

## PRIDE! THE GREATEST GIFT

Sermon by Audette Fulbright

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All Souls Church, NYC

“I remember when someone threw a Molotov cocktail, I thought, “My god, the revolution is here. The revolution is finally here!” So thought Sylvia Rivera, transgender rights activist and a veteran of the Stonewall Uprising.

This year, New York hosts WorldPride, and recognizes the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, that trans and queer liberation uprising that marked a turning point in LGBTQ+ rights and activism. But if you don't quite know the history, you may miss a lot. And that would be a loss, indeed.

But before we drop back in history, a brief litany:

2019: Seven black transwomen have been murdered as of this June. The Trump administration announces it will allow federally-funded adoption agencies to discriminate against same-sex couples; a ban on transfolx serving in the military goes into effect; protections against discriminating against trans people in HUD housing or emergency shelters is removed. In May, the administration published a proposed rule that would allow health care providers to refuse to treat transgender patients.

That's just this year. It isn't a list that includes the Pulse Nightclub massacre, or Betsy DeVos' education department systematically removing protections for LGBTQIA and disabled children. It really is just a very top line view. Still, it is important context.

But let's go back in time now, to 1969. I know many of you remember 1969, which means you remember that it wasn't a time when LGBT folks were out, loud, and proud. There were laws that criminalized most aspects of LGBTQ lives. Finding a safe and welcoming community was difficult in most places; even in New York, there were significant challenges, but there was a thriving underground club scene, among which was the Stonewall Inn. The Stonewall was a seedy club, lacking a liquor license, run by the Mafia. And, it was a club where the most marginalized, even in the gay community, could gather -- and did.

The way these things worked back then, laws were written so that a club where two same-sex people were dancing together, or where a person in drag was being served alcohol, could be raided, patrons arrested, and the club even shut down. As a result, the club owners paid off policemen, and had a system of being alerted in advance to raids, which usually happened early in the evening, so the crowds could party more safely in the later hours. On June 28 of 1969, the Stonewall Inn was raided – which surprised the owner, since the place had been raided only two days before. As patrons were being arrested and hauled out, a butch-identified lesbian, Storme DeLarverie, said her handcuffs were too tight. She was clubbed by an officer, and the crowd, instead of backing off as violence escalated, pressed forward, at first jeering and throwing small items like pennies, but progressing in time to bricks, bottles, and more. The police were unprepared; they called for backup. Rioting broke fully out; the bar itself was set on fire, though it was doused.

Protests continued for days. The LGBTQ community, spurred to action by the protests, organized. They developed organizations, strategies, and built new community based on pursuing public change. A year later, on the anniversary of the Stonewall raid that set off the protests, New York saw the Christopher Street Liberation Parade – a parade that brought LGBTQ folk out of the shadows and into the street, to show their pride and commitment to change. Other communities held solidarity parades with the Christopher Street parade. These were the genesis of today's Pride parades.

We have seen much progress over the years. Within Unitarian Universalism, we took our first General Assembly resolution to work for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi rights in 1970 – one year after Stonewall. In 1969, a UU minister, James Stoll, came out as gay. Unfortunately, he never worked as a minister again. But by 1979, we ordained openly gay men, some of whom are still serving – and we have been ordaining openly LGBTQ folk ever since. 1989, we began our Welcoming Congregation programs, to educate congregations and create genuinely safe and welcoming sanctuaries for LGBTQ+ folks. All Souls was one of the earliest congregations to attain that status. It came as the congregation had determined not to turn away, as so many had, from the devastation of the AIDS crisis. All Souls sought to educate New Yorkers about AIDS, through a public awareness program, and worked to foster humane responses and care to people with AIDS and those living with HIV.

We have marriage equality - for now, and we have seen a sea change in people's acceptance of those of us in the LGBTQ+ community. As Unitarian Universalists, it's embedded in our faith practice that we see the worth and dignity in everyone, and so we have been at the forefront of all these issues. But we are human, too, and full of human failings. We make mistakes large and small. Just recently, the magazine of our faith - the *UU World* - published an article about trans folk, written by a non-trans woman. It was riddled with basic errors, and it centered the experience of non-trans people, implying that trans identity was something new, an oddity that non-trans folk were just learning to "deal with."

