

Sermon: June 2, 2019 – John 17: 20-26
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

When I was growing up, “proud” was a difficult word, at least in the circle of modesty I grew up in. It was OK to tell someone you were *proud of them*, and we could be *proud of our war veterans*, in the way we’ve been hearing this past week at the 75th anniversary of D-Day – but in the opinions of my family and my Church, to be “*proud*” of *one’s self* was to be a “prideful” person, and that definitely wasn’t good.

So I admit that there is a part of me that still hears those old echoes on this, the first-ever United-Church-wide “Pride Sunday.” But the echoes only last for a few moments, for other experiences quickly step forward to remind me of how powerful it is, when those who have been intentionally and systematically repressed and diminished, turn the tables on that oppression, and express pride in the wonderfulness that is them.

The first time that I saw a group of people take an insult and turn it into a badge of empowerment, was when we were living in small-town Saskatchewan. Our town of 1,500 residents had a rather large population of folks with developmental disabilities. A number of them lived independently and had jobs around town, but many lived in group homes and worked at Mallard Industries, a supervised work and training site which had a woodworking shop, the local recycling depot, and a thriving wedding decoration business. At the end of the day, a bunch of workers would walk from the workshop to the local burger and ice cream place, and because they worked at *Mallard* Industries, some mean-spirited locals would point and shout “hey look, here come the ducks!” which the shouters thought was just hilarious.

At first the workers and helpers weren’t sure what to do about it, until the day that one of them decided to say, “I’m a duck”! Then a chorus of “here come the ducks, here come the ducks” started among the workers and before long there were even “here come the ducks” sweatshirts. What started out as an insult got turned into a term of pride. Am I a duck? Yeah, I’m a duck!

The power of that expression of pride, was related to both the level of mean-spiritedness intended by the insulter, and the vulnerability of those being targeted. And over the years, we have seen so many similar reversals, when people who had been specifically belittled and limited by the powerful and the entitled, not only overturned the belittlement, but used it to name and claim their pride in their identity.

I think back to the 1970s slogan, “Black is Beautiful, Baby,” which arose specifically in response to the heavy shaming of African Americans for the tone of their skin, and the shape of their bodies and facial features. Perhaps the most visible turnaround within this, was in hair styles. Instead of continuing the widespread practice of hair straightening in order to fit in with the expectations of the dominant culture, African Americans started letting their hair grow out and in the early 70s, the bigger the afro, the better. Black was indeed, beautiful.

About 1900 years earlier than that, followers of Jesus used the terms “saints,” “disciples” or “brethren” to identify themselves, while the term “Christian” was first coined in the city of Antioch as a derogatory term. This was an effort to portray the believers as people worshipping and perhaps even idolizing Christ, with a side goal of segregating them to one part of the city; so to be called a Christian was, at first, to be labelled and limited. But with time, the group absorbed the term Christian, and transformed it into an important and beloved term of self-identification. In the same way that the Roman tool of terror and execution – the cross – became a visual statement of God’s promise of emancipation from any power that tries to lessen the holy gift of life, the name “Christian” took on a whole new life when it was claimed, and turned around.

And today, we have the first official Church-wide “Gay Pride Sunday” of the United Church of Canada, celebrating the lives of our LGBTQ-2Spirited friends and family. To think of where this

fits in to the pattern of oppression and reversal that I've been talking about, I invite you to think back to when you were a teenager. At that age, could you have imagined that there would EVER be a time when the terms Gay and Pride would be used side by side, so much so that when I see the word PRIDE on its own, I assume it's talking about the LGBTQ2 community? I certainly couldn't. My Junior High experience was one of ducking for cover, where ANYTHING that set a boy apart from the norms of being athletic, tough, unemotional, non-artistic and non-academic got interpreted as homosexual expression, and where anyone who actually WAS gay or lesbian was targeted and verbally and physically abused on a daily basis. At least in my suburban 1970s experience, there was not one aspect of being gay that would have been considered a source of pride, by the dominant culture.

