

Pride 3.0

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reading

Our reading is actually a dialogue from a scene on the popular television show “The West Wing.” With apologies for American content, I hope you’ll recognize the point it makes.

In the scene, President Josiah Bartlett has agreed to see Dr. Jenna Jacobs in the Oval Office. Her visit is an attempt to secure his support for her views against homosexuality which she widely shares in her weekly news advice columns and radio show.

President Josiah Bartlet: You're Dr. Jenna Jacobs, right?

Dr. Jenna Jacobs: Yes, Sir.

President Josiah Bartlet: Forgive me, Dr. Jacobs. Are you an M.D.?

Dr. Jenna Jacobs: A Ph.D.

President Josiah Bartlet: A Ph.D.

Dr. Jenna Jacobs: Yes, Sir.

President Josiah Bartlet: Psychology?

Dr. Jenna Jacobs: No, Sir.

President Josiah Bartlet: Theology?

Dr. Jenna Jacobs: No.

President Josiah Bartlet: Social work?

Dr. Jenna Jacobs: I have a Ph.D. in English literature.

President Josiah Bartlet: I'm asking 'cause on your show, people call in for advice and you go by the name Dr. Jacobs on your show, and I didn't know if maybe your listeners were confused by that and assumed you had advanced training in psychology, theology or health care.

Dr. Jenna Jacobs: I don't believe they are confused. No, Sir.

President Josiah Bartlet: Good. I like your show. I like how you call homosexuality an abomination...

Dr. Jenna Jacobs: I don't say homosexuality is an abomination, Mr. President. The Bible does.

President Josiah Bartlet: Yes it does. Leviticus.

Dr. Jenna Jacobs: 18:22.

President Josiah Bartlet: Chapter and verse. I wanted to ask you a couple of questions while I have you here. I'm interested in selling my youngest daughter into slavery as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. She's a Georgetown sophomore, speaks fluent Italian, always cleared the table when it was her turn. What would a good price for her be?

While thinking about that, can I ask another? My Chief of Staff ... insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly says he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself or is it okay to call the police?

Here's one that's really important because we've got a lot of sports fans in this town: touching the skin of a dead pig makes one unclean. Leviticus 11:7. If they promise to wear gloves, can [our] Washington [team] still play football? Can Notre Dame? Can West Point?

Does the whole town really have to be together to stone my brother John for planting different crops side by side?

Can I burn my mother in a small family gathering for wearing garments made from two different threads?

Think about those questions, would you?

Sermon: Pride 3.0

It all started with a raid that turned into a riot.

Forty-five years ago this week,
police visited the Stonewall Inn in Manhattan for the last time.

In the wee hours of June 28, 1969,
police arrived, as they often did, to harass and arrest patrons of the bar.

The owners of the club were part of the city's mafia.

Typically, they put off raids by paying bribes to the police.

At other times, their payments at least bought them a tip-off
that a late-night visit was coming.

The relationship between the bar owners and their clientele
was one of convenience, when it wasn't inconvenient.

The patrons who paid the hefty \$3 cover charge to get in
had to be known to the bouncer or, to the bouncer's eye, be clearly queer.

After they were inspected through the peephole and admitted entrance to the
bar, everyone had to sign a book in order to keep up the appearance
of this being a private club. Apparently, no one signed their own name.

Many, once they were inside,
would head to the washroom for a change of clothes
and emerge a short while later with a different gender identity.

The Stonewall was the rare place where queer people—
be they gay men, lesbians, trans folks, drag queens, or street hustlers—
could be together, drink, and even dance,
though the privilege of such a place
came with the cost of the constant threat of arrest and public disgrace.

Often, just as a raid was beginning, the owners would alter the lighting.

The sudden shift to bright white lights was a warning
to step away from a same-sex partner if dancing or touching,
a sign to the less masculine men to “butch it up,”
a signal to “femme it up” for the more masculine women.

In short, the light was a hint that it was time to put back on the facades
that most everyone lived behind
beyond the doors of the bar.

And, yet, something was different about that summer night in June.

That evening, when the police entered the bar,
lined people up and demanded they show their ID’s,
many of the once-compliant patrons simply refused to play along.

Female police officers would typically take people dressed as women
to the washroom to verify their sex, and if their sex didn’t match
their identification, arrest them on the spot.

But that night, these women also just said no.

When they realized that things weren’t going according to plan,
the police decided to take everyone inside the bar, all 200 of them,
down to the station for booking.

They called for back-up and ordered several patrol wagons
to transport all the patrons, the staff, and owners.

While they were waiting, the police decided to let some people go,
when it was clear they wouldn’t be arrested.

