic, the skateboards and bicycles, and so on. At one point, Butler says, "we have a false idea that the able-bodied person is somehow radically self-sufficient."

She then compares mobility to gender and says "no one gets to have a gender all on their own...because we're embodied, we fundamentally depend on other people to recognize who we are and to help us figure out who we are in a social world."<sup>3</sup>

What conditions the way that we move through the world and through the church as LGBTQ persons and allies? What obstacles obstruct us and what supports do we depend on for spiritual mobility? In what ways are we interdependent? How are we loving our neighbour and how are they loving us in this space that we share?

I read about a woman named Donna Red Wing, a community organizer and an American national leader in the fight for human rights, civil rights, and LGBTQ equality. In the early '90s, she and her partner Sumitra moved from Massachusetts to Portland, Oregon, just in time for one of America's big gay rights electoral battles: Ballot Measure 9, which would have effectively defined Oregon gays and lesbians as second-class citizens. This measure was pushed forward by the radical religious right. Donna Red Wing and a group of dedicated others succeeded in

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0HZaPkF6qE&t=96s> and <https://www.law.berkeley.edu/php-programs/faculty/facultyPubsPDF.php?facID=1105&pubID=17>

narrowly keeping the measure from going through. She later moved to Iowa, where she met a man named Bob Vander Plaats. She writes:

*Bob Vander Plaats...is the head of the radical right group here. One day, I just walked up to him and said, "Hi, my name is Donna. I'd like to have coffee with you." He said, "Okay, call my office." Afterward, he told me he was stunned. He had no idea what I wanted and what I was up to.*

*We met for coffee. What surprised me was, I really liked him. He was funny. He was smart. He has a son who's profoundly disabled, and he's an amazing father. The first time we met, afterward I got in my car and I called my wife. I said, "I don't want to like this man. Why did I laugh at his jokes?" Well, they were funny.*

*That isn't to say, if Bob did something really horrible or stupide, I'd come after him like you wouldn't believe. He would do the same. We're dealing with each other as human beings and not as stereotypes. He had to give up what he thought lesbians were about, and I had to give up a little bit about what I thought right-wing evangelicals were about.*

*There are people on Bob's side who are really angry that he meets with me. There are people in the LGBT community who are really angry that I meet with him. For me, I think it's the next step. We live in a place and space that we have to share, and we're finding out that we have things in common.*

*After we won marriage on a federal level, Bob and I bumped into each other at a TV station, and he just gave me a great big hug and said, "You're buying coffee next time."<sup>4</sup>*

Donna Red Wing initiated a sharing of space with someone radically different from her, someone whose very views threatened her way of life. She asked "who is my neighbour?" and disrupted the binary of us and them, straight and queer, conservative and liberal, thereby shifting the boundaries that separated her from Bob.

The poet and activist Audre Lorde once said, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."<sup>5</sup> In other words, we cannot continue to use the same tools that built up heteropatriarchal Christianity to tear it down. We cannot use the tools that erected the boundaries between us and them and determined who we

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<sup>4</sup> See *The Book of Pride: LGBTQ Heroes Who Changed the World*.

<sup>5</sup> Audre Lorde. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press. 110- 114. 2007. Print.

should and shouldn't love. Queer theology is one of the alternative tools we can use to build different temples in which to worship – temples of deep belonging and inclusion.

One of the participants in the Stonewall uprising was a 28-year-old novice nun named Virginia Apuzzo. She had gone into the convent knowing that she was a lesbian, but she didn't know how to connect this part of her identity with what she had been taught was virtuous and right; so, she fled to the church in order to escape herself. Then she read about the Stonewall riots in a newspaper and realized that there was a group of openly queer people openly fighting for queer rights. She said that "it was as if suddenly a brick wall opened up." And she left the convent to join them. She eventually "founded the Hudson Valley LGBTQ Community Center" and enjoyed a long career in politics, eventually serving as the "highest ranking gay person in the Clinton White House". She says that "Stonewall still has relevance because 'Stonewall happens every day.' She explained... When we, here at the Hudson Valley Center, talk to a teacher about the problems of a young student who is in the process of questioning himself or herself and that kid feels somebody standing there talking to the rule-makers on his or her behalf, that kid experiences a piece of Stonewall all over again. It's just in a different context, but for that one young person, it's no less powerful."<sup>6</sup>

I'm so impressed with the community service and activism of people like Virginia Apuzzo, but I'm also painfully aware that she sought out the church to remove herself from her own queerness and then was liberated when she left the convent and found her place of deep belonging outside of the church.

What are some ways that we can foster this kind of deep belonging *within* our church? As Mennonites, we need to be accountable for what our institutions are doing to uphold oppressive systems. For example, we can stand against and help to radically revise homophobic lifestyle policies like the one held by Mennonite Central Committee for its workers, in spite of how complicated this may seem.

Christian ethicist Christine Gudorf also suggests ways that members of the 3 Abrahamic faiths can promote loving justice and deep belonging.

1. First, Gudorf thinks that religious communities should resist defining sexuality in static, ultimate ways. Concepts of sexuality are interdependent and fluid and dynamic.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/stonewall-participants/>

2. Second, religious communities should decentre sexuality. Sexuality was not a focal point of Moses, Jesus or Mohammad. The bottom line is that religious education, legislation and ritual should focus on the dignity, value, and obligations of human persons to each other irrespective of those persons' sexual identities.
3. And, third, protect the vulnerable without disempowering them. This means creating and maintaining safe spaces while promoting inclusion and participation on all levels.<sup>7</sup>

A year after the Stonewall riots, on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1970, ten thousand people paraded past the original site. Flyers were handed out that said, "Welcome to the first-anniversary celebration of the Gay Liberation movement. We are united today to affirm our pride, our life-style, and our commitment to each other." Along the way, the marchers called out to curious onlookers saying, "Join us!... Come on in, the water's fine!" And a few joined them.<sup>8</sup> And a few more join every year.

I'd like to conclude with a prayer. Creating, renewing, incarnated God. We rejoice because we are made in your image. We ask that you guide us in our quest to live out loving justice in your name. And we thank you for opening our ears, our eyes, our hearts and our arms to one another as your community of faith in all of its wondrous colours. Come on in, the water's fine.

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<sup>7</sup> See "The Erosion of Sexual Dimorphism: Challenges to Religion and Religious Ethics" by Christine Gudorf.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1970/07/11/parade>