Fast forward to 2019, and this cross-stitch sampler happily adorns the walls of my lesbian daughter and her girlfriend: HOMO SWEET HOME. A whole bunch of insults (Queer, Homo, Butch, Dyke) have been happily co-opted by the queer community as terms of identity and endearment. And the word PRIDE – *PRIDE* – is now a term that the LGBTQ2 community can legitimately use for itself within the broader community and even in Church. There is a growing sense that we're ALL somewhere on the sexual spectrum, whether we view that as something fixed or something fluid, and that our identity as sexual beings is not something that needs to be hidden under a cloak of secrecy or quietly conformed to societal norms.

What I cannot lose sight of, however, is that this process of sexual inclusiveness is not anywhere near as widespread as we would want to be, in the world or in the Church. A 2017 report in The Guardian noted that "Homosexuality is still a crime in 72 countries. And even countries with no legal barriers, such as the US, record shocking levels of hate crimes – there were 53 transgender murders from 2013 to 2015 and not a single one was prosecuted." That report goes on to list the seven most unsafe countries for LGBTQ people, and these nations are not all clustered together, they're from Africa and Europe and Asia and Central America. And this February, the United Methodist Church, the largest mainline denomination in the USA, "voted to strengthen its ban on gay and lesbian clergy and same-sex marriages". (as per NY Times) That was a devastating pronouncement for many of our clergy friends in that denomination, and brings the real threat of a Church schism. Taken on a global sense, we still live in a world where it is not only allowed but encouraged for nations and Churches to limit the rights of sexual minorities. And *that*, I am *not* proud of.

Something else I cannot lose sight of, is where we would picture Jesus in the midst of all this. We know, from the gospel accounts and from tradition, that his circle of women and men was filled with people from various marginal groups, subsistence-level fisherfolk and loan sharks, political activists and prostitutes. And in the midst of that diversity, across the ages, Jesus prays that God will bring together and sanctify ALL who follow in his way, "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You" (John 17:21 – words reflected, in Latin, on the UC Crest). There's no thought here that all will be identical, but all will seek unity in Christ and see one another as equals in Christ. In those early days, the vast majority of those drawn to the teachings and community of Jesus were from the margins of society, people disempowered by the rules and norms of the day, and in many ways *that is still the drawing power of Jesus*. Many of us are drawn to Christ, not just because it's the family tradition or because it seems a sensible thing to do, but because we recognize the way that in Christ, our hurts and our brokenness are held and transformed in love. In Christ, I never have to pretend I am someone I am not.

As we look at our present and our future as a congregation, we have a question to ask ourselves: Where do we see ourselves in all this? That, basically, is the question asked by the Affirming process. Is this a place of welcome for folks who have been marginalized? And specifically, as many Churches happily exclude LGBTQ2 involvement, repudiate same-sex

marriage, and refuse to have gay or lesbian clergy or lay leaders, what do WE say? As some Churches – and nations – try to narrow down the range of allowable sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions, do we acknowledge that this exclusion is contrary to the broad circle that Jesus gathered around him? Yes, to be an affirming congregation talks about inclusion in much broader ways than just the inclusion of sexual minorities, and that’s why we’ll be spending the whole month of June looking at various aspects of this wide, complex task...but it starts with learning how to speak openly about who we are – as spiritual beings and as sexual beings – and learning how to create a safe place for a population that has been made to feel anything but safe or welcome by the Church as a whole. It starts by saying that WE don’t understand how a Church that follows Jesus could explicitly exclude people based on their sexuality, so we’re going to explicitly welcome and be enriched by the joyous diversity of sexualities that God has placed within humanity.

I don’t see this being a big stretch for this congregation. We already perform same-sex marriages. And you’re good at welcoming! So let’s explicitly, overtly state to the community around it, that we really mean it when we invite ALL people to join with us in celebrating God’s wonderful gift of life. By taking on the designation of being an Affirming Ministry, we commit ourselves to keep learning and growing so that we can authentically say to the community around us, “All of you are welcome” and, as was said in the welcoming words at The Universal Christ conference, “All of you IS welcome.” Every bit of who God has created you to be, is welcome here. All of you are welcome, and all of you IS welcome, as we worship and serve and learn and share at Christ’s table.

On this Pride Sunday, and in this month when we really engage what it would mean for us to be an Affirming Ministry, may Christ’s heart of love and inclusion be known. Amen.

References cited/for further reading:

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