

## **God's Rainbow People**

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## **Psalm 42; Galatians 3:23-29**

In late June, in 2014, shortly after school let out for the year, our senior high youth went on a summer mission trip to New York City. We'd booked our housing in the West Greenwich Village neighborhood, and I was immensely pleased with myself. "We'll be able to get street parking!" I thought. "Since all the New Yorkers will be out of town for the weekend."

I got the first hint that this might not come to pass when we drove by a street corner where a grown man stood, wearing a rainbow colored tutu. "Uh oh," I slowly realized. "It must be Pride Weekend! Better start looking for a pricy garage. Cause on street parking just isn't gonna happen!"

Yes, our lovely group of teens and adults had arrived in New York City at the Ground Zero of the LGBTQ+ celebration with its highlight event: the Gay Pride Parade. And with our 10<sup>th</sup> Street location, we were right in the midst of it.

Turned out to be an amazing time. True, it was crazy hectic trying to get around with the sidewalks blocked, and thousands of spectators and participants all occupying the same space at the same time. But it was wonderful fun. I was proud of my city. And I was so glad that we got to be part of such a magnificent and special event.

One of the places that I made sure to take our CPC group that week was to the outside of the Stonewall Inn, a bar in the heart of the Village, in Christopher Park. "Take note of this place," I told them, and I made sure they all read the plaque that described the events that took place there in 1969. "Take note of this place. This is important. This is something to remember. This is a place, an event, that has profound meaning for all of our lives."

You may have noticed the plethora of rainbow flags and Pride events this year. It's because this year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the events that took place at that Stonewall Inn on June 28, 1969.

Stonewall had become known as gathering place, a refuge, for LGBT people in the 1960's.

Why was a refuge needed?

"Because the LGBT community did not enjoy the freedoms which came with the social and political changes that were taking place in other areas of society." Individuals identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender "faced oppression and criminal prosecution even for being physically intimate with consensual partners. In NYC, LGBT persons were frequently arrested for acts such as same-sex

dancing and kissing and wearing clothes of the perceived opposite gender. In some States, adults of the same sex caught having consensual sex in their own home could receive sentences of up to life in prison or be confined to a mental institution, where they faced horrible procedures, such as shock therapy, castration, and lobotomies. LGBT Americans lived their lives in secrecy for fear of losing their jobs, being evicted from their homes, or being arrested.”<sup>1</sup>

With such a need for secrecy, or for safe places to gather in New York City, a variety of nightclubs, bars, restaurants, hotels and private clubs that served LGBT clientele became located in the Greenwich Village area.

At the time, it was common for police to raid LGBT bars, which were often run by mob syndicates. And on June 28, 1969, undercover officers raided the Stonewall Inn...a usual practice, and a follow up to a raid they had made earlier in the week.

But this time, instead of dispersing, customers protested. This caused a crowd to gather. People began to cheer! They shouted “Gay Power!” and “We want freedom!” The gathering grew. A riot ensued. Later in the week, demonstrators appeared. More protests formed. Confrontations continued. Momentum had begun.

This uprising galvanized the LGBT community across the nation, giving rise to the demand for equality and respect. It is a point, a location, that marks the birth of the modern LGBT civil rights movement. It sets the stage for Supreme Court victories that later ensured equal rights for all people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

On June 24, 2016, --- three years ago --- President Barack Obama declared it the Stonewall National Monument, that “future generations would learn about this turning point that sparked changes in cultural attitudes and national policy towards LGBT people” for decades to come.<sup>1</sup>

As I mentioned, in honor of this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration, this month we’ve seen more rainbow flags than ever. There have been more Pride Parades and events and celebrations than ever before. I live in Howard County, and it’s hosting its first Pride event in our local Centennial Park. Newspapers are running feature stories on how attitudes in families and communities have changed.

On June 8<sup>th</sup>, the Washington Post ran a story that notes that the transformational change in public opinion towards the LGBT community is a shift that is “unlike any other of our time.”