But those patrons, when released, simply gathered outside
and waited to see what would happen.

Within mere minutes, a crowd of patrons and passersby
swelled on the sidewalk.

As each new person emerged from the bar, they were heckled or applauded.

When the owners and employees were put in the first patrol wagon,

the crowd cheered wildly.

In a fit of inspiration, someone shouted, “Gay power!” and others started singing “We Shall Overcome.”

There was a tense, strange mix of hostility and good humour in the air.

After a police officer shoved a transgender woman, she hit him on the head with her purse and the crowd began to boo.

When word spread through the crowd that the patrons remaining inside were being beaten by the police, they started to throw beer bottles.

Soon, a “stone butch” lesbian came out screaming she’d been hit with a police baton for complaining the handcuffs on her wrists were too tight.

For ten minutes, once outside, she swore up a storm as she scuffled with a team of four police officers.

She reportedly looked around at the crowd and said to them, “Why don’t you guys do something?”

When the officers picked her up and hurled her into the wagon, the crowd instantly became a mob and did just that.

Chaos broke out as the crowd swelled to more than 500.

People were shoved to the ground, bottles and rocks and bricks sailed through the air, drag queens in handcuffs escaped from the patrol wagon, and some in the crowd tried to turn the vehicle on its side.

In the midst of all of this, the police retreated inside, behind the broken windows of the bar for their own safety.

When the crowd started hurling burning garbage through the windows, the police emerged with pistols drawn.

Soon, reinforcements arrived and they started to march slowly, in an effort to push the crowds back.

The crowd formed lines of their own and started singing and kicking—as in a kick-line,
as though they were the Rockettes of Radio City Music Hall.

Last Sunday, Kate Chung shared the quote on her t-shirt
by Emma Goldman, who said she didn't want to be part of a revolution
if it didn't include dancing.

Needless to say, Emma would have loved that night outside the Stonewall.

The next day, the local newspaper, *The Village Voice*, described the scene: “A stagnant situation there brought on some gay tomfoolery in the form of a chorus line facing the line of helmeted and club-carrying cops. Just as the line got into a full kick routine, the [police] advanced again and cleared the crowd of screaming gay power[-]ites down Christopher [Street] to Seventh Avenue.”

By 4:00am the streets were quiet. The world, though, would never be the same.

This rag-tag collection of queer people had fought back.

They made it clear they had had enough.

And for the first time had garnered a taste
of what fighting for their own dignity really meant.

A riot followed the next night and a few days later.
In time, the police backed off raiding bars in the City of New York.

And queer people began to organize.

Meetings were called, posters printed,
and long contentious discussions held about strategy.

While there had been a number of “homophile” groups
meeting for a few years, and some even staging quiet protests here and there,
Stonewall marked a turning point away from timidity.

The following year, on June 28, 1970,
the first Gay Pride March was held in New York City, while other cities

in the US and around the world held their own commemorations.

That summer there was a demonstration of 100 people in Ottawa to mark the first anniversary of the decriminalization of homosexuality—that defining moment for Canada when Trudeau famously said that: “the state has no place in the bedrooms of the nation.”

In Toronto, that same year, the city’s first queer groups organized a picnic and for much of the following two decades held “Gay Days” or marches and other demonstrations to build a more visible identity, to advocate for inclusion in the Ontario Human Rights Code, to resist police crackdowns on gay bathhouses, and draw attention to the impact of AIDS on the gay community.

It was a tumultuous time of confrontation and pushback in Toronto.

Finally, though, in 1987, the Human Rights Code was amended to include sexual orientation.

In time, City Council would proclaim Pride Day in the city, the Supreme Court would rule in favour of lesbian and gay people having equal rights, equal marriage would become the law of the land, and, at least until recently, Toronto mayors made a point of marching in the parade.

Across those 45 years, the legal landscape and social position of much of the queer community has been dramatically transformed.

There is much to celebrate, much to be grateful for—much for which we, queer people and straight allies, can be proud of.

And, much that we, for our part, can take pride in as Unitarians.

And, yet, I and at least a few others question what Pride has become, and wonder whether an over-the-top party every year is really the most meaningful way to honour all that’s been accomplished.

We must never forget that the origins of Pride, which we celebrate this week with the world, was born of protest and rebellion—a fight for equality and dignity for all.

I recall my first Pride Parade.

It was in Dallas, Texas in 1990, exactly twenty years after the first.

And, for me, shortly after I had been rejected by my own family upon coming out.

My friends and I marched, in the buckle of the Bible Belt, because our sexual identities made our intimate lives illegal.

And we marched because our friends were dying in droves all around us of AIDS, at a time when there was little hope in sight.

Even with a strong streak of protest involved in my own experience, I can now better appreciate the stories I've heard from the generation older than mine, about Pride in my day being quite different from theirs.

They told me that I couldn't imagine all they had gone through. And they complained that my generation didn't appreciate what they had worked to achieve.

As an aside, all my life I've felt that I was born twenty years later than I should have been. . . !

Still, I was at least conceived in the 60's, and, as best as I can tell, right around the time of the Stonewall Riots.

So, I'd like to thank my parents that, give or take a week or two, I'm roughly the age of Pride!

But, maybe that's why I now relate to my elders' lament about Pride losing its punch.

I don't want to begrudge anyone their party—which I call Pride 2.0.

But I'm glad that it seems, that after several years of the party, we are now moving toward what I hope will become Pride 3.0: a celebration of all that has been achieved, *and* a deepening commitment to address all that has not.

There remains work to do in Canada.

As we gather today, Bill C-279 remains stalled in the Senate, even after gaining the support of the House of Commons in a free-vote last year.

This bill, which in one shape or another has been making its way through Parliament for the better part of a decade, will, when it finally becomes law, protect transgender Canadians from hate crimes under the Criminal Code and ensure their full equality under the Human Rights Act.

That can't happen too soon.

And there obviously remains work to do in the wider world, especially on the human rights front.

With a few hiccups, Canada, even under a conservative government, has taken a largely leading role on the international stage when it comes to advocating for the rights of queer people.

It seems clear that in the years ahead, queer rights will form a fault line between cultures around the globe.

Already that's been clear in the response to the Sochi Olympic Games.

And, it's been clear in the tensions between Western democracies and various African nations, in particular, when they've passed the most draconian legislation, often called "Kill the Gays" laws.

It's hard to know where all of this will go in the years ahead, but the movement that started in a Greenwich Village bar has gone global and it will not stop.

Now, from the relative safety we have in Canada, we're not unlike the patrons standing outside the bar that summer night, just as that butch lesbian looks around and says, "Why don't you guys do something?"

That woman's name is seemingly lost to history. But her ever-pertinent question is not.

Forty-five years on, it's timely to ask what that something we might do is.

I believe it is the work of increasing the sum total of love and justice in this world.

That articulation may not have been front of mind
for the people standing outside the Stonewall Inn all those years ago.

But it was at the heart of what they were seeking to do—as it is for us.
The call of our faith is to stand on the side of love and justice.

And by that, I am guided by the words of Martin Luther King, who said:
“When I speak of love I am not speaking
of some sentimental and weak response.
I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen
as the supreme unifying principle of life.”

As Unitarians, we have come to see and labour for
the ever-widening embrace of that principled love,
not merely accepting or tolerating people who are different,
but endeavouring, when we are at our best,
to cherish them for whoever they are and whoever they love.

In recent years, the widening of that embrace has brought a lot of letters with
it.

I’ll admit that I’m sometimes stumped by the acronym used to define the
community that now celebrates and is celebrated at Pride.

It’s grown from simply gay or gay and lesbian to now be: LGBTTIQQ2SA.

It’s an acronym of inclusion used to speak to the broad array of identities
lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender,
intersex, queer, questioning, two-spirited, and allies.

In other words, it’s potentially everyone. It potentially includes all of us.

Holly Near, the writer of the song we’ll sing as our final hymn,
“We Are a Gentle, Angry People,” said that when she wrote it as a poignant
protest song to be sung after the assassination of Harvey Milk,
the first openly gay person elected to public office,
she simply wrote the line, “we are gay and straight together....,”
but as other people wanted to see themselves included—
and didn’t find the word “gay” to be their word,
she struggled to find a way to fit everyone in.

What she came up with, eventually, though, is perfect, and I'd ask that we sing it together when we come to that line in the hymn.

Rather than "we are gay and straight," let's sing her new words: "We are all in this together..."

Because we are.

The story of Pride is a universal story.

For we are all a little bit queer sometime.

We are all a tad different—and every one of us has known the sting of exclusion that can come with that.

Pride is an invitation to us all to live the life we're given.

To emerge from whatever closets that would keep us hidden, to be our truest selves.

To embrace our place in the great human rainbow and delight in the wonder of how we're each so wonderfully made.

And to celebrate the enduring truth that every person is a child of the universe to be cherished for the great gift that they are.

In this week as we welcome the world to celebrate Pride in our city, may we use our very lives to build bridges of understanding around the globe and close to home.

May we take our place in the long line of people who have laboured in the cause of love and justice by dancing our way through the revolution that is still and ever unfolding.

Blessed Be.