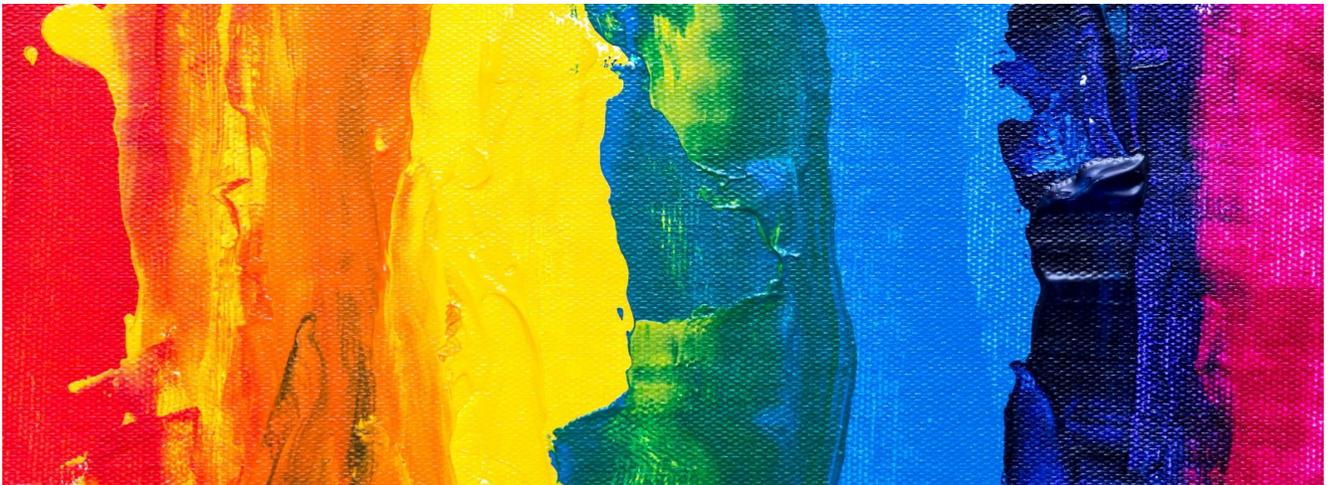


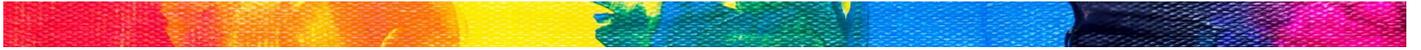
God's Expansive Love:

Stories of Enlightenment.
Stories of Truth.
Stories about Human Sexuality.

*"I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.
When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds,
I will remember my covenant that is between me and every living creature of all flesh."*

Genesis 9:13-15a





January 2021

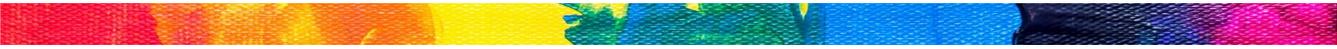
Greetings Friends in the PRCC Community!

As the mother of a beloved son who is gay and a decades-long member of Park Ridge Community Church, I am honored to have collected, along with Luan Zoellner, the following stories from our congregation and beyond. The stories are of one's own journey or that of a loved one in the LGBTQIA Community and the ensuing transformation or greater understanding created. I was moved by the insight, honesty and vulnerability reflected in each writer's contribution. I hope you will read these slowly and savor God's presence and love speaking through each day's words.

In Christ's Light and God's All Encompassing Love,
Cindy Klimmeck

The stories included and their accompanying scriptures and prayers can be read as a daily devotional during our Sermon Series "The Gift of Love" or at your leisure.

**FOR THIS ELECTRONIC VERSION, ALL NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED TO HONOR AND
PROTECT THE PRIVACY OF ALL INDIVIDUALS.**



“My Friend April”

By PRCC Member

“All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.” John 1:3-5

April exploded into my life the summer after 7th grade. I was twelve years old: all elbows and knees, glasses and braces. I was shy and kind and hurting. My mother had lost her two year battle with breast cancer in February of that year and my life at home was a mix of piercing ache, empty nothingness and longing for connection. In those months after her death, my father grew distant and angry and my grandmother, who lived with us, grew closer to my 9 year brother who needed extra snuggles and warmth.

In my mind’s eye, I was more alone than ever.

But April, April was life itself. I knew her loosely from the Edison Park park district softball league, but as a new student at my Lutheran school we formed our own fresh connection. When the weather broke, she began riding her bike to my house enticing me outside to play. Her dimples won my dad over. Her genuine love and respect for seniors shone through as she chatted with my grandmother. Full of laughter, crazy curly hair and zany ideas, she was my one-way ticket out of that heavy-hearted household and into a different world where life lived on. Her light pulled me out of the dark.

April came out to me in our 20s, when we both found ourselves living back with our parents after college. She sobbed a broken-hearted cry, fearful of her family finding out and treating her differently. I knew her mom and dad to be extremely loving and wonderful people, but this was her story and her journey. I did my best over the ensuing years to support April where she was at in her personal life as she struggled with how to answer questions about who she was dating from colleagues, aunts and uncles, old childhood friends and her mom and dad. She brought her girlfriend home, but never displayed a hint of romantic interest or special connection, carrying around guilt and shame for being herself, for not being truthful to her family and for not being honest with her heart. She developed severe anxiety that she still battles to this day.

She eventually moved to Europe, for a job opportunity - yes, but also because she found a freedom in European cities that she did not find in Chicago, where she could look at her girlfriend with love in her eyes and not be judged the way she feared in Wrigleyville or Edison Park. We remained friends, spending time together on her annual Christmas trips back home and a few memorable times when I flew to visit her abroad. Through the years and despite the struggles, she never lost her light or her zany ideas, allowing me to chalk up adventure after adventure by her side.

April eventually met Cora, a beautiful person inside and out that I am now lucky to call a friend as well. As April grew in confidence in this relationship and in herself, she introduced Cora as her

partner to her siblings, childhood friends, mom and dad. Beautifully, everyone accepted her and Cora with open arms.

But being April's friend continued to provide me with an education the difference between coming out and being out. She always seemed to be calibrating her behavior, depending on the circumstances. For example, when April and Cora were invited to a family wedding she confessed that her biggest decision was whether or not she would dance with Cora.

'Of course you will!', I quipped hoping to tap into April's signature boldness and bright spirit. But she shifted in her seat as she responded saying, "I'm just not sure how my extended family would react. I don't want to make anyone uncomfortable."

The day after the wedding I learned that April did not dance with Cora, the fear of judgement winning the moment...but April's mother did. Listening to April retell the story signaled an acceptance and love so deep into April's heart that the simple dance won the night.

After eleven years of dating, April and Cora got married in a civil ceremony in their home city of Amsterdam followed by a beautiful dinner with Cora's family and friends in Cora's hometown in Denmark. But April knew that to make official and public what had been private and secret for so long, she needed to have a wedding reception in Chicago, too, complete with extended family, proclamations of love and dancing. As the date of the event drew closer, she shared her anxieties with me. The fear, the shame and the worry of upsetting others still taking up a large amount of real estate in her mind.

I asked April if I could say a blessing before dinner, wanting to invite God into the room and into the marriage. It was a delicate subject, as Cora's religious and cultural traditions treated spirituality as a private encounter and April's Roman Catholic background left her with mixed emotions about how to acknowledge the God-given right to love and be in union with another person with the treatment of gay persons and gay marriage in the Catholic church.

But because I knew a God that could pull light out of the darkness, I opened with this line, "April and Cora, May your Creator be pleased with your marriage". I felt the collective exhale leave the lungs of April's family, and watched their faces as they searched their hearts. For how could a loving God bright enough to create our April and Cora be doing anything but good to bring them together to share that light and love around with the rest of us?

After my blessing, April's mom gave the speech of her life - filling the room with laughter and tears and genuine heart. We all danced that night, right alongside April and Cora.

God of all, thank you for friendships that offer mutual light, support, and strength. Shine your light in our lives. Amen.



“Diversity and Communion”

By PRCC Member

“On these two commandments hangs everything in the Law and in the Prophets” Matthew 22:40

God is clearly more comfortable with diversity than we are, and God’s final goal and objective are much simpler. God and the entire cosmos are about two things: *differentiation* (people and things becoming themselves) and *communion* (living in supportive coexistence). Physicists and biologists seem to know this better than theologians and clergy.

The arguments of homophobic or anti-gay folks might seem well-supported, but their goals and objectives seem to be different from those of God or Jesus. Their arguments generally have to do with very secular concerns: control over chaos, majority rule, fear of the other, fear of the unknown, and idealization of a family unit that Jesus himself neither lived nor idealized. Check the Gospels if you don’t believe me.

However, I do realize that we are dealing with incredibly deep archetypes, those electric sexual images that motivate us at the most intimate levels of our being. Such “totems and taboos” have a deep hold on every culture and every individual, but they do change over time. We have learned so much over the last thirty years about the biological and psychological complexity of sexual orientation and desire, as well as gender constructs. National Geographic, which is no light-weight magazine, devoted its entire January 2017 issue just to gender! We in the West have been stuck in a dualistic trap other cultures have not struggled with to the same extent. For example, the Navajo or Diné and other Native peoples have historically honored non-binary, or two-spirit, people instead of rejecting them or criminalizing their existence.

As a general rule, I would say that *institutional religion tends to think of people as very simple, and therefore the law must be very complex to protect them in every situation. Jesus does the opposite: He treats people as very complex—different in religion, lifestyle, virtue, temperament, and success—and keeps the law very simple in order to bring them to God:*

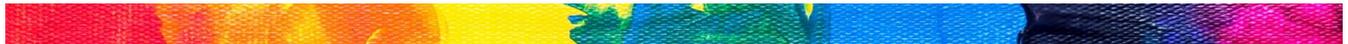
A legal expert put him to the test: “Teacher, which commandment in the Law is the greatest?” He replied to him, “You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind.’ This is the first and foremost, and the second is like it: ‘You are to love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hangs everything in the Law and in the Prophets” (Matthew 22:35-40).

If I were to say this apart from Jesus’ authority, you would rightly accuse me of being simplistic, naïve, and reductionistic. Yet Jesus’ approach takes the risk of allowing people the freedom to be themselves and to love God according to the shape of their own heart, soul, body, and mind! Religion developed for the sake of social control, but Jesus does not give us much grist for the social control mill. For Jesus, it is all about union—union with God, others, and *what is*, however it presents itself. Do not let

the labels trip you up—woman, man, transgender, cisgender, straight, bisexual, gay, queer. We all belong, but how cleverly our moral pretenses prevent us from struggling with what is right in front of us! How ingeniously our ego protects itself from compassion and understanding.

Jesus, like the cosmos itself, constantly affirms two parallel drives *toward diversity and toward communion*. The whole of creation cannot be lying.

Jesus, help me to fully differentiate, becoming more and more my true self each day. Help me to live in communion with all your children - those who I perceive as similar to me and those who I perceive as different. Help me to appreciate the beauty and diversity of your creation. Amen.



“Everlasting Love”

By PRCC Member

I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Jeremiah 31:3

Henri Nouwen (*Finding My Way Home: Pathways to Life and the Spirit*) looks at Jeremiah 31:3 and realizes the cosmic import of those words of promise and commitment from God. He says:

Jesus came to share his identity with you and to tell you that you are the beloved sons and daughters of God. Just for a moment try to enter this enormous mystery, that you, like Jesus, are the beloved daughter or the beloved son of God. This is the truth.

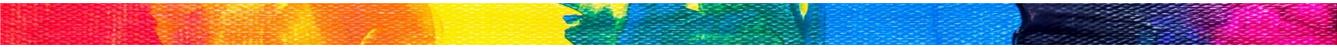
Furthermore, your belovedness preceded your birth. You were the beloved before your father, mother, brother, sister, or church loved you or hurt you. You are the beloved because you belong to God from all eternity.