“As recently as 2004,” it says, “polls showed that the majority of Americans --- 60 percent --- opposed same-sex marriage, while only 31 percent were in favor. Today,

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<sup>1</sup> Presidential Proclamation – Establishment of the Stonewall National Monument, June 24, 2016. Barack Obama

those numbers are reversed: 61 percent support same-sex marriage, while 31 percent oppose it.”<sup>2</sup>

This transformation change is visible in the life of our church. Although, the Presbyterian Church has been recently a bit ahead of the curve, that has not always been our history. We have been engaged in a long struggle to understand and live out the words of scripture in regards to our identities as complicated sexual & gendered beings.

Paul spoke to the church in Galatia centuries ago:

*This is who you are now, he told them. In Christ, there is no distinction between you. You are not male and female, slave or free. But you are ONE in Christ. You have a new identity. The old power structure no longer fits. It is Christ who is your authority. Christ who unites you. Christ who forms you. Christ who lives in you.*

Paul was describing how to live in community that was in accord with life in Christ.

Though I don't suppose that the apostle would have foreseen what our modern society looks like, I think that what he was writing was a true and deep understanding of what radical love and acceptance could truly look like. You are neither male nor female! These divisions are not what defines you in your life in Christ. “You are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are heirs according to the promise.” Gal 3:29

The church has certainly not understood how we have been called to live in this new vision, this new reality, this promise.

It was not until the mid -20<sup>th</sup> century that women ministers were ordained in the Presbyterian Church, a few years before I was born. And it has been a very long slog towards acceptance and inclusion for LGBT persons in our denomination's history.

I stand before you as someone who remembers this history from our denominational past. Because a lot of it started in the New York City Presbytery, our group of then United Presbyterian Churches, who had asked for “definitive guidance” about whether persons who acknowledged a homosexual orientation and practice may be ordained. This was in 1976. And in 1978, the General Assembly – our largest governing body – issued a policy statement that said that “unrepentant homosexual practice is inconsistent with the requirements for ordination,” but that, this shall “not negatively affect the ordination of persons who have already been ordained.”

A reminder that ordination for Presbyterians is for three offices: Minister of Word and Sacrament (clergy), Elders (who serve on our local church's governing body, the

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<sup>2</sup> Americans' views flipped on gay rights. How did minds change so quickly? Samantha Schmidt. [WP](#), June 7, 2019.)

session), and Deacons (who are charged specifically with the ministries of care and compassion in our congregation and community).

For the next 30 plus years, the Presbyterian Church (which is now the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.) wrestled and fought and struggled to allow LGBT persons to live out their baptismal promise --- that we are all the beloved children of God, given gifts by the Holy Spirit to serve Christ's church and God's world.

I was present in three different Presbyteries hearing arguments and statements over this during that time. And I remember people getting up to the microphones during Presbytery meetings presenting their positions. And it got to be that one knew exactly what someone was going to say, and how they were going to vote. (We could have reduced a three-hour meeting to three minutes!)

And I remember watching the witness --- the amazing witness of those who identified as LGBT --- as they shared their stories. As they wore their rainbow-colored stoles and lived out the gospel with a faithfulness and steadfastness that to this day continues to astound me. I hear in their testimony the words of Psalm 42:

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*

*My tears have been my food day and night.*

*Why are you cast down, O my soul, why are you disquieted within me.*

*I say to God, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?"*

*Hope in God; my help. Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.*

I think the most profoundly affecting thing, is that so many of our LGBT kin stayed part of the Presbyterian Church. They stayed. And spoke. And prayed. And witnessed to God's inclusive love. They challenged power, and injustice, and called us all to be the community that Christ intends us to be.

And I confess I am ashamed of how many words of abuse, such dehumanizing language that was spoken and written against them by members of our church body.

The process towards inclusion was long...very long.

Organizations were formed. More Light Presbyterians were the first... created from the few words of hope in the original 1978 definitive guidance which read: "*yet more light may shine forth on the scriptures...*"

More than two decades ago, The Covenant Network of Presbyterians was created, to work “towards a Church as Generous and Just as God’s grace.” It focused on changing ordination standards, and in later years, worked for marriage equality. Catonsville Presbyterian Church became a member of this organization many years back, and our membership continues today.