My colleague the Rev. Sean Dennison, a good friend who is also the godfather of my older daughter Ember, and who came out as a transman in 1996, wrote recently:

It turns out there was a lot of harmful information in the article. As transgender and nonbinary people began to respond, the list of problems grew and grew. As it did, I began to notice that one deep assumption connected each mistake to the next: the assumption that we are just beginners at all this "trans stuff." And as I heard people respond with, "But it's all so new . . . how can you expect us to get it right?" and "Don't shame people for not knowing better," I remembered when I'd heard it before.

I've heard it when someone asked that others stop relying on words and metaphors that exclude disabled people. I've heard it when white UUs have been asked to practice decentering whiteness and include voices and practices that honor black people, indigenous people, and/or people of color. I've heard it when discussing the possibility of updating a reading that was written before inclusive language became standard. I've heard it when I ask my mother again, after twenty-two years, to call me by my name and use my correct pronoun. Whenever I or any of my friends and beloveds ask for real change that challenges the norms and traditions of Unitarian Universalist culture, I hear the refrain: "We are new at this! It is too hard! It disrupts everything and makes me uncomfortable!"

As I look out at the world and wonder about Unitarian Universalism's place in it, I am more and more convinced that we must stop excusing ourselves from the world- and life-changing work of justice by claiming that we don't know what to do because we are beginners. There is no excuse for refusing to learn, when there are teachers all around us. The person saying, "Hey, call me by my name and, yes, my pronoun is they," is your teacher. The person saying, "It's not good enough to quote all white men in your sermon," is your teacher. The person saying, "I can't get into your building and, when I do, you ignore me," is your teacher. The person saying, "It's not about your comfort," is your teacher. The teachers and lessons have been here for decades. It's time to learn.<sup>1</sup>

This is why Pride matters for all of us. Because we have to take care of one another. The Rev. Theresa I. Soto, who also just happens to be Sean's spouse, puts it this way, "All of us need all of us to survive." Part of being able to take care of one another is to understand the challenges each of us faces. We can't say, "I don't care whether or not you're gay, I like you whatever you are." To say that is to actually say, "I neither know nor care about the harms you face. I am uninterested in your struggles, and you can't count on me to stand by you when you face injustice, just for being who you are." That is not how we take care of one another. We need to understand each other's experience of the world, take into account the risks we each face, have compassion for the wounds we carry, and stand together when the tides of inequity rise.

The path of progress never runs straight, nor even gaily forward. It is fraught with setups and upsets, it brings times of joy and celebration, but it also runs through the valley of the shadow of death. Ram Dass reminds us, "We're all just walking each other home." Can we remember it that way? "We're all just walking each other home." To do that, we need to know where each of us lives, who they love, and why it matters.

This is why Pride should matter to all of us. It is the celebration of people who have known what it is to be despised and outcast, and who refused to allow hate to define us or have the last word. It is the example of people who, in the face of intolerance and fear, stood up and fought back. It is the right response to anyone who would deny your basic humanity: reclaim your pride. Know that who you are is worthy, whole, needed. It is to come to a table set by friends, with hands gentle with love, when we are sorrowing, lost or need to rest.

In closing, I want to share this poem by the Rev. Hannah Villnave, who wrote:

*People sometimes ask:  
Is Pride a protest  
Or a party?  
And the answer is  
Of course  
Yes.  
And why not?  
Why not  
Rejoice as we resist  
Dance as we demand change  
Celebrate as we create community that delights in  
All of who we are?*

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<sup>1</sup> "It's Time to Learn," by Sean Dennison, *UU World*, Summer 2019 <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/time-learn>

*So bring all of that  
With you this morning.  
Bring your policy demands  
Bring your glitter  
Bring your supreme court broken heart  
Bring your rainbow socks  
Bring the emptiness you feel  
For our siblings gone too soon.  
Bring your Gloria Estefan remix  
Bring your tender hope for change  
Bring your most garish eyeshadow  
Bring your spirit, tattered and battered  
By a world that seems insistent on  
Choosing fear and hate.  
Gather up all these things  
And bring them here  
To a place where we don't  
Have to shoulder these burdens  
Or celebrate these joys  
Alone.  
Come, let us [go out in Pride],  
Together.*