

Wonderfully Made
Psalm 139:1-18

Pride Sunday/ Fifth Sunday after Pentecost/ 26 June 2021

In many churches (certainly not all churches) these days, the Sunday nearest June 28 is known as Pride Sunday. More and more churches are marking this day every year. June 28 marks the beginning of the Stonewall Riots or Uprising, in 1969, when police raided the Stonewall Inn, a bar located in Greenwich Village that was a haven for New York City's gay, lesbian, and transgendered community. The raid was that evening violent. However, on that night the LGBT community decided to fight back against the police in an uprising that continued for the next couple of days, ending on July 3. Stonewall marks the start of the LGBTQ movement in the United States, fighting, demanding, advocating for equal rights, acceptance, and inclusion within American society, as well as within the life of the church. The church, for the most part, was late to this movement, although there were a handful of progressive theologians and pastors who were vocal in the 1960s and 1970s. Everything began to shift in the 1980s and 1990s as congregations were faced with its members, and members' children and grandchildren, along with pastors, dying from AIDS.

“Hospitality,” “welcome,” “inclusive,” “radical acceptance” became the watchwords, even code words of the liberal, progressive wing of the church called to minister to this marginalized and excluded segment of the society. Within the PCUSA, it was first [More Light Presbyterians](#) who tirelessly worked for LGBTQ inclusion and early on advocated for the ordination of LGBTQ members. Later, in the 1990s, when there was a formal ban on the ordination for LGBTQ members in the PCUSA and that dreaded paragraph was added to *Book of Order*, another group was organized, the [Covenant Network of Presbyterians](#), which represented the broad middle of the church, with a leadership that was primarily straight. Covenant Network joined ranks with More Light and other groups and together pushed for full LGBTQ (queer, for short) inclusion in the PCUSA.¹

It was a long, painful struggle for the church, especially for the queer community from 1996 to 2008. In that year, everything shifted in the denomination, we finally had the votes at the General Assembly to remove that dreaded paragraph, and later a simple majority of the presbyteries approved the changes in 2009. Presbyteries were then free to ordain open LGBTQ Christians. Our gifts for ministry were fully acknowledged, welcomed, and celebrated. Then the denomination wrestled with marriage equality, bringing about even more changes and deeper inclusion for the PCUSA. And there's more work to be done, especially around transgender inclusion and welcome. Remarkably, thankfully, the denomination now has an Office for Gender, Racial and Intercultural Justice, something we couldn't imagine ten years ago. We have come to understand that social justice causes in one area of the church directly impacts everything else. This is something we weren't conscious about when we started this work. The gospel calls us to a ministry of welcome, to serve the “least of these” (Matthew 25:31-45), to work on behalf of the marginalized, the bullied, the ridiculed, the rejected, those that are ostracized and “othered” and made to feel inferior, less-than, sinful...attitudes that far too many Christians still harbor toward the queer community.

As we know, all of this has been a long, difficult journey for the church. In my work with the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, serving on the board for fifteen years—one of the greatest joys of my ministry—listening to Presbyterians at GA's, at conferences and meetings across the church and nation, one thing became clear to me regarding LGBTQ acceptance and inclusion: while we might all be on the same journey, we're at different stages of awareness, we're not all walking together, and this includes people who are gay and coming to terms with their sexual orientation and identity. There are different stages in the coming out process—everybody's experience is different, and *we must never underestimate the enormous spiritual, emotional, psychological anguish involved in coming out, even today*. It might be easier for many teenagers and young adults today, thank God, but it's never easy. And there are different stages in learning to love someone who is coming out or is gay, especially if you've never put yourself in the shoes of someone who is gay. The more people who come out and courageously live lives of authenticity and integrity, the more people, especially those who are straight, will have to come to terms with their own fears and feelings. When debates about LGBTQ inclusion and acceptance move from discussions about an issue, a theological or biblical issue to an issue related to someone with a face, especially the face of someone you love, then everything begins to change.

I will always be thankful for the way that this congregation accepted and loved me when I shared The Letter, my coming out letter to the congregation. And I will be forever grateful to the Personnel Committee and to the Session at that time (you know who are) that listened to me, encouraged me to share my story, and then stood beside me 100% when the letter started to arrive in the mail. I remember seeing copies of the letter and the mailing envelopes arranged in piles on the table in the conference room, in the Church House. Everyone there that morning putting the mailing together prayed over each envelope. And then as I watched all the bins with the letter leave the Church House to go to the post office, I was nervous and wondered, "What have I done?" Two days later, the phone started to ring at the Church House. I braced myself and said, "Here we go." The first call was from a long-time member who wanted to talk with me. Shirley put her through to me. I picked up that phone and I heard, "Hi, Ken. Your letter arrived today. I'm just calling to say we love you hon." That was it. After worship on the first Sunday after the letter went out, a Sunday when for the first time in my life I stood free in the pulpit, free from knowing that I was hiding a part of myself (I'll never forget the power of that feeling on that morning), one of our young adults came by my study, someone who had never come by before that day. This person knocked on the door, came in, just stood there and said, "So, God really does love us rainbow kids?" And I said, "Yes."²

"I praise you," the psalmist prays to God, "for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works..." (Ps. 139:17). It has taken the church a long time—too long—to recognize that its LGBTQ+ children are indeed fearfully and wonderfully made, a long time to celebrate our gifts and honor our experience and listen for the way God is at work in our lives. And today we celebrate and give thanks for the LGBTQ+ members and their families here at CPC. Yesterday's Catonsville Family Pride Event, a first for this community, was a beautiful celebration and I'm grateful that it happened on our grounds with the church and its steeple in clear view—and rainbow flags everywhere. So many expressed to me their deep appreciation and thanks to CPC for hosting this event.