For years, people worked tirelessly to advocate and educate, and then, finally in 2011 (8 years ago) Amendment 10-A was approved by a majority of presbyteries that declared that “Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Christ in all aspects of life...” and went on to allow the church to approve all persons for ordination according to their ability, commitment, calling, preparation, suitability and gifts.

Finally, the day had come.

And the Presbyterian Church is finally able to more fully live out the Gospel’s Word of welcome, inclusion, justice and love.

This all being said: I think it is appropriate during this Pride month, 50 years after the formation of the modern LGBT+ civil rights movement, to acknowledge the incredible amount of pain and hurt that has been caused by the church, by our denomination, in these years of division and exclusion.

And I place this rainbow flag upon our communion table, as a sign of recognition. A recognition of pain that has been caused --- a sign of our deep regret and sorrow. We lament that many faithful followers of Christ have been excluded from service in ministry, or had to remain silent about the fullness of who they are. It is a sign of thanks for the persistence of those who worked for change. It is a sign of forgiveness that has been graciously granted, a sign of reconciliation – a continuing witness of how we are in Christ together and that there are no divisions between us. And it is a sign of promise --- that we can continue to grow in love, working towards a greater justice not only in the church but in our communities and in the world.

Last June at the 223<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly, two historic overtures were approved. One affirms and celebrates the gifts of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the church. Another affirms the rights and dignity of people of transgender, non-binary, and people of varying gender identities. <sup>3</sup>

The second of those overtures includes these words:

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<sup>3</sup> A New Day for LGBTQIA People in the Church: General Assembly Unanimously Approves Overtures; June 20, 2018 Brian Ellison

*Standing in the conviction that all people are created in the image of God and that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for all people, the 223<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly (2018) affirms its commitment to the full welcome, acceptance, and inclusion of transgender people, people who identify as non-binary, and people of all gender identities within the full life of the church and the world. The assembly affirms the full dignity and the full humanity of transgender people, their full inclusion in all human rights, and their giftedness for service. The assembly affirms the church's obligation to stand for the right of people of all gender identities to live free from discrimination, violence, and every form of injustice.*

The church is already living into its promise. This past week in the Presbytery of the James (Richmond, Virginia) Jess Cook – the first openly gender non-binary (not identifying specifically as male or female) has been approved for ordination to Minister of Word and Sacrament.

There is yet, more light, to shine on the church. Plenty of work for the Holy Spirit to do to guide us, to change us. To bring us into the future that God is yet preparing for us.

But I am happy to be part of the journey... inspired by so many who have worked and prayed and struggled and sacrificed and endured because they knew the truth that is conveyed in Scripture:

*In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.  
You were baptized in Christ, and clothed in Christ. You are one in Christ Jesus.*

There is much to learn. Room to grow. Work for justice that needs to be done.

Let us joyfully commit to this work.... So that  
*For everyone born, there's a place at the table.*

God help us to include everyone in Christ's generous welcome.

## **PRAYER**

Holy One, we are grateful for the gift of our lives and gift of others in our lives. And we know that you created each of us with dignity and worth.

You call us to love each other, and to do nothing to others that we would find hateful to ourselves.

We repent for the times when our faith traditions have named lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people unworthy. Your love does not exclude: we are all worthy.

We suffer when LGBT persons are oppressed, excluded and shamed by religious people who overlook the fundamental call to justice in our scriptures. We lift up those worshipping communities that even now struggle for welcome and inclusion.

We pray for LGBT children and youth who are rejected by their families. For those driven to suicide from the pain of alienation.

We pray for LGBT persons in Chechnya, Uganda, Zambia, Iraq and elsewhere who have been murdered and tortured for who they are.

We remember LGBT refugees from around the world seeking safety and sanctuary. We lift up transgender people who are targeted victims of hate crimes and assaults. We pray for all whose dignity and self-esteem have been eroded by hateful systems and structures.

Lord, we give you praise for creating your rainbow children. And we celebrate our diversity, and lift up our oneness in Christ.

Help us to dedicate ourselves to building bridges of love and hope, making equity and equality for all people our goal, working continually for justice, so that everyone can live fully in your love.

By the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

(adapted from Religious Institute, A Responsive Reading Celebrating LGBT Pride Month, 2010; and Pride Prayer by Alydia Smith, United Church of Canada, 2017)