God loved you before you were born, and God will love you after you die. In Scripture God says, *I have loved you with an everlasting love.*” This is a very fundamental truth of your identity. This is who you are whether you feel it or not. You belong to God from eternity to eternity. Life is just a little opportunity for you during a few years to say, “I love you, too.”

Nowhere does God say that God will only love us if we love who society says we should. Nowhere does God say that God will only continue to love us if we remain comfortable in the sexual identity we were assigned at birth. Nouwen says to listen to this fundamental truth of our identity: God loves us – just as we are, whether we feel it or not. And more – we belong to God forever.

If God loves us in this way, and for all eternity, how can we not love each other just as we are? And further, how can we pretend to say in response to God’s love “I love you, too.” if we do not?

Open my eyes, Holy One to your everlasting love, for me and for all your children. When I have trouble loving someone, expand my heart. Amen.



“The Gift of Love”

“For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.” 1 John 3:11

My name is Jessica and I have been married to my wife, Barb, for 29 years. I am 79 years old, a retired Physical Education and Life Skills teacher, volleyball coach & Athletic Director in a Chicago suburban middle school. I have been retired for 15 years. As a teacher, I went to school each day “in the closet” so to speak. No one knew I was gay. I did not talk about my wife for fear my administration, my peers, my students and worse yet, the parents of my students would find out and try to have me fired.

I grew up on a grain & livestock farm in Central Illinois with two older brothers and a younger sister. I loved kids and I loved the farm. When I was a senior in high school, I remember sitting down and talking about my future after high school with my parents. When I told my Dad I wanted to farm with him, he said, “What? Girls don’t farm!” His statement crushed me. My oldest brother, who was kind, helpful and always there for me, guided me towards a teaching degree at Illinois State University. My brother already was a high school history teacher and football coach. He said because I loved kids and was always playing ball, I should become a PE teacher. It made sense to me. In college, I had several same sex relationships, but I knew I wanted children.

In the 60’s, the only responsible way for a girl to become a mother was to marry a man, so I did. After 14 years of marriage and 4 children later, I realized I could not lead a straight life any longer. I wanted a divorce.

I was a Sunday school teacher, Cherub Choir Director, adult choir member, Brownie Scout leader, Room mother at my children’s school and President of the Child Study Club. I was a very highly respected mother in my small hometown community of 2700. When everyone found out I was gay, my life became a nightmare. I could have been tarred, feathered and run out of town. I left on my own, BUT that is a long story to be told another time. My life was Hell for several years; no support from my family, except my Mom and younger sister, no support from my friends, the community, and most hurtful, no support from my church.

In 1990, I met Barb and we were married that next year in our brother’s home by a friend who was a United Church of Christ minister. Our 4 children, brother, sister, some other family and friends attended, but I could not talk about it at my school that next Monday morning. In 2011, Illinois recognized same-sex Civil Unions so once again, we were married, in our brother’s home but this time by a Cook County Judge. In 2014, the Federal Courts recognized gay marriage and Barb and I were married a 3rd time, thus sealing our marriage in the eyes of the Federal government. We will celebrate 30 years of marriage this February 2021. We have 11 grandchildren and 4 great-grandchildren.

In 2008, we joined First United Methodist Church of Evanston, (First Church). Before Covid-19, Barb and I served as Ushers, Greeters, Soup Kitchen Volunteers, providers of After Worship Treats, and

attended many small group sessions. We were the original co-chairpersons of our annual Rally Day Picnic and served on the Annual Rummage Sale Committee, until it closed a couple of years ago.

One of the BEST and most wonderful things to happen to us, was being accepted by our church family. Our First Church believes, "We are a Reconciling Congregation and welcome ALL inclusive of age, race, education, economic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, and special needs." Most importantly, First Church practices what they preach! To be accepted by family and friends was important and a big deal; but to be accepted by our church and in the eyes of God is AWESOME!

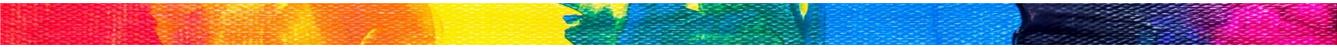
Our 4 children and 11 grandchildren have grown up to be responsible adults ranging from teachers, swim coach, Athletic Director, architect, nurse, DPT, CPA, BS, MS MBA, & college graduates & college students. Our children have been recognized as Wyoming State Swim Coach for 6 years, Wyoming Health Teacher of the Year, Illinois School Nurse of the Year and our grandchildren have been State swimmers, golfers, basketball, volleyball and football members, 2 valedictorians and many others have been on the high honor roll. Nine of our family members are in committed straight marriage and 1 is in a gay marriage.

We are normal, well-respected partners who have raised fun-loving adult children who are responsible and accountable. We support our family through weekly communications: texts, e-mails, phone calls, Zoom and Google Duo. We are yearly guest speakers at our son's high school GIST class, (Gender Issues in Society Today). We help put up school bulletin boards, plant bulbs, garden, attend all family sporting, music and concert events. We also attend family gatherings, especially holiday celebrations (except this Covid-19 year).

Our neighbors are wonderful and accepting of who we are. We serve on our Block Party committee, sit around our neighbor's fire pit and visit, babysit our neighbor's dog and cats, and support our neighbors through neighborly deeds. Our friends are varied: church friends, cruise friends, Wild Women of Wyoming travelers, Wednesday night golf/walk/dine group participants and correspond with many elderly friends and families through texting, e-mails, phone calls, notes and weekly letters.

To look at us, we look like your average spouse, mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, sister, aunt and friend. We are caregivers, practice the Word of God, participate as informed citizens and live by the laws of the people and God. Our favorite Bible verses are John 3:16, Galatians 3:28 and 1 Corinthians 13:4-8.

God of Love, thank you for the love we have felt in our lives. Heal the wounds that have been inflicted by the withholding of love or abuse. Fill us with your abundant love. Amen.



“Yes, and?”

By PRCC Member

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you.”

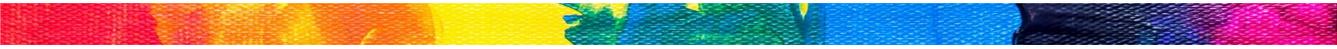
Jeremiah 1:5

My husband, Frank, and I joined Park Ridge Community Church over 20 years ago. At the time, our boys, Jacob and Joseph were 6 and 3 years old respectively. The boys attended Sunday school and participated in the Christmas Pageants; most notably was the year Joseph stood up front dressed as a candle and twirled in a circle while singing “Go Tell It on the Mountain”. They went on middle school ski trips, worked in the Pumpkin Patch and enjoyed attending Youth Group. In the summers, Joseph went on a number of Boundary Waters canoe trips and when he was old enough, joined his big brother on the Youth Mission trips. PRCC was a positive place for our boys with an emphasis on inclusiveness and service while having fun.

During the summer before his freshman year in high school, Joseph told us he was gay. Looking back, it’s interesting to observe how Frank and I were both unsurprised and surprised by Joseph’s news. We sat down as a family and talked about it. Our first conversation was uncomfortable and awkward. At 14 could Joseph really be sure of his orientation? We each processed Joseph’s news differently. In a matter of days, I realized that Joseph was happier than he’d been in years. Throughout Joseph’s childhood, he was fun loving, quick to laugh, silly and light hearted. It was nearly impossible to feel down around him. During middle school, things gradually changed. Joseph became quiet and a bit withdrawn. The little spark was still there but it was somehow clouded over. It was during those middle school years that Joseph was silently grappling with his identity. When Joseph came out, it’s as if the shadows parted and there was our sweet fun loving son again. I was so happy for Joseph and his newly found freedom. We told our extended family and friends. Everyone was happy for Joseph.

I had one great concern. How would Joseph’s orientation be received by our church? I made an appointment with the Pastor. I nervously entered his office and took a seat. He was sitting behind his desk but immediately stood up and took a seat right across from me. He had an expression of concern on his face. I must have looked like a worried mess. I told him Joseph had come out. I will always remember this moment. A welcoming smile came over Pastor’s face, and in the kindest tone, he said, “Yes, and?” I had created all sorts of scenarios in my mind of needing to defend Joseph or perhaps no longer being welcome. “Yes, and?” was a holy moment for me. Joseph was loved and welcomed without condition. We were loved and welcomed without judgement. It’s been 12 years since our dear son came out. We are proud of both our boys and the fine young men they have become. We are grateful for our church family and the support and love of God we feel here at PRCC.

Thank you, God, for the strength of young people coming out and sharing their truth. Shelter those who walk in fear. Help us to reach out that all of your children might live out their spark, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Amen.



“Acceptance and Transformation”

“So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.” Ephesians 4:25

We are a Park Ridge family with 4 children – all of them unique and special in their own way. Our understanding of “acceptance” was challenged when our youngest daughter came out as gay in high school and then 1 year later as transgender. While our love for her never wavered, we knew little about this world and the challenges we would face, not to mention the fight our child would endure, in a world with little understanding or acceptance.

It took a long time for us to reflect and understand what we truly went through at the time. You are faced with the reality of what your child has been struggling with and you see their pain for the first time. This is all offset by your own reeling emotions. There is the fear for her safety and well-being and concern for how your family, church, friends, etc. will react, and treat our daughter. We were grieving, yet we had to push that aside and do our best to learn how to support our daughter. Little did we know then, how rare it is for a transgender child to actually receive the support from their own families.

Throughout her childhood, our daughter struggled with anxiety and depression, and to fit in socially. We were relieved when she took an interest in music and theater and found good people in those circles. She also joined a Park Ridge Youth program sponsored by a local church and truly enjoyed the fellowship she found there. When she came out as gay, she was no longer welcomed in the church group. This would be just the start of a litany of alienation, discrimination and abuse she would face for years to come.

When our daughter started her transition, it was difficult for all of us. It was painful to see the child we knew change everything; her voice, her face, her clothes, etc. Each step was a new challenge for us and a true test of our love and faith. Our strength was reinforced by watching our daughter, who never wavered in her determination to be the person she needed to be.

During these days, my husband and I went to counseling and participated in PFLAG (Parents, Family & Friends of Lesbian and Gays) meetings, but it wasn’t enough. We were desperate for more information. Our pastor, Carol Hill, reinforced our understanding of GOD’s love for ALL his children. This truly strengthened our resolve to be there for our daughter through her transition. The conversation was a spiritual awakening and a true turning point for us.

We found other resources to be helpful including the Facebook group – “Parents of Transgender Children”. Finally, a community of people who understood what we were going through! We were now being educated by people who had gone before us, and now walked beside us during our own journey. They were with us, as our daughter went through painful surgeries, suicidal ideation, and

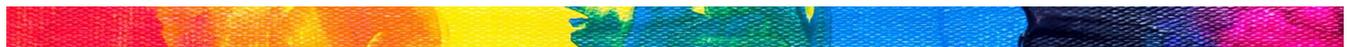
other mental health challenges. We felt GOD working through these wonderful parents, who helped by sharing their own resources and experiences, strength, hopes, joys, and sorrows of parenting a transgender child. We witnessed the fierce love they have for their children that was pure and unselfish. Through this support, we found the additional strength we needed to be there for our own daughter.

The transgender community faces odds that many of us will never know. The following facts should scare anyone.

- Poverty- 29% (many due from being evicted from their own family homes)
- Violence – 54% (40 killed thus far in 2020)
- Discrimination – 27% fired from jobs
- Suicide attempts – 41.8% transgender youth

I am happy to report that Z is still the same bright, funny, loving person that she was prior to her transition. She has endured unimaginable hardships, but we have loved and supported her through it all. She is in a happy long-term committed relationship with a woman we adore. Our mutual love and respect for each other, has brought us to a deeper more meaningful relationship. While all of what we experienced has been incredibly difficult, we find ourselves in a better place. We've grown as people to be more understanding and ACCEPTING of all people. We judge less and love more. We look forward to the day when our community treats all people with respect and dignity they deserve: this will help make this world a safer, more loving place for all our children.