It pains me, though, to consider the enormous amount of hurt and pain the church has caused its rainbow kids because it was too slow to realize this - that we are loved by God, that we have gifts to share, so much pain caused by fear and an absence of grace and compassion. What authority does the church have to say who is or isn't "wonderfully made"? What authority does the church have to say how and in whom the Holy Spirit chooses to dwell, and even calls some to ministry?

It took me a long time to accept my acceptance, to quote Paul Tillich (1886-1965).³ I had no role models. I had to work through things alone. I became very depressed and didn't think I could live with all of it. I couldn't imagine life outside that closet and so I went even deeper into depression, deeper in the closet. I lived with denial. I ran from myself, hated myself, hated a part of myself. I threw myself into work, into academic achievements, into a PhD—which was also problematic because my research was on the writings of James Loder, my mentor, who did not support the ordination of gays and lesbians, who wrote some misguided and hurtful things about the gay community. But because I considered him to be the most brilliant person I had ever met; how could he be wrong? I met with him for counseling, he knew my struggles. As you know, I'm grateful to him for so much...he taught me how to honor my dreams, particularly a dream that changed my life and continues to shape my life and my work and training in Jungian psychology. About a year before he died, I saw him in Princeton and I told him that when it came to understanding the gay experience, he was wrong.⁴ Jim heard me, he said he would reconsider some of the things that he wrote. But that never happened.

Early on, I felt that my call was to teach and to preach. My personal life or happiness could be set aside. I became a house divided and we all know what Jesus said about what happens to a house divided against itself (Matthew 12:22-28). When I came to Maryland, after living through a painful episode at the church in Mendham, which was divided over gay ordination and was shocked by what I heard what people say, people I loved but didn't know my full story, I decided I needed to take more responsibility for my happiness, that I needed to befriend myself, make peace with myself, come out to myself, step into myself, step into my life, with pride, I guess...but more importantly, for me, at least, with *grace*. In time I met Mark and we've been together now for twenty years.

But what about ministry? It wasn't safe to come out. Do I stay in the Presbyterian Church? Should I move to the United Church of Christ (UCC)? Leave ministry altogether and teach? Through the support of very close friends and family members and excellent psychologists and hundreds of hours of therapy over more than thirty years, and wrestling with all of this biblically and theologically, I realized two important things.⁵

First, I'm Presbyterian through and through. For generations my family has been Presbyterian. It's in my blood, my DNA. I'm a child of this church, I'm a product of this church, this is *my* church—and I'm not going anywhere.

Second, God's call in my life was never just to a part of me but to all of me. I came to see that my experience of suffering, of pain, of shame, of being bullied, of getting picked on in high school for not being like everyone else (I knew I was different), my sensitivity to the needs of others because of my own experience—all of this took on greater meaning for me. The old

proverb is true: “Be kind, everyone is fighting a hard battle” that you know little or nothing about. I came to see the value of empathy. All of this has helped me (I hope) become a better pastor. Claiming my experience in this way has given me gifts for ministry.

Something interesting happened this past week. I was typing out the sermon title and I typed *Wounderfully* Made. I quickly caught this Freudian slip—or, better, *Jungian* slip. And I smiled. Yes, we are made by our wounds. My wounds have made me, and by God’s grace, I have worked with, I have made and I’m making something with my wounds. For this, too, is part of the call, and this too is *grace*. This is why, in part, I preach and teach so much about experience, about the importance of honoring, valuing one’s personal experience. It’s also one of the key reasons why I’m so interested in psychology, personal healing and growth and transformation.

Irenaeus (b.130) said, in the second century, “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.” I believe this with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I believe this is the Christian life, to experience this grace, know it personally, and then live it out in community by helping others come fully alive, to help others step more fully into their lives, with integrity, authenticity, joy, pride, and grace.

Like many of my age who are gay, I am grateful that for many teens and young adults today being gay is not a stigma. We imagine how our lives would have been different if we came of age with greater understanding, acceptance, and grace, feeling safe to be who we are, free to love. While this it is true, it’s much easier today, and there is still so much more work to be done for our youth. At yesterday’s Family Pride Event I spoke with several parents and heard about some their challenges. According to [The Trevor Project](#), LGBTQ young people are 120% more likely to be homeless. 40% of homeless teenagers in the U.S. are LGBTQ. The stigma and shame for being gay in Hispanic, African-American, and Asian-American communities are pervasive. LGBT youth seriously contemplate suicide at almost three times the rate of heterosexual youth. Each episode of LGBT victimization, such as physical or verbal harassment or abuse, increases the likelihood of self-harming behavior by 2.5 times on average.⁶ There’s still work for us to do.

The church has something to offer youth, young adults, all people, whether straight or gay. We can offer the welcome and kindness of Christ, a community—when the church is truly being church—that provides a setting, a safe place for people to love and be loved, to step into, live into one’s full humanity, to come fully alive. For doesn’t everyone need to know that they are fearfully and wonderfully—and, yes, even *wounderfully*—made?



¹ For more information about More Light Presbyterians, see: <https://mlp.org/>. And to learn about the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, see: <https://covnetpres.org/>.

² I was given permission to share this story.

³ From Paul Tillich's sermon "You Are Accepted," in his collection of sermons *Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948).

⁴ I included my critique of Loder in my doctoral dissertation and later in my book on Loder's work, *The Relational Theology of James E. Loder: Encounter and Conviction* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

⁵ There are many excellent biblical-theological resources available today, thankfully. I recommend: James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (Convergent Books, 2015),

⁶ The Trevor Project: <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/preventing-suicide/facts-about-suicide/>