

Fearfully, Wonderfully Made June 14, 2020

Gen 1:26-28a

Psalm 139:13-18

This June marks the 50th anniversary of the first Pride marches. The Christopher Street Liberation Day March was held in New York City in 1970. This gathering was not the colorfully exuberant festival we're now accustomed to seeing, rather it was described as a profound 'act of desperate courage.' As many as 5000 people marched through the streets, out in the open, proud of who are they are. They were shouting affirmation, and demanding change.

(New York Times, Andrew Solomon, June 27, 2019, The First New York Pride March was an Act of "Desperate Courage")

The flier for the event reads:

What it will all come to no one can tell. It is our hope that the day will come when homosexuals will be an integral part of society --- being treated as human beings. But this will not come overnight. It can only be the result of long hard struggle."

Gay Liberation Front Flyer 1970, sml6010, July 13, 2018

It is in recognition of the many years of struggle and the intersectionality of passion and pain that the LGBTQ+ community has expressed solidarity and support for the current racial justice protests, for the Black Lives Matter movement.

LGBTQ+ persons know and remember the 1980s when thousands of gay men were dying from a mysterious disease that swept through the community. They were victims of AIDS, and a society and its leaders looked the other way, and even blamed the community for its own suffering.

There is intersectionality in how the movement coalesced: the Stonewall Riots began with the actions of black transgender women, including Martha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, who knew that "enough was enough."

The Human Rights Campaign and over 100 LGBTQ+ organizations just released a letter stating:

"We understand what it means to rise up and push back against a culture that tells us we are less than, that our lives don't matter. Today we join together again to say #BlackLivesMatter and commit ourselves to the actions those words require.

hrc.org, The Human Rights Campaign and over 100 LGBTQ Organizations Release Letter Condemning Racial Violence, May 29, 2020, Elizabeth Bibi

One of the actions is lifting up the names of people whose lives – and deaths – need to be recognized and accounted for.

The Covenant Network, of which our congregation is a member, in a recent statement, acknowledged the death of Tony McDade, an African-American

transgender person who was killed by a police officer in Tallahassee on May 27. Tony McDade is the twelfth transgender or non-conforming person to be killed this year, following more than 50 who were killed between 2018 and 2019.

Hearing Voices Long Silenced, Brian Ellison, June 10, 2020, covnetpres.org

In a Presbyterian Church webinar, COVID at the Margins, sponsored by GenderJusticePCUSA, one of the speakers noted:

“Basic dignity and humanity is not being applied to trans deaths,” and “transphobia is a problem in our country.

COVID at the Margins, GenderjusticePCUSA, June 8, 2020

Here is some information we need to know:

- 44% of black transwomen are living with HIV in the US. Covid at the Margins
- Black transwomen are among the most vulnerable people in our society as a whole. The average life expectancy of a trans woman of color is 35 years.
USA Today, Celebrating Pride Month and Rallying for Racial Equality, Elinor Aspegren, June 5, 2020

A 2012 report from Lambda Legal found that half of all black trans people have been imprisoned. (For transpeople as a whole, that ratio was 1 in 6). The Root, Anne Branigan, June 4, 2020, Tony McDade was an Imperfect Victim of Police Brutality

- A 2013 study reported that transgender people of color were six times more likely to experience physical violence from the police compared to white cisgender people. The Lily, Cecilia Nowell, June 3, 2013 National Coalition of AntiViolence Programs

Marginalization of LGBTQ persons is happening in all parts of our society.

- One third of the nation’s transgender population lives in poverty.
Rev. Laura Marks Cheifetz, More Light Presbyterians, mlp.org
- One in four transpeople have lost a job due to bias, more than three out of four have experienced some kind of workplace discrimination.
 (“O”, 6 Ways to become a Better LGBTQ Ally, Francisco Palleres-Santiago, 6/27/19)

Last week, the Trump administration submitted a brief to the Supreme Court arguing that a tax-funded adoption agency should be able to refuse to work with same-sex couples. (NBC News: Adoption Agency Should be Able to Reject Gay Couples, Julie Moreau, June 4, 2020.)

And then just this past Friday, June 12, the Department of Health and Human Services rolled back health care protections for transgender people, making it easier to deny them coverage.

(NPR, Transgender Health Protections Reversed by Trump Administration, June 12, Selena Simmons-Duffin)

We are seeing discrimination right in our own neighborhood. This past week, right next door from this church, a family was outside Hillcrest Elementary School holding a banner reading: God Marriage= 1 Man 1 Woman. For me, this is, among other things, an unfortunate and limited understanding of a Scripture text. Instead of seeing a revelation of the diversity of the Divine, the goodness of God as seen in humankind, it's presented as narrow and biased, hurtful and harmful.

On Tuesday, a counter-protest was organized, and a group of families from the nearby area brought signs expressing love and support from the Catonsville community. Among them, I'm sure, was our local motto: *No Hate in 21228*.

Behind the protestors, behind the counter-protesters, was a sign on the Hillcrest wall. I took a photo of it: it's the one printed in the Order of Worship and on our newsletter page: LISTEN, LEARN, ACT.

The words of the prophets are written on the schoolyard walls: Listen. Learn Act.

This is good advice for those of us who are trying to be allies in the struggle for gender, sexual, economic, and racial justice. A helpful definition of an ally is "someone from a non-marginalized group who uses their privilege to advocate for a marginalized group." Performative Allyship is Dead, Holiday Phillips, May 9, FORGE.

and

"a person or group that provides assistance and support in an ongoing effort, activity, or struggle."

6 Ways to Become a Better LGBTQ Ally, Francisco Palleres-Santiago, 6/27/19.

We in the church have always been called to be allies. We have the privilege and responsibility to use our hearts, our hands, our ears, our voices, our money. We can all Listen and Learn and Act in every facet of our lives.

How can we begin?

"Understanding an identity you don't share is a great way to start being a useful ally." VICE, How to Celebrate Pride Quietly, S. Bear Bergman, June 9, 2020

One of the wisest, most beautiful people I've ever met, wrote this advice for young people: Listen. Find people like yourself and listen. Find people unlike you, and

listen. Having an understanding of lots of different people will help you as you grow and change.

The area I want to focus on today in the church, is in our language. We have been on a long journey towards inclusive language – moving away from solely male gender nouns for God towards a fuller expression of God. And towards a fuller expression of human diversity, created in the image of God. There was a time when all human beings were referred to as ‘men;’ groups of people were spoken to as being ‘brethren.’ We now have hymns and prayers inviting “Brothers and sisters, men and women’ to worship, to gather. It is time to find new words, new expressions, to include all the people of God. Ken and I are discovering these --- you’ll hear us say, “Siblings,” for example. “Friends.” “People of faith.” “Children of God.”

I had the privilege to see and hear a video of middle school children who are part of a Genders & Sexualities Alliance who are working to create a supportive school community. They filmed a public service announcement, extending greetings to their classmates and teachers. Each of the greetings was welcoming and joyful and accepting, and intentionally used language that didn’t exclude anyone because of gender identity. “Hello learners!” “Good morning, students; hello, teachers,” “Hey, friends!”, “Welcome, everyone.”

We are all expanding our language, and in doing so, respecting the dignity of all persons. I am still learning how to do this. Recently I was filling out an online survey for a Presbyterian organization, Next Church, and it asked me which words I wanted to use to identify myself, and what were my preferred pronouns.

I’m cisgender, I typed she/her/hers. But I confess that had to look it up in order to know what to do.

Cisgender, I discovered, is most accessibly understood, in the prefix. “Trans” from the Latin is “across.” Like TransAtlantic, across the Atlantic. Transgender. Cis – c-i-s, is a corresponding prefix, “on the same side of.” One could say New York and Ohio are cisatlantic. I am cisgender: my sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with the biological sex assigned to me when I was born.

Writing down my pronouns, she/her/hers enables others to know how I would like to be addressed. When someone writes their pronouns, including they/them/theirs, it is my responsibility to use those pronouns as a sign of respect, and as an affirmation of how God is revealed in them.

Something else I needed to learn: gender expression and sexuality are different terms. I am, more specifically, cisgender, heterosexual.

More Light Presbyterians has a series of webinars that would be worth considering as part of our education. Because, as they describe these webinars, “learning to discuss the nuances of gender identity and sexual orientation provide a strong

foundation of welcome.” If we at Catonsville Presbyterian Church are going to really affirm our banner headline: WE CHOOSE WELCOME, then we need to truly understand how to do that.

There is more, much more that we need to do to LISTEN, LEARN and ACT.

We are called to work, to walk, with all of the people that God has formed in God’s creative diversity. We need to take risks. We need to speak boldly.

We need to confess. We need to keep going forward in welcoming and affirming all the people of God.

And as we all grow in these acts of love and support and resistance and change, we can commit to do that. Let’s start today with our words – our words in story and prayer and song.

I loved the opening hymn. I hope you did too because the language in it was especially vibrant. I’m so delighted that I discovered the writer/composer, Amanda Udis-Kessler and the website, [queersacredmusic](http://queersacredmusic.com).

We’re being given such a rich new vocabulary of music and language. Just hear again these words from “We Are Gathered,” which was written for our now on-line worship experience:

*As we tend to one another with our gifts and with our care,
Our community is strengthened through the faith and hope we share.*

*As our voices join together, may our song of peace resound.
May we offer in abundance all the grace that we have found.*

The words of the Psalm call out: *I am fearfully, wonderfully made.*

They are the title words of the song we’re about to sing – words of celebration and struggle written by Amanda Udis-Kessler. They are words that acknowledge the violence done to human beings. And they are words of courage that continue the journey and the fight.

It is our turn, today, for the church to sing these words. To offer strength. A resting place. A safe place. To be an ally. To take pride in the glory and the wonder of our shared humanity. To give praise to a God in whose image we are all created. And then, as we will sing in our closing hymn: We will walk with each other. We will walk side by side. We will guard each one’s dignity. We will save each one’s pride.

Today, 50 years after the first Pride marches, we walk on. We sing on.

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Our neighbor, Hillcrest Elementary just posted these words on its sign. May these words be our prayer and our calling:

LOVE RECOGNIZES NO BARRIERS. (Let us) THINK, ACT, LIVE WITH LOVE. (Amen.)