God of transformation, transform our hearts to reflect your heart, your love, your acceptance. Teach us to ask the right questions when we don't understand. Help us to honor one another's truths. We pray for the transgender community. Protect them as we work together to keep all your people safe. Amen.



“Who Am I?”

By PRCC Member

Jesus said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Luke 9:20

Having been a counselor, Stephen Minister, and a person who does a lot of listening, here are questions that people have asked me over the years. The questions come from young people, adults and friends. All ages ask, “Who am I?” They are trying to find their identity. This can be a painful or joyful experience. “Will I like who I think I will discover? Will I be accepted? Will I find joy in this adventure, or will I be really scared? Am I gay, or on the spectrum of LGBTQIA? How do I know who I am? If I am gay or someplace on the spectrum, will my family and friends accept me? Will I accept myself? Who can I talk with openly and honestly? If I acknowledge who I am, do I find a sense of relief, shame, or peace? Where can I go to find acceptance and love?”

This is just the beginning of the questions. In Catholic priest, professor, writer and theologian, Henri Nouwen's book *Dare to Journey*, he answers some questions and asks more.

Integration: Bringing Together Our Outer and Inner Life

There are two stories to our life; the public and the private. There is the story that is known to our family and friends and the story that we embroider inside our own heads. These two stories do not always coalesce. There can be the public success and the personal inner pain. There can be the social persona of strength and the inner persona of fear and fragility.

It is not easy to integrate the two stories. We often tend to deny the inner story. Yet we must begin to hear its tale and listen to its pain and disappointment. Integrating the two stories will mean that both have to change. The story of strength will thus begin to reflect a new vulnerability. The story of fear will begin to reflect new hope.

Nouwen rightly notes that this attempt at integration will bring about a new sense of wholeness. "We come to maturity," he writes, "by integrating not only the light, but also the dark side of our story." Success and pain, strength and fragility thus weave a new pattern of being that paradoxically does not diminish us, but makes us more sensitive and thus stronger.

Psalm 18:28 "You, Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light."



"Love Wins"

By Jaclyn Weir, PRCC Parish Coordinator

"Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle; my rock and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield, in whom I take refuge, who subdues the peoples under me." Psalm 144:1-2

When I walked into the Episcopal Church of St. Thomas the Apostle in Dallas, Texas I was in way over my head. I had been a teacher for my entire working career, and now I was interviewing to be a priest's assistant.

The interview went fairly well, I was sitting across from Mother Joy, the first female priest to lead this particular Congregation. As the interview concluded, she asked me one final question, "Are you comfortable with the homosexual community?"

During my first few weeks as the Church Secretary, I quickly put together that about 85% of the congregation identified as gay or lesbian. Over the two years that I worked there I learned many of their stories and was truly given a glimpse into a world of which I had no knowledge. I had never thought twice about someone's sexuality before, but I had also never been exposed to the hardships of my fellow Children of God.

Many of the couples had been together for 20 plus years, but before they had found each other, they had lived alternate lives. Many of them had married people of the opposite sex, had children, and lived an illusion to make others around them comfortable. The former Rector was a gay man, so many of

these couples had found a true sanctuary in this church home. They had finally been able to celebrate themselves and their loves openly, and more importantly, in a place that acknowledged them as God's children.

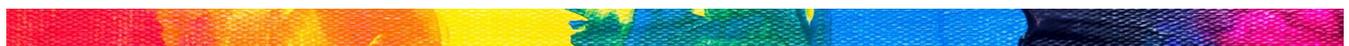
On June 16, 2015 the Supreme Court ruled same-sex marriage legal nationwide. I felt honored to be a part of the celebration that day. All morning my office was filled with tears, laughs, smiles, and a loss for words that this day was finally here. Given that this was the church that had first celebrated them, many of the couples began plans to be married in our sanctuary by Mother Joy.

Shortly after the ruling though, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church explained that changes would still need to be made and that the definition of marriage was being discussed; all of which would take some time. Unfortunately, I was the messenger at the time so I was the one that answered the phone. Each conversation began with excitement only to be tarnished with my news that they could not get married here....yet!

It was decided as a congregation that we would fight this ruling; our little church was ready. At some point during all of this I left, moving north, and joining my new Church family at PRCC. About a year ago, the Bishop caved and allowed for only St. Thomas and one other sister church to perform same sex ceremonies. It wasn't the end of the battle but it was a HUGE win!

St. Thomas, the church's namesake, was a Doubter, but time at St. Thomas Episcopal Church taught me to NEVER DOUBT THE POWER OF LOVE, BECAUSE LOVE ALWAYS WINS.

God of Love, give us words to speak when explanations are needed. Grant us silent lips when you call us to listen. Be the shield around those who are fighting for their lives, fighting for their loves. Give us faith and not doubt in your great Love. Amen.



"God's Gift"

"Then the voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Acts 10:15

My name is Patrick. I am a 57 year old gay male professor who has been out for more than three decades. My story is inspired by the title of your sermon series 'The Gift of Love.' As you will see, I have been so fortunate to experience God's love and to share my life with a partner for the past 34 years.

I was raised in a mixed religious environment with my father being Protestant and my mother Catholic. Probably most significant though is that I attended Catholic school in both grade school and high school. Although I embraced the Catholic teachings and guidance, I became increasingly estranged from the church, and my own family, as I began to realize my sexual orientation. At that time in the late 1970s, there simply was no way to reconcile my sexuality with my religious and

spiritual beliefs. To be more precise, I felt like there wasn't a way to bridge my sexual orientation with Catholicism.

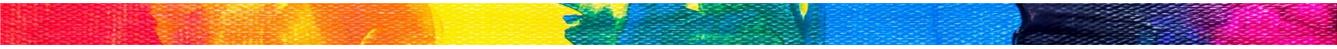
As a consequence of this divide, my spiritual life became focused on my connection to God, largely outside the traditional religious boundaries. Coming from a very conservative family, it was difficult to see how I could exist as a gay man given the homophobia at home and the incessant bullying and taunting at school. It is not surprising that I only started to live a more open life as a gay man when I moved to Los Angeles for grad school at age 21. This transition was a little rough, but I remember vividly praying for a partner to share my life with. Exactly one week later I met my partner Juan who was also a UCLA grad student. Although I didn't recognize it at the time, I see this now as a case of answered prayers.

Although we didn't know each other there, Juan was also from Vancouver. Apart from that connection, Juan and I, on the surface, were quite different. I knew though that our values were very much aligned. For more than three decades now, Juan has been by my side, offering support, guidance and love every step of the way. In this time we have lived all over the USA (Los Angeles, Dallas, Tucson, Nashville, New York, and Providence) and have weathered lots of good times and a few bad ones too. Coming from a family that held emotion and expression in low regard, I have been blessed with Juan's large and welcoming family. They have made me part of their family over and over again.

I find it poignant that both Juan and I are now in our 'late middle age' yet, when I look at Juan, I still see him as the spirited and kind young adult when we first met. I know that our greatest achievement is the way that Juan and I have navigated our life with humor, grace, and, of course, love. Juan has made me a much better man. I know that I am worthy of love and capable of giving it. That is a huge lesson to learn.

I want to end my reminiscence with an incident that occurred 20 years ago during a week-long retreat at the Mount St. Alphonsus Retreat Center. Each day I met for one hour with a spiritual adviser. He knew that I was gay and that I was in a relationship. When the subject turned to my gayness, I told him that I saw it as a 'cross to bear.' Father paused for a few beats and then suggested that I think of it as a gift rather than a cross to bear. This thinking changed my attitude and helped to anchor me in a more positive and favorable frame of reference. I know that I am blessed as a gay man and that I can approach every situation, good and bad, with compassion and kindness. Most of all, I feel so thankful that I am sharing my life with Juan. That's all I need to know to realize that God's love is bountiful and sustaining for each and every one of us.

We are grateful for guides in our life, O God, who help open our eyes to your ways. Help us unlearn lessons that are contrary to your gospel of Love. Teach us the ways you have uniquely gifted each of us with our sexuality, our personalities, our diversity that makes each one your Beloved Delight. Amen.



“Identity and Desire”

By Fr. Richard Rohr

Published Thursday, November 9, 2017

“There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28

Another beautiful metaphor in the Bible used for God is that of a lover. The allure of a beloved pulls us out of self, into *ekstasis* (Greek for ecstasy). Unfortunately, the Church’s shaming of body and sex has shut down many people’s longing for and experience of intimacy with each other and God.

Sexuality and gender identity elicit so many strong feelings and even irrational opinions because they touch upon something foundational. If you don’t recognize the sacred at this deep level of identity and desire, I don’t know if you will be able to see it anywhere else. When Christians label LGBTQIA individuals as “other,” sinful, or “disordered,” we hurt these precious people and the larger community, and we actually limit ourselves. Fear of difference creates a very constricted, exclusive, and small religion and life, the very opposite of what God invites us into.

Binary genders (male and female) are more an imposition of our dualistic minds than the nature of reality. The Bible often refers to “eunuchs” (see Isaiah 56:4-5, and Matthew 19:12, for instance) which may or may not have included people that today we might know as transgender, bisexual, intersex, gay, or lesbian. Many cultures identify a third or even fourth gender. Not everyone identifies internally with their external biology. And not everyone mirrors the cultural “norms” of gender roles or attractions. It is amazing that it has taken us this long to admit what is hidden in plain sight, and it must have caused immense suffering to so many throughout history.

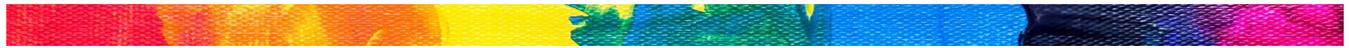
While this non-dual awareness is growing, we have a long way to go. There is a great deal of contention, fear, shame, and hurt still to be healed. Whenever consciousness moves to a higher level, we can anticipate push-back, an equal and opposite reaction. Thankfully, it seems that religion and culture continue to mature. We see the Episcopal Church now welcoming and blessing same-gender relationships. Many countries like the United States, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, Brazil, and South Africa legally recognize same-sex marriage.

Even as we acknowledge the sacredness of gender and sex, we also need to realize that there’s something deeper than our gender, *anaFranky*, or physical passion: our ontological self, who we are forever in Christ. You are beyond the metaphor of male and female; you are a child of the Resurrection, a creature of Eternal Life. As Paul courageously puts it, “There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

Those who have already begun to experience their divine union will usually find it very easy to be compassionate toward all “Two Spirit” people because they know they share the same ontological, essential self that is “hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3).

For all of the beauty and power of sexuality, it is still under the rubric of the floating or passing self, rather than the Self eternally anchored in God. I believe our gender is going to pass away when we do. I think that's exactly what Jesus is referring to when he says, "the children of this world take wives and husbands . . . but in heaven there will be no marriage or giving in marriage" (see all of Luke 20:34-37). In the end, there is only universal love where "God will be God in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28).

Gateway to Silence: I am created in God's image.



"Change Them Not Me"

By Liz Swanson, PRCC Director of Pastoral Care Services

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." Psalm 51:10

Dear God, I'm irritated at someone else so please change them!!

"Please Auntie, let's wash your hair." For a number of years Auntie was failing and I loved her so would go and help out, get groceries and do things for her. As she declined, her need for help increased and I spent more time with her. Like so many life-changing aspects of personal growth, this situation of assisting someone in declining health was a mixed bag - a privilege; a burden; a time of joy; upsetting; frustrating and mostly, a time of deepening love. But I also felt self-pity because I was doing so much and other family members were doing nothing at all. Somehow I decided the solution was to continue on in silence, giving my anger to God and praying for the Divine to change the ones not helping. My prayers went something like, "This is unfair God, so please change their hearts to see what they need to do and how they should be helping."

Not surprisingly, this didn't help my attitude or change the situation. I was telling a good friend about this. In her kind, gracious way she explained that I could actually pray for myself, for my heart to soften and to see that the answer to this problem is not a change in others, but in me. That was revolutionary to me and slowly over time as my prayers changed, my attitude changed as well.

A few years later I was reminded of all of this when I found myself in a small group discussion that came around to "homosexuals" and what the Bible says about this. Not everyone, but some members of the group, thought that homosexuality is a sin and people in same sex relationships need to repent of their ways and change in order to be fully embraced by God. These group members concluded that we should be praying for them to change and stop being homosexual.

At the time, I remember making an effort to explain that I knew and loved people who were in same sex relationships and struggled with this interpretation of scripture. I doubt if I was as kind and gracious as my friend was with me, but I explained that this reminded me of what I learned about praying for God to change others. I had judged my family members and decided what they should do to make me comfortable. It felt like that's what was happening in the group discussion about

homosexuals. I don't know if this was a revolutionary idea for anyone but I knew that praying for others to change wasn't for me.

God, help me to pray in way that opens my heart for your transformation. Help me resist labels that oppress your children and blind me to their kinship.



“The Supported Homosexual”

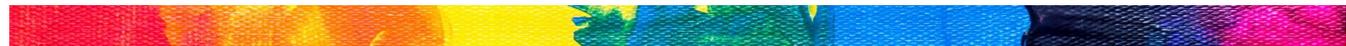
By PRCC Member

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:35

I am the product of an extremely supportive family. I didn't come out until I was fourteen, but I think when I came down the stairs at age seven with blue eye shadow and a feather boa, the cat was out of the bag. Since then I've learned a lot, like you always need a tacky base when using shimmer around the eye, and if you want to impress your parents' friends chicken feathers are not the way to go; invest in ostrich feathers. My parents did what every good family would do in that situation, they got out the camera. From then on it was not really an “if” he'll come out but more of a “when”. The positive impact of being in a supportive environment cannot be undervalued. For example, no one batted an eye, while in college, I said I wanted to go as Nancy Kerrigan post knee whack for Halloween. When I brought home a framed photo of me in drag as a Christmas gift, I was squarely featured in prime wall real estate without question.

When I finally did come out at the ripe age of fourteen there wasn't any fear about acceptance. Again, my family did what every good family would do in that situation; they told me they loved me. Coming out allowed me to be a more authentic version of myself without the limitations of having to be someone that I wasn't.

Creating God, thank you for chicken feathers AND ostrich feathers and the beauty that each one of your creations displays! Thank you for the love and acceptance felt by some. May love and acceptance be the norm and not the exception, not only in biological family units, but also in our church families. Amen.



“Our Story”

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” 1 John 4:7-8

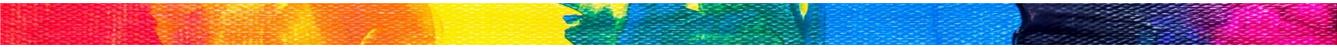
My wife’s and my journey began with the Supreme Court’s ruling legalizing same sex marriage in 2015. We knew we wanted to be married, but it would only work for us if we were married in our church, by our pastor with God’s love at the center of it all. This was to be a new experience for our church as our Presbyterian leadership had recently ok’d same sex marriages. But there was a catch. A Pastor could agree to perform the ceremony, but the Session could refuse to allow it to happen in the church. The Session could approve use of the Sanctuary, but the Pastor could refuse to perform the ceremony.

We approached all three of our pastor’s as we wanted a unified representation...and after much discernment on their parts...each agreed. Now, it was on to the congregation. At the time this was occurring, I was a Ruling Elder on Session. I spoke to the Head Pastor and we agreed that we would not initially tell anyone who had made the request, as we wanted the ruling body to decide on the overall merits of same sex marriage, not just because it was the two of us. Given this approach, and people not knowing it was me, I was party to many, many conversations on the topic. Some were uplifting and encouraging...others took me to an incredibly sad place. Both sides provided surprises on how people felt about this.

We had private Session conversations, public congregation conversations, guest speakers and on and on. Many of these events taught us to hear and forgive, to know that Jesus takes us to where we need to be, to be grateful for, and celebrate all the good that came from this.

In the end, Session approved the ceremony, and surrounded by our family and friends, we were married in October of 2016. It was a beautiful day on so many levels with people stepping up to support us. Yes, some left the church over this. It was hurtful, but those who remained have learned to see us as being no different than them in our lives and our faith. Today, we are “old hat”, accepted, loved and respected (Some have approached us to tell us they were against this at first, but after watching what happened and knowing us, they are now full supporters). We are also grateful that, although there haven’t been any more same sex marriages to date, there are several same sex couples who have since joined our church. Their comment about our congregation “you all are so very loving, accepting and affirming. We knew this was the right place from the start!”

God of Love, help us to find in every loving relationship, the essence of You and Your Love.



“A Brother’s Love”

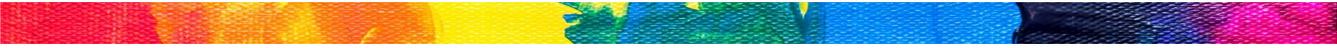
*“Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ He said, ‘I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?’
Genesis 4:9*

I have always looked up to my brother. He is successful, has lots of close friends, has an incredible disposition, and genuinely lives a happy life. He “came out” to me when I was about 20 and in college. By the time we had that discussion, he was in his mid to late 20’s and I was already fairly confident he was gay. My ‘suspicion’ was not for any one reason, but I remember thinking, *how could someone who has so much to offer never have had a girlfriend before?*

Our conversation was simple and short, nothing changed in our relationship. My brother is one of my closest friends, and will be my best man in my upcoming wedding. His sexuality has no impact on our friendship. Why would it? The conversation almost felt like a formality; like he had to tell me for himself that he was gay.

My biggest takeaway from our conversation and this situation was the surprising amount of remorse I felt, and still feel. It seems unfair to me that my brother had to overcome some “hurdle” in his life just to tell people who he was, and who he loved.

God of our Ancestors, we lament the pain of our siblings who have had to overcome hurdles in being themselves. Help us to overcome obstacles together, caring for and protecting each one of our beloved siblings - no matter what.



“A Parent’s Love”

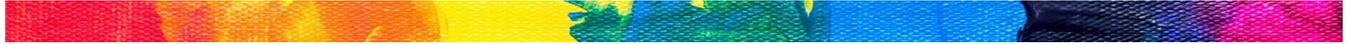
“Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?” Matthew 7:9-10

When our son was 8 or 9, a gay friend of mine told me she thought he was gay. The seed was planted. He always has been a very compassionate and loving young man. He’s very social and has loads of friends. In high school he went to every dance, girl’s choice, proms, etc., but while he had many good female friends, he never had a girlfriend. The seed planted years ago was beginning to germinate in my mind.

Fast forward about six years. After a very upsetting breakup with his partner, he came to me in tears and finally “came out”. My heart went out to him. I felt horrible that he was hurting so much, but happy that he was able to talk to me about his sexuality. My initial worry was that his life would be more difficult on both a social and professional level. But, as a friend reminded me, he lives in Chicago, not rural Arkansas!

Friends and family have been very supportive and all continue to love him for the person he is and always has been.

God, we know that all children have not experienced unconditional love. We pray for your children who are hungry for love to find in us lifelong friends. May we meet the needs of children, known and unknown, as they discover who you have created them to be.



“Love is a Verb!”

By PRCC Member

“Those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act - they will be blessed in their doing.” James 1:25

God's unconditional love, His comfort, grace, mercy and transcending peace; wouldn't it be great if everyone could experience this in their daily lives? It would be like God's Kingdom; here on Earth.

As Christians - we can only hope and pray for this type of love to be fully known. Throughout our years at PRCC and even now during in this difficult time of separation, our church has blessed us with meaningful worship time, thought-provoking sermons, beautiful music, rich bible studies, a creative Sunday school, fun youth programming and many generous church ministries; all pointing us towards believing, receiving and sharing God's love. PRCC is straight-forward in its teaching of Love as an Action!

Knowing the love of God, and the power of His providence, peace and presence in my life has truly been a blessing. Over my Christian journey, I've not always felt this presence and am extremely grateful for loving family, faithful friends, and the church for putting love into action by reminding me of God's provision and unconditional love for me. This assurance has carried me through the most trying of times and continues to encourage me each day. As a result, I am in continual prayer- hoping all God's people may have this type of support and a loving faith community.

Unfortunately, there are many who do not find the church welcoming and have felt unworthy of God's love. Sadly, the LGBTQ community has been widely discriminated against, shamed and even excommunicated by the church. Knowing of these hurts and learning that friends and family, whom I love, have experienced this type of rejection from their established churches, ordained and lay clergy and parishioners is completely heartbreaking! It goes against everything I know about being a follower of Jesus. I can't imagine learning you are not welcome to worship and/or serve in a community that claims Love as its foundation.

Jesus speaks boldly to all his disciples in *John 13:34* “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

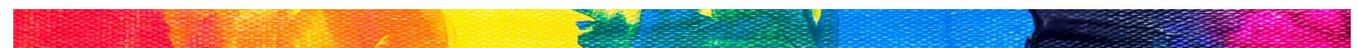
If our faith asks us to be disciples of Christ and Love as He loves, how can this discrimination in the church be reconciled? If we are to be known by our Christian Love, then there would be no room for this rejection for the love of Jesus is unconditional and accepting of all.

There's no denying the many challenges of 2020. In addition to the isolation from family, friends, and our faith community, for me, it's been very difficult becoming more deeply aware of the many societal injustices. It's been a time of pause, reflection and refinement. A time to listen, learn and "lean in" on how to affect change. In other words, a time to explore ways of putting Love into Action; asking - How I/we can "be Love" for all, especially our brothers and sisters who are feeling rejected and hurt? How can we fully live into our faith and practice love by accepting people where they are and allowing for them to become who they are meant to be? How can we not only be accepting of those at our door, but actively reach out to those walking by - exclaiming "You are loved and You are welcome here!"

In the coming year, I hope and pray God will continue to work boldly through PRCC - the church leadership, staff, parishioners and its ministries! May we all be moved to share God's transformative love wherever we are - stepping closer to the joy of God's divine presence in our own and others' lives moving us towards experiencing God's Kingdom; here on Earth.

For *"There will be everlasting joy when God's kingdom is established on earth"* Psalm 21:1

Loving God, help us to put your Love into our actions, into our words, into our decisions. Let your kin-dom come on earth as it is in heaven. Let Love rule the day. Amen.



"Marriage is Marriage"

By Rev. Carol Hill, PRCC Senior Minister

"The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins." 1 Peter 4:7-8

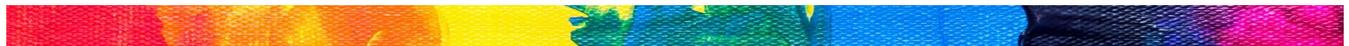
When I said yes to marrying Edward and Matthew, I was excited and a little nervous. I had married plenty of couples, but this would be my first same-sex couple. As I was preparing for their first premarital counseling session, I reviewed my typical questions, ensured my form for couples had non-gendered language (changed bride and groom to Partner 1 and 2), and prayed that God would help prevent me from saying something stupid. When the couple entered my office, I went through my questions, heard them recount when they first noticed the other, what their first date was like, and what they hoped for in the marriage they would build. We laughed as they complained about the things that sometimes bothered them - dirty clothes left on the floor and the like. They talked about hopes for children and shared family drama.

After our session was over, I felt ridiculous. This session was just like every other premarital session - a couple is a couple and love is love. As I stood before them on their wedding day and received their

promises to love one another in sickness and in health, exchanged rings, and listened to the choir sing, I couldn't help but cry. These two loved each other fiercely, and it was an honor to get to pronounce and pray God's blessing upon them in the covenant of marriage.

On the way out of the sanctuary one person commented that she didn't know Methodist ministers married gay couples. I responded, "To deny what God was obviously doing in bringing these two together would be unfaithful. My calling is to serve God and God's people - every single one of them." Fortunately, love covers a multitude of sins, including my sin in thinking this couple would be different. I am so thankful when I get to witness the love two people share, and it turns out that gratitude is the same (if not more) when the couple has to conquer hurdles to get to the altar. I am forever thankful for Matthew and Edward and the ways they taught me about not only their love, but God's love.

Loving God, we thank you for moments when our eyes are opened to your love. We thank you for the love we have experienced in our lives: from lovers, friends, family members, and your church. Help us to share your love with the world. Amen.



“Knowing”

Let the same mind be in you that was in Jesus Christ.

Philippians 2:5

*“DIVERSITY is having a seat at the table,
INCLUSION is having a voice,
and BELONGING is having that voice be heard”*

-Liz Fosslein, No Hard Feelings

Jesus was all about giving everyone a seat at the table, about gathering diverse individuals to share food, wine, conversation, opinions, wisdom and grace. His most famous meal was the Last Supper but consider how many gospel stories revolved around food and drink shared with others. Sometimes in homes – of Levi (Luke 5:29), Simon the Leper (Mark 14:3), a Pharisee (Luke 7:36), and of Mary, Martha and Lazarus (John 12:1-2). Other times outdoors – feeding the multitude (Matthew 14: 13-21), a well in Samaria (John 4), breakfast on the beach (John 21:1-17). Guest lists included society's elite, the marginalized and everyone in between. Truly God, in the person of his son, Jesus Christ, did “*not show favoritism.*” (Romans 2:11) Isn't that wonderful to know? But then knowing that, how could we (the Church) have ever thought, even for a minute, that the voices of our LGBTQIA brothers and sisters were not welcome at the table? Absurd! And yet for so long, we thought exactly that.

For most of my adult life, I was a know-it-all Christian. Don't get me wrong, my faith was sincere; it was strong; it was kind. And it was built on the foundation of scripture. My attitude toward the Bible was simple – God said it, I believe it. That straightforward understanding brought comfort. In

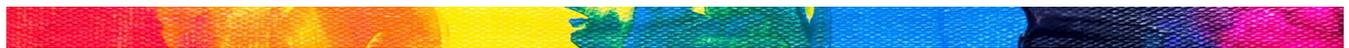
retrospect, it also brought a kind of smugness. Somehow, we could KNOW what God wants. We can know what's right and we can tell others what we think.

Then came a revelation that rocked my world - my son, Jerome, told us that he was gay. He was 24 at the time, already an adult. From the very first moment, I knew that my love, our family's love for Jerome was bedrock. It was unchanging, would not falter. His place in our family was secure. We assured him of all those things. I also understood right from the start that Jerome's place in the family of God was also secure. I mean, if I love Jerome this completely, how could God, the author of love, accept him any less? However, not everything was quite so firm. I quickly came to question two fundamental things.

The first, was about my parenting. I had raised Jerome; he grew up in our home. How could I not know this most fundamental thing about him? What kind of mother was I, to leave him to navigate these trying waters all on his own? It's been seven years since Jerome came out and I continue to regret that our home was not a safe place where Jerome could talk about his sexuality with assurance that he would still belong, would always belong.

The second thing to wobble with this revelation was my understanding of scripture. I no longer knew how to approach the Bible. The simplicity I mentioned before no longer worked, because some of the things the Bible said about gay people, like my Jerome, were cruel, even outright wrong. But God is not cruel, is not wrong. How do I reconcile these two things? I still don't have a completely satisfying answer to this, but I have learned (am still learning?) to live in the tension. This requires a humility I did not have before. I hold tight to God who is good and kind and inclusive. A God who welcomes EVERYONE to the table and gives them a voice. My desire is to *have the same mind [in myself] that is in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 2:5) toward all who may not have felt welcome at the table. I am no longer a know-it-all Christian (thank God!) but I know the One who knows it all.

God of all Wisdom, clarify our misunderstandings, open our eyes to your revelations, and help us to rely on you and your love as the source of our knowledge.



“Chosen Family”

But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” Matthew 24:48-50

I have made many friends who are LGBTQ, but I'd like to share my story specifically about my friend Kris.

We met on the first day of college orientation. I thought he was straight at first, but when he told me his orientation, I wasn't totally surprised. Having been around out gay people in high school and

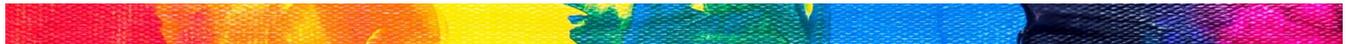
growing up in an open-minded home, it wasn't hard for me to accept. What I found difficult, was watching him go through two things.

First, he had never been in a situation like what college can offer you, so sometimes he would take chances that he did not need to take. He felt he needed to so he could understand himself a bit better. For example, he would meet strangers online and go meet them without telling me or his other friends.

The second aspect I worried about was his relationship with his mother. His parents grew up super conservative in the church and didn't believe that men could love other men. They believed physical love had to be between a woman and a man. After he came out, his mother stopped talking to him for a week. It was so hard to watch him go through this internal turmoil and to see him turned away by the people he needed most, his parents.

I tried to be there for him, but not understanding what exactly he was going through, made it difficult. Shortly after, Kris's mom realized that her son wasn't gay because of his decisions but because of who he was. They still have a weird relationship, but it's much better now that they have had open and honest communication.

Thank you, God, for placing people in our lives who help us see more clearly and those who become our chosen family. May the love we share offer kindness and care without reservation. Amen.



“Transitioning”

“For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him.” 1 Samuel 1:27

It is with joy that we write about our middle child, Matthew. He is transgender and began his transition over 15 years ago. He knew for years that he wasn't comfortable in his own body and that changes needed to happen so that he could lead a happy and productive life.

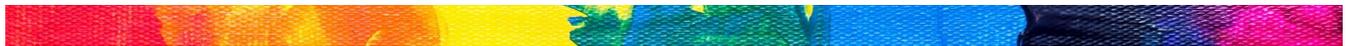
Throughout his early teens he was not quite sure where he belonged. He excelled in school and sports but wasn't always sure where he fit in socially. It was definitely his strength of character that pulled him through those years. We did not realize this, probably due to his positive outlook and happy demeanor.

Gradually over the years we saw Matthew changing physically. He kept his hair short, his dress more neutral. We knew he was changing but didn't know exactly how. We didn't have the courage to question him and instead just accepted him and the path that he was choosing.

In 2009 he wrote us a heartfelt letter explaining what was going on. He had come out to friends and siblings but not to us. This letter was a true turning point for us, as we now knew he felt more male than female or somewhere in between. Matthew was letting us know he was transgender and a combination of male and female identities. We made a firm commitment on that day to support and love Matthew throughout his transition and forever. As a family we needed to be there for him as he found his rightful place in life.

Matthew is still the same person on the inside: smart, capable, loving, hardworking, funny and brave. He is a wonderful parent to his two daughters, a skilled and compassionate nurse, and a loving and caring adult. More trans people are being accepted for who they are. Hopefully, in the future this will continue, as more paths will be open to them, and more parents will accept them and be proud of their courage. They are individuals who wish to make their mark in the world and see pathways to a happy future.

Transitional times can be difficult to navigate, God. Turning points can feel like the wilderness. Guide each person on our journey, that transitions might be smooth, leading to abundant life!



“Kindness and Respect”

By Shelley O’Brien, PRCC Director of Children’s Ministries

‘Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.’ Luke 6:37-38

Growing up, a lot of people come in and out of your life. There are some who are there for a short time, while others become a part of your family for the rest of your life. Doug is one of those people. I met him in middle school at Oakton Ice Rink. He was a fun, outgoing guy who everyone liked. He also went to school with my younger sister, Katie. Because we had lived in England, we had clothes and haircuts that were popular there in the 80’s punk scene, but had not yet made it to Park Ridge. Kids at the middle school were not kind to Katie. They would bother her at school and on her way home. One day as she was sharing her stories of what had happened, she told me that there was a boy who was very popular and was really nice to her. He talked to her at school and that day had walked with her part of the way home to make sure no one bothered her. She showed me who he was in the yearbook. It was my friend Doug. As a young middle school kid, he had an open mind and an open heart and was willing to accept all; no matter their differences. This is just one of the many things that made him so special.

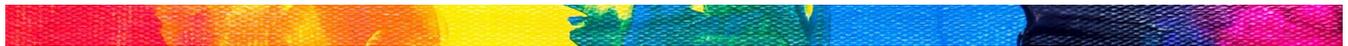
In college, he came out as gay. It was different back in the 80’s and 90’s and was not as easy to do. He went through some struggles initially in trying to navigate where he fit in in the gay community and the local community. People were not always kind. I remember one night in particular when we were out at a local restaurant. Some of the people we went to school with were making comments. I was so upset because here was a guy who accepted everyone and was kind to all. People were not treating

him with the same kindness and respect. It broke my heart that they did not see what a wonderful person he was and only saw that he was gay.

Doug touches the lives of everyone he meets. With his outgoing and friendly nature, he gets along with everyone. He is unapologetically himself and never tries to be someone he is not. Because of that, he is very popular in our community and has probably opened many people's eyes to be more accepting. I am so thankful that I have had such a devoted and true friend in my life.

Over the years, besides being an amazing son and brother and caring for his own family, he has become a member of our family as well. He is included in all family dinners, is always there for any of us with a present, some food, or making us smile. My kids have grown up considering him an uncle. They have always been very accepting of the LGBTQ community because they grew up with Doug. They know that love is love. God creates all people exactly the way they are supposed to be.

God of all, we long for a world in which all people would be treated with kindness and respect. We honor the people in our lives who have modeled selfless love. Thank you for these examples and treasured relationships!



“A Tale of Two Brothers”

“But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” ’ Luke 15:29-32

There are two brothers who love each other very much. At young ages, the little brother sleeps in the big brother's doorway until their parents combine their rooms.

The big brother (11) has just thrown his little brother (8) to the ground in front of several of his friends (or at least school mates that he is trying to impress). Their mother grabs the big brother, embarrassed that an older brother could treat his younger brother so poorly, and pulls them both from the ground to take them home from school. The big brother cannot believe that his younger brother wants to practice cartwheels with girls during recess. The little brother cannot believe his brother is so mean. They are brothers and spend a lot of time together, but are not friends. The big brother is very hard on his little brother. The years of adolescence go by.

The big brother (17) learns that his brother came out as gay; the little brother is entering freshman year of high school. The big brother is cold to his whole family, especially to his little brother. He

goes out with his friends, thinking he is cool, gets blackout drunk, and proceeds to scream obscenities when he gets home late. He punches cabinets in the family kitchen and cries himself to sleep.

The next day, the big brother visits with his youth minister at the request of his parents. He realizes that he has one brother who of course he loves, even if it is a repressed feeling. In a few short months, the big brother is off to college and the little brother is significantly happier.

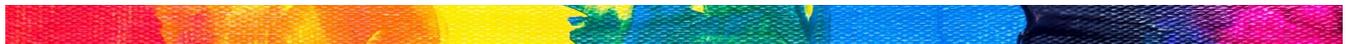
During his college years, he and his little brother hang out. Sometimes... when the big brother is home. They get along better. Sort of.

The little brother goes off to college. He makes a ton of friends and makes his own way. He is much happier. The big brother graduates from college and wants to spend more time with his brother. He starts to date a very kind open minded girl. The little brother immediately wants to hang out with her too. She is cool and pretty.

The three of them begin to hang out more and more. The fact that the little brother is gay is irrelevant at this point for the big brother. He loves his brother and his brother loves him back. They start to be true brothers again.

One of the happiest days of the big brother's life happened in the past few months. He has now married the nice girl. The little brother and his boyfriend recently got engaged. The big brother is so proud and happy and loves his brother and his brother's fiancé. He is happier now.

Timeless God, navigating relationships is sometimes more difficult than we would care to admit. Yet, over time, you help heal wounds, bridge chasms, and forge new paths. Be present as we navigate relationships with loved ones and strangers. Amen.



“Love Beyond Stigma”

By PRCC Member

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Matthew 25:40

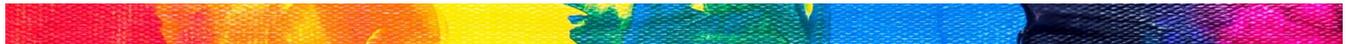
After graduating college I lived in NYC and worked as a nurse at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. It was the 1980s and we started seeing patients, mostly homosexual young men, being admitted with an unnamed and unknown immune deficiency syndrome which came to be known as AIDS. Back then, there were people who thought since this illness affected mostly gay people, it was God's way of punishing them for their behavior. I could never understand how people who considered themselves to be “religious” could think that God would punish people just for being themselves.

I think back to those days and think how much things have changed for the LBGQTQIA community and yet how little. These days there is more acceptance of a spectrum of sexual identities and gender orientations, but there remains a great deal of discrimination, and often times it comes from religious communities.

While the stigma against the LGBTQIA community disappoints and saddens me, I still have hope that by continuing to educate and discuss the ways people are different, and yet, the same can help to create greater acceptance. I appreciate PRCC for being willing to begin the process to become a space that is welcoming to all.

I recently came across the song, “ Drag Queens in Limousines” by Mary Gauthier. It’s a beautiful song with a wonderful message. There’s a line which I think is appropriate at this time and place: “sometimes you just gotta do what you gotta do and pray that the people you love will catch up with you.” If you get a chance, have a listen.

God in Community, Holy in One, we pray for progress in our understanding and care for our fellow human beings. Help us accept one another just as Christ accepts us. Release us from our tendency to judge others, and instead let us operate on a robust understanding of grace for all. Amen.



“What’s in a Name?”

By Rev. Andi Voinovich, UMC Pastor

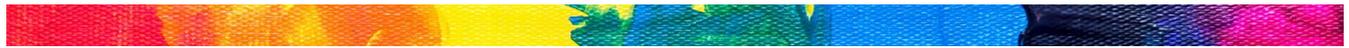
“Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.” Mark 13:33

Often the season of Advent is described as a time of waiting. We wait for the coming of Christ. Instead of waiting being a passive action, the verses from Mark 13:24-37 invite us to take a more active approach. These verses charge us with being alert! Be aware!

Throughout scripture, God calls upon the people to pay attention in a variety of ways. One such way is through names. Names have meaning and power. Think about it, in this season of Advent when we celebrate the coming of Christ, in Matthew’s account of the Christmas story, we learn that the child being born is to be named Emmanuel, which means “God is with us” (Matthew 1:23). If we look to the Old Testament, who can forget the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel? After wrestling, a man asks Jacob for his name and then tells him that he shall be named Israel for he “has striven with God and with humans and has prevailed” (Genesis 32:29). Just a verse later, Jacob, who is now Israel, names the place in which this moment occurs Peniel, where he had “seen God face to face and yet (his) life was preserved.”

In my own seeking to be alert, to be aware, through a time of prayer and discernment, names have been on my mind a lot lately. In paying attention to the ways God is moving in my life, I have decided it is time to invite you to use my new name. This is a name, Andi, that feels like a better fit for who I am and is a celebration of my relationship with my family. Andi is short for Andersen Reed Voinovich, a combination of surnames in my family. Sometimes names have meaning, and this is the meaning of mine.

Adonai, Elohim, Yahweh, Jesus, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, We have so many names to call you, and we know you listen. We pray and refer to you in ways that help us connect with you. Remind us of the power of names. When dear ones ask us to call them by a new name, help our responses be gracious and filled with acceptance. Shape our hearts in ways that can adapt to and embrace change rather than being threatened by it. Remind us that you know each of us by name. Amen.



“A Place to Belong”

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.. For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.”

Psalm 139:7-8, 13-14

It is interesting how one can internalize negativity and a completely arbitrary understanding of what is “normal.” That was my biggest struggle. I had (and have) the most loving and supportive family a kid could ever hope for, yet the prospect of being different was enough to cause me to struggle with anxiety, depression, and hopelessness.

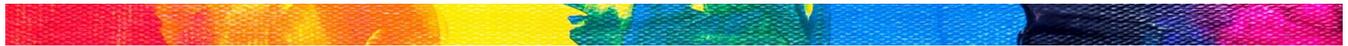
I felt laser-focused on my future and my goals but they felt so incongruent with my personal life. Silly as it may sound, and it feels silly to write, I had a perception that cops couldn't be gay. I actually had people tell me that. I thought I'd never be able to serve openly in the military because of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” so I didn't enlist after high school. Being gay felt like a barrier to everything I wanted to accomplish as a young adult. I repressed my feelings and my true self to achieve what I wanted at the expense of my mental health. I had support and love but I didn't have anyone to go to about my sexuality. I tried desperately to be “normal.” It's hard to not be indignant when people like you are being killed all over the world and denied basic civil rights in the nation you love and call home.

After some years, I decided, with a therapist's help, to opt for courage. If I wasn't going to be welcomed, I was going to forge my own path. I'm pleased to say I was so very, very wrong. I've only been welcomed with open arms. My friends and family care about who I am as a person. My coworkers on the police force care that I am willing to run towards danger with them. I have taken two separate oaths to the constitution; first as a police officer and very recently as a member of the National Guard. I have a fiancé whom I love more than I could ever possibly put into words, in addition to another loving and perfectly wonderful family.

Five years ago, if you had taken a snapshot of my life today, I would not have believed it for a second. The darkness would have shrouded my ability to see my future happiness. Now I have achieved my goals to serve my community and my country. I'm starting a family. All this had felt like a distant pipe dream.

I want to conclude by saying that what your church is doing truly makes a difference. At times, it may seem performative or hollow. If it can save a life; if it can make one LGBTQ+ person feel like they have a place they belong i.e. a place to be safe, a place to be themselves, it is worth it. It isn't always easy work or welcome work. But never, never stop. It changes the world one person at a time.

God of Sanctuary, you receive each person into the loving arms of your embrace, offering safety, welcome, home. Shatter our false assumptions of “normal” and replace them with visions of your creative genius. Teach us to love fully without reservation. Amen.



“Bearing One Another’s Burdens”

“Bear one another’s burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Galatians 6:2

We first discovered that one of our sons was gay when he was in his early twenties, after he had graduated from college. He had broken up with his partner who had wanted him to move from Chicago to New York. We were the last to know, and as one of his brothers said to us, “So he finally dropped the bomb” and let us know. I had always thought that one of his best friends was gay and would rib him a little about this.

I was always looking for potential girlfriends for him even though he had many female friends already. Anyway.....our oldest son came home one evening and was in tears with my wife as he divulged his sorrow about breaking up with his partner. I got home a little later from work and on hearing this; my first reaction was that I had lost a son.

Two hours later I called him to say that I loved him and that we fully supported him. My wife did not have my initial reaction about “having lost a son”. His coming out was I think a great relief to him, like a burden lifted, and our support for him only enhanced our relationship with him that had always been very strong. His brothers and many friends had known about this for years! Certainly this experience has opened our eyes and provided new perspectives for us.

From an historical perspective, one has to remember that even in modern western democracies, being gay was a crime not too long ago and is still punishable by death in certain cultures. In 1952 the famous British mathematician, Alan Turing, was prosecuted for his homosexuality and chemically castrated for his “criminal offense”. He committed suicide two years later. His mathematical genius had helped save Europe in WWII with his decoding computers. We have come a long way in our ability to accept others.

God of Grace, we lament how long it has taken us to understand the beauty in your creation of LGBTQ persons. We confess our own shortcomings in what we’ve said or left unsaid. Help us to

allow our newfound perspectives to shine forth in this moment you've given us. May we not waste a single second we are given. Give us courage for the facing of this hour. Amen.



“Sacred Worth”

By Rev. Amy Foster, Pastor Mollie’s Mom

“Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” Romans 12:10-13

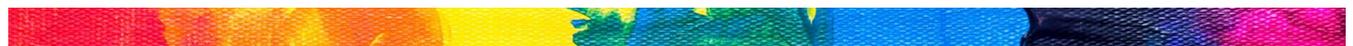
In 1993, my brother, at the age of 30 was diagnosed as being HIV positive. Shortly thereafter he developed both mental and physical health issues. At times he needed care from extended family members.

I remember it like it was yesterday when I received a frantic call from my mother saying that I needed to travel to Dallas immediately as my brother had been admitted to the hospital. He was very sick and very scared and it was more than my parents could handle. I promptly started packing a bag and making arrangements so that I could go help care for him. Now this was more than my husband could handle. At the time, it seemed as if we were the only ones in rural Kansas to openly know someone who was openly gay and living with HIV/AIDS. My husband was not at all comfortable with me taking an abrupt open ended trip to Texas, and leaving him at home with our three small children.

In the midst of our somewhat heated discussion my husband blurted out, “just what do I tell the kids?” My response was simply to tell them that their mother was going to go help her brother, because that’s what siblings do.

What better way to raise children than to lead by example by caring for and loving one another with an unconditional, undying love. My brother’s life was no less sacred than mine. Isn’t that what Jesus taught about? As siblings in Christ, it is our sacred privilege and responsibility to love one another. Love is never inconvenient and surpasses all understanding.

Creator God; you have formed each and everyone of us in love. Help us to be love in all that we say and do. Forgive us for the times when we shy away from stepping in to extend love. Be patient with us as we grow to become the people whom you have created us to be. Amen.



“Denouncing Bigotry”

By PRCC Member

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” John 8:31-32

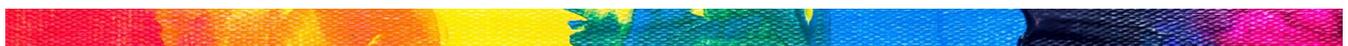
In September 2019, McKrae Game, a well known, infamous advocate for conversion therapy came out as gay and tried to apologize for his role in promoting the quackery that is conversion therapy (and

emboldening the morons who believe in it). And while it's not my place to speak on that apology, I will note that many of the comments I saw from LGBTQIA+ persons who had been harmed by conversion therapy were understandably less than forgiving.

I've said this before: as a young Black kid, one of the tools I had against racism, was a community of melanin that assured me that I am not less than because of my skin color. I knew that people that I trusted and loved would always build me up. And it was not lost on me that racists were directly insulted and no one ever told me I needed to walk with racists or help anyone get over their racism. And when I hear the stories of LGBTQIA+ persons who have endured the harm of our collective homophobia and transphobia, I cannot help but wonder how much harm could have been avoided if those young persons heard more people unapologetically denouncing conversion therapy and homophobia/transphobia in all its various forms. What if a young trans person heard someone - ANYONE - affirming their worth AND also directly challenging the harmful statements of bigots? How much better would life have been for someone we lost, or someone still alive but still dealing with the trauma of a world that devalued them? What if we hadn't failed them with our silence?

My calling is to loudly proclaim that I believe that God celebrates when a same sex couple finds each other, and that couple engages in a healthy relationship, marriage or not. I also believe that God 100% accepts all trans persons and that God in no way feels that a person's transition is a statement that "God made a mistake." I truly believe that marginalized people NEED to hear their allies STRONGLY denouncing bigotry.

God of Truth, give us courage to unapologetically defend and resist evil in all its forms. Use our words and actions to convey unequivocally your claim and care for all people, including every single person in the LGBTQIA+ community.



"Equality over Acceptance"

As printed in the July 26, 2020 McKinney Courier-Gazette

"Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of one's house, it would be utterly scorned." Song of Solomon 8:7

We, as a family, are absolutely thrilled about the recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling for LGBTQ Americans to be protected from discrimination in employment. This is especially important at a time of crisis when so many, like our son-in-law, have lost their jobs because of the pandemic. However, this is only a step towards equality and inclusion, with so much more work to do.

A few years ago, we moved from Los Angeles to McKinney, just outside of Dallas. Work brought us here and we've been able to build a community to make it home. With our move, we were very intentional about finding a church that would be welcoming to our gay sons, Derek and Kyle, when they came to visit. Despite being longtime members of the Methodist Church, we were still struggling

with how our church in California went through a rocky period, reconciling with the inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

It was important that our new church in McKinney had those values. We've made an effort to inform and educate, talking to people at our new church to bring them closer to being allies. Within faith communities, acceptance shouldn't be questioned; we are taught to just love everybody regardless of their orientation or identity.

Our LGBTQ advocacy began when our boys came out to us in 2013. Then, we began listening to really understand what it meant to be a parent to gay sons. It was the basis of our beliefs and attitudes that we are commanded by our God to be loving to others. Our sons just expanded our horizons.

But, we continue to worry about the discrimination our sons face in their every day lives. Our younger son Kyle has been hurt terribly by his church in New York. He has a love for God that's so strong, but they wouldn't allow him to serve or even stack chairs because he's gay. He eventually left because it broke his heart. It's hard for us to see that he's not able to serve in the way he'd like.

Someone who discriminates is unwilling to try to understand where someone else fits in, similar to white privilege. Discrimination is harmful in so many ways, whether physically, emotionally or financially.

Our faith, religion and church strongly discourage discrimination, it goes against the teachings of Jesus. We recognize that people are afraid and discriminate against people for things they don't understand. So, we want to help educate people, but we also want to see our lawmakers step up as there are currently no explicit statewide nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ Texans.

Our sons are working adults and contributing members of society. If you knew them, you'd love them just as much as we do. We want to see them have all the same opportunities to achieve their dreams whether in their careers, community, faith, marriage or having a family. They deserve that. But, in order to see those dreams become reality, we need equality.

God of Justice, help us to realize equality for each of your children. We pray that every individual could be fully themselves, and not face discrimination in any form whatsoever. Wash over us, over our society, and instill in us a sense of your justice. Amen.



“The Best Wedding of 2001”

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’” Mark 9:35-37

For the first time in their adult life, they wanted to find a community of faith. They had lived together for a decade and wanted to be married before God. I agreed, and we met for five pre-marriage counseling sessions.

I introduced them to the fascinating world of Reformed Church of America (RCA) liturgy. Is there some flexibility, they wanted to know? They rolled up their sleeves and we walked through it line by line.

When I spoke of the Call to Worship as an invitation into a sacred space, they wondered where this came from? “A few verses from the Psalms,” I said. They were unfamiliar with the book so they asked to table this decision.

At our next meeting they admitted to reading the entire book of Psalms. They were searching for a Call to Worship that resonated with their sensitivities. Frankly, they were both comforted and bothered by the book’s complexity.

Still, they named five they saw as personally meaningful and possibly usable. They also highlighted gospel passages and epistle readings for consideration. They thought I could make the final selection but they still had a few questions.

How could God be portrayed as present and loving, but also absent and hostile? How could Paul write about grace and love, then argue against other believers? How could Jesus teach about healing and forgiveness, then get so defensive?

Gradually it became clear that we were no longer planning a wedding. Writing their vows, planning the music and selecting the hymns was met with similar intensity, more questions, more searching.

As they grew in understanding, we were walking down a faith journey that married respect with reflection, appreciation with apprehension, a love for the Light of the World with concerns for how that Light gets filtered.

Finally the day of the ceremony arrived and pieces came together like the flowers, ferns and ribbons in the wedding bouquets. The words were rich with meaning and tailored to fit the occasion. The vows were exchanged with sincerity, prayers offered with grace, the hymns sung by a congregation of supportive family and friends. By the benediction, tears were rolling down many cheeks.

All hell broke loose a month later. The news got out that I had blessed a same-sex union without the blessing of my consistory.

A sweetly prepared and spiritually uplifting worship service was soured by angry threats to end my pastorate. Colleagues muttered about how I needed to lose my ordination. There was a hearing of concerns, a formal reprimand to follow proper protocol next time. I didn't mind. At a place deeper than protocol was a wedding that had it all.

Fifteen years later, Gary and Steve are still married, now legally. While the RCA continues to argue about the Biblical support for their love, they continue to read more of the Bible and offer these observations:

How is it that the church hesitates to bless our marriage? Why is the church okay with some really messed up, offensive relationships in the Bible, but not ours?

Why can't the RCA bless marriages like ours that are loving and faithful? The more the RCA argues about our marriage, the less likely we are to ever go to a RCA church – unless, more pastors risk being open and affirming.

God, your church has striven to be faithful and welcoming, but too often has failed. Give strength to those who are helping to encourage inclusion at denominational, national, regional, and local levels. Help us to not give up until every place that preaches the love of Jesus Christ would also welcome each and every child in your name. Amen.



“Finding A Voice”

By PRCC Member

*Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable.
Speak out in order to judge with righteousness and to defend the needy and the poor.
Proverbs 31:8-10*

The queer community has always been skewed toward the odd and disenfranchised, bursting at the seams with people and groups that have been relegated to the margins of society. Language changes and evolves, and so have we — people who, in bygone eras have been called gay, bent, or fey, have carved out for ourselves language from the discard pile of English etymology to render legible some portion of our identities. Some of those have been labels we created ourselves, terms like “a friend of

Dorothy,” a shibboleth among gay men since 1939; sapphic (c.f. Sappho, ancient greek poet who was both Lesbian and from the isle of Lesbos), an all-encompassing identifier for women who love women; enby (derived from “nb,” for “nonbinary”), a person who doesn’t fit into a strict binary gender; and agender, which describes people who don’t feel described by gender at all. As Walt Whitman, perhaps channeling the queer community, wrote: “Do I contradict myself?//Very well then I contradict myself;//(I am large, I contain multitudes.)”

At the heart of all these identifiers is a recognition of an inherent community, that we use code words to name ourselves, to give voice to a piece of ourselves, and let other people know they’re seen. Queer radicals have argued for more than half a century the essential humanity that binds us together, which demands to be seen, heard, and acknowledged. Radical, here, does not only demand upheaval or change; it also speaks to the Latin radix, or root — “queerness” being that thing which connects all the multifarious identities of queer people. Having a shared language is essential to describing and contextualizing a community based on shared experiences of exclusion, miscommunication, and silence. How we are heard, how we communicate, how we give voice to our identities is an important part of the reality of being queer.

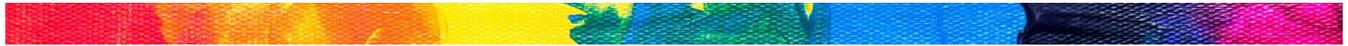
Over two years ago I started working with a group of queer singers, acousticians, and vocalists who introduced me to the concept of vocal gender work. They addressed a need I had seen in the trans community myself, a lack of support for people who wanted to change their voice to more closely reflect their gender. The human voice is a complex instrument, one that we are trained in from birth, created from the sum of all the habits and abilities one acquires over one’s lifetime. As infants are taught to speak, so are they taught vocal models, where we are trained to identify certain sounds as feminine, and others as masculine. That modeling affects the voice we develop later in life, and which, over time, we habituate to. This leaves some trans people with voices that are the results of socialization as their assigned gender at birth, leaving them with vocal habits that can be psychologically painful and dysphoria-inducing.

In the last two years I have worked with hundreds of trans men, women, enbies, and other folk who are learning to alter their voices, to be perceived as the gender they are. This gender-affirming voice work has helped them find voices that reflect their authentic selves, that let them safely navigate a world that is often hostile to their existence. While I have always been an enthusiast of the voice, and while I had been teaching voice for about ten years at the time, that kind of vocal transformation had not seemed possible to me. The work we’re doing now is literally at the cutting edge, and is a marriage of many fields that have long been of interest to me, including linguistics, phonetics, acoustics, neurology, and vocal pedagogy. In many ways, I was in the right place at the right time, with skills that happened to be of use to a marginalized community. The work I’ve been called to feels, in many ways, reminiscent of Proverbs 31:8-10:

Speak out on behalf of the voiceless,
and for the rights of all who are vulnerable.
Speak out in order to judge with righteousness
and to defend the needy and the poor.

We are called to be the voice of the voiceless, to empower others with speech, to give them the power to safely name themselves and be themselves. Christ's calling is to practice radical love, love that not only changes the world around us, but that love which is the root of all things and which binds all things together.

Holy One, be the voice crying out among us. Lift up the voices in our midst. Give us courage to listen well and respond in love. Amen.



“Overcoming Fear”

By Pastor Mollie Foster, PRCC Associate Minister

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because God first loved us.” 1 John 4:17-19

“I’m gay.”

Two words that have been the most freeing words I have ever said, to myself and others, in my life.

“I’m gay.”

Two words that have been the most terrifying words I have ever said, to myself and others, in my life.

I never believed there was something wrong, bad, or sinful with being anything other than straight/cis-gendered. But I did feel that being anything other than straight/cis gendered meant that a person was just that...an “other”.

Growing up in central Kansas in the 1980s-1990s, I surprisingly knew A LOT of non-straight people; my uncle, aunt, cousins, younger brother (even though he was not “out”, we knew). This was never talked about in our family. The “gays” were never talked about as “the gays”. They were simply just people like everyone else. You would think that coming out would be a piece of cake knowing that my family would not bat an eye or change a tune in hearing me say those freeing, yet terrifying, words.

I didn’t come out until I was 34 years old (I’m nearly 38 today). But I ALWAYS knew. It is something that I do not know how to separate from myself anymore than to acknowledge that I have blue eyes, short arms, and wide feet. It is who I am and how I was created to be.

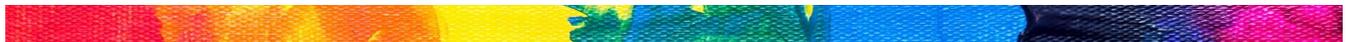
So, why did it take 34 years to say the words? Fear. Fear of all the questions, losing my calling and career, a chance to have a family, looks in public, safety, etc. Fear of others. When sharing this with others, I cringe at hearing the words “I accept you” or “I knew there was something different about you”, or (my least fav) “I love you, anyways.”, As if there is something against the norm or odd, that needs to be loved in spite of or welcomed. It’s easy to tell yourself not to worry about what others think, but living it is a different story. I have lost friends in my life. Almost every time Carrie and I go out to eat (you know, back in the day when it was cool) we are asked by the server repeatedly if we are sisters or what our relationship is to one another (I have tried to contain my eye rolls). We are aware of our surroundings at all times while traveling. We are introduced to others as “special friends” rather than girlfriend or partner. These things, and many more, have never eased.

Even today, as I’m writing this, I am a little terrified. My thoughts feel like a huge jumbled, incoherent, hot mess in trying to clearly articulate what it’s like to come out and to live in the reality.

What I do know is that it became unbearable within me to not be true to myself. The fears do not go away, but rather, I have learned to live with them.

It’s not easy and sometimes fearful. But it is the most beautiful and authentic part of me; love. It’s just as simple as that. It’s just love! And love is always a part of God. True love of self and others is never sinful, odd, different, or something that needs to be accepted in spite of.

God of Love, let your love abound. Teach us words to say that not only convey your perfect love, but also cast out fear. Thank you for placing prophets in our midst who teach us and help us understand your love more fully. Amen.



“Safe Space”
Ministries

By Sasha Gerritson, PRCC Director of Music

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me.”

John 14:1

Many of you know that I’ve grown up in church, having acquired my first “church job” at the age of 14, and I suspect it’s no secret that I’ve simultaneously grown up in the theatre community, since around the same time.

The theatre world has long been known as a safe haven for the members of the LGBTQ community. I grew up from an early age having many gay and lesbian friends, people who were comfortable being “out” and unafraid to be exactly who they were. I never thought anything of it, truth be told. She has a girlfriend, I have a boyfriend, you have a girlfriend or a boyfriend, he has a boyfriend, okay, so what. “If you truly love someone, why should it matter what race or gender they are?” I said to myself. I could never understand the anger that some people felt, expressed and acted upon regarding this. And I

never understood a religious community turning its back on a member or friend because they were gay. What??? The same church that tells of Jesus' limitless love for all people, regardless of any single thing? I don't get it! But, as I was taught to do from my childhood, I kept my mouth shut, believed what I believed, remained true to myself and my beliefs, but didn't make waves. Until one day a young person from our community, but not our church, passed through the doors of the choir room, and he made me see things in a different light.

This young person, I'll call him "Steve" for the sake of this article, but that wasn't his name, was a friend of another person who took voice lessons from me. This was back around 1999/2000. He came to observe and possibly take lessons from me. I didn't know a thing about him, meeting him for the first time that day. I gave my student a piece from the show "Rent", a modern day retelling of the La Bohème story, set in the early 1990's, at the height of the AIDS epidemic. The character I was coaching the student on was a gay character, and we were discussing different emotions and intentions, gestures and approaches to interpreting this song in an authentic way.

At one point Steve interjected "hey Miss Sasha, won't you get in trouble for talking about that stuff in church?" (We were having the lesson in the choir room). I stopped short. "About what stuff?" "You know, the 'gay' stuff". "No, it's perfectly appropriate in the context of the character from the play, but I'm curious, why would you ask that?" "Well at my church we are NOT allowed to discuss that stuff. I'd get in a TON of trouble bringing up anything like that. Our pastor told us that if we did have feelings like that we should pray really hard to Jesus to help us get over it." He looked pained and I noticed his eyes filled up with tears.

I quickly realized what this kid, around age 15, was telling me. He was gay. He tried to bring it up at his church and was told to essentially "pray away the gay". I wasn't sure what to do. I knew what I believed in my heart, but I thought I probably shouldn't tell this young man, who I just met, from a neighboring church, whose parents I didn't know, my take on all that. But I did.

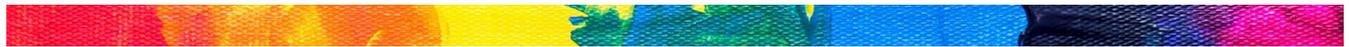
"Steve, I don't know what church you go to, and I'm not asking you to tell me, but can I tell you what I believe and what I've experienced in this church, PRCC?" He nodded.

"I believe that God loves us all, no matter what. I believe that we are not judged for the persons we are attracted to or wish to marry or fall in love with. I believe that it is perfectly normal to be gay or straight or bisexual, whatever. Makes no difference to God. I believe that you cannot simply "pray away the gay", because it's part of a person's DNA. And I believe Jesus Christ accepts and loves us all. And my experience at this church has been that all people are loved and welcomed. There are gay and lesbian people here and it's no big deal, because, well, it's NOT a big deal. I mean who cares who you are in relationship with, just be you and try to be the best person you can be."

Steve nodded and smiled. Then said “I wish I went to church here.” And I smiled back and said “You are always welcome, please know that”. I heard the words from John 14:1 “Let not your heart be troubled” in my head. I said a prayer for Steve and his journey, which I knew might be a rocky road.

Over the years Steve sometimes took a voice lesson or coaching. He always remembered our talk and would often hug me. Years later, after college, he felt comfortable coming out to his family and friends. He is happily married now, to the love of his life.

God of All, you call your church to be a safe harbor for those in life’s storms. We have failed too often. Remind us how to be faithful in loving boldly, speaking truth, and ensuring that every single one of your Beloved children have a safe space to be. Grant us your peace when we are stepping out onto the waters, especially when those steps usher a Beloved One into your safe and all-encompassing love. Amen.



“Being a Mom”

“I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Amos 5:21-24

Three years ago, when my teenage son came out to me as bisexual, my first feeling was one of gratitude that he felt safe sharing this information with his father and myself, because he knew it would not change a thing about how much we love him and accept him just as he is. You see, despite the Reformed Church of America’s (RCA) failure to take an open and affirming stance on LGBTQ inclusion in every aspect of our denominational and church life, we believe that if the gospel is good news for some, it is good news for all – without exceptions and without stigma and shame. The current reality, however, that would threaten to deny my son the opportunity to marry in our Reformed church if he loved and wanted to commit to another man, breaks our hearts.

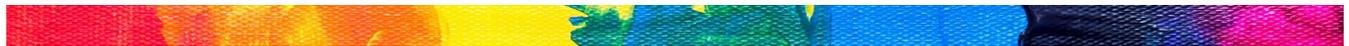
This is the church where our son was baptized, confirmed, made a profession of faith, served, taught Sunday school for the younger children in our church, participated in mission trips, and has been beloved in our local church since infancy. Consider carefully the message we communicate to our youth about their sexuality, if we expect them to deny themselves the opportunity that those of us who are hetero-normative take for granted, to live a life blessed by covenantal relationship and love. This message tells them that their God-given identity is somehow sinful or even evil.

My particular church is blessed to have a pastor who has always had an open, affirming and inclusive belief system. But my heart aches for the likely hundreds or even thousands of youth in our denomination who, instead of being able to feel loved and affirmed just as they were created by God,

will instead hide their sexual identity; or disconnect from church life; or continue to participate in church life but with overwhelming shame and grief; or leave their homes because they are not accepted; or worse, succumb to the horrible tragedy of taking their own lives, as so often happens to LGBTQ youth who are not accepted by their churches and families.

I love the church, and I love the RCA. But if we are committed to always be reformed and reforming and take seriously our mission to be “Transformed and Transforming,” then perhaps we need to start where the pain and divide is the deepest and consider that no theological difference, short of denying the life, death and resurrection of Christ, is worth breaking unity and tearing apart our denomination. We can agree to disagree but we cannot survive as a denomination in the long run if we cannot make room for all.

Thank you, O God, for the loved ones who have stood with their children, parents, friends, cousins, uncles, aunts, neighbors, teachers, pastors, and strangers amplifying voices, sharing stories, and not allowing judgement or condemnation to have the last word. Give us courage to engage the ministries of justice rather than looking the other way.



“Let’s Talk about BiSexuality”

“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them: male and female he created them...God saw everything that God had made and indeed, it was very good.” Genesis 1:27, 31

“I don’t want to hide anymore.”

These are the words I have been saying to myself (and my therapist) a lot this past year and a half. You see, I am bisexual, and in September 2017, I started the process of coming out: first to my husband and close family, then to some of my close friends, and eventually to my colleagues, youth, and parishioners. And on October 11, 2018 (National Coming Out Day), I finally made a coming out announcement to my social media friends. Well, most of them... (thanks to the “limited profile” and “friends except...” options on facebook.) I was not yet ready to come out to everyone and deal with some of the potential responses.

While most of my coming out experiences have been really positive, liberating, and healing, I was still concerned about writing this blog piece and exposing this part of myself to so many people. You see, even when I came out to people in LGBTQIA+ affirming communities, my sexual orientation was still often misunderstood. (The “B” seemed to be missing.)

“Why does it matter? You’re married.” “I don’t get it. What does that mean to be bisexual and married to a man?” “You’re not leaving your husband, are you?” “Well, it’s not like you’re going to post this on your blog for everyone to see, right?”

I was also asked several incredibly inappropriate and personal questions about my sexual life that I am pretty sure those who asked these questions would never have asked any of their other friends.

These questions have been exhausting.

I quickly learned that I needed to have what felt like a detailed persuasive essay ready to share about why my sexual orientation was legitimate and what it meant for me to come out as a bisexual cisgender woman in a monogamous marriage to a straight cisgender man. And I have come to realize that – like all bi(+) folks – once I came out the first time, I had started my journey of a life-long coming-out process.

Since I started coming out, I have been in conversation with many other individuals who identify as bi(+) and I have come to learn that I am not alone in feeling misunderstood and invisible. Bisexuality is incredibly misunderstood, even in some of the most LGBTQIA+ affirming churches and communities. And while bisexuality is becoming more accepted within society, biphobia and bi erasure are still alive and well.

Bisexual(+) persons are commonly thought to be over-sexualized, promiscuous, incapable of commitment, more likely to cheat, and greedy. (“Why can’t they just choose one gender?”) Sometimes when bisexual(+) people come out, it is assumed that their bisexuality is just a phase before they actually “really come out” as lesbian or gay. (“Bisexuals don’t exist. He is just confused.”) Bisexual(+) individuals are also often presumed to be polyamorous. (While some bisexual individuals might be polyamorous, polyamory and bisexuality are not synonymous.) We are sometimes seen as “not queer enough” or as “just seeking attention.” We are commonly assumed to be gay, lesbian, or straight, depending on the gender of the person we are in relationship with. (“She is married to a man, so she must be straight.”)

Many bisexual(+) people feel invisible and erased, no matter what community we are in. And for this reason, we can feel incredibly isolated and lonely, as we cannot seem to find a place where we belong or are accepted.

In our society, we have been trained to understand the world in the binary: people must fit into one of only two boxes. So it is difficult to understand anyone who does not fit into one of these two boxes and rather falls somewhere on a spectrum. In regards to sexual orientation: it is often our tendency to believe a person can be attracted to and capable of being in a romantic and/or sexual relationship with someone of either another gender or the same gender. Yet, we tend to have difficulty comprehending how people might also be attracted to multiple genders.

(This is similar in terms of gender identity, as well. We have been trained to believe that there are only two genders (male and female), so we often have difficulty understanding that there are multiple genders and that some people are genderfluid, non-binary, agender, or another gender minority.)

Gender preferences for bi(+) people fall on a spectrum. Bi(+) persons may have particular preferences and may not be attracted to all genders equally. Preferences may also be fluid and change at different times in a person's life.

Every human being is a unique individual. And this is true for those of us who are bisexual(+). Therefore, we need to stop making assumptions and generalizations about bisexual(+) people... And while we're at it: let's just stop making assumptions and generalizations about anyone.

One statistic that often surprises people is that bisexual(+) individuals make up the largest population of the LGBTQIA+ community. Yet, because we are still commonly misunderstood, erased, and our sexuality continues to be delegitimized (both inside and outside LGBTQIA+ communities), only 28% say that we are out about our bisexuality to some or all of the people who are most important in our lives.

And according to the Human Rights Campaign, because of all the struggles bisexual individuals bump up against, they “suffer significantly higher rates of depression and anxiety, domestic violence, sexual assault, and poverty than lesbians, gay men, or straight cisgender people.”

If our faith communities claim they are places that welcome, include, care for, and celebrate all persons for who God created them to be, then we – in the Church – must do a better job of actually creating these welcoming spaces for ALL people, including our bisexual(+) siblings (and all others who are being erased, ignored, and marginalized.)

We need to continuously do our research in order to educate ourselves and our congregations about biphobia, bi erasure, and how to best support and include our bi(+) siblings. We need to offer opportunities for our bisexual(+) siblings to share their stories, offer their insights, and participate in the leadership of the church. We need to work hard at not making assumptions about someone's sexuality and/or what that means about that individual's personal life. We need to be intentional about using bi-inclusive language in our sermons, liturgy, and every-day conversations, listen as a means to seek understanding, and refrain from asking intrusive and inappropriate questions. We need to shut down all biphobic comments, speak out for and with our bi+ siblings, and join them in advocating for equal rights and treatment. (And we should be doing this for our siblings of all sexualities and gender identities, as well.)

I keep going back to the question I have often received when coming out: “Why does it matter?”

For me, it matters because my sexual orientation is about more than the gender of the person I am in a sexual and/or romantic relationship with. It is about what desires I have, how I connect with people, where I find a sense of community and belonging, and how I look at and interact with the world.

It matters because it is a part of who I am. When I denied this part of me or kept it silent, I carried a lot of shame and withheld a big part of who I am from God, others, and myself. Yet, I was created in God's image, I am beautifully and wonderfully made in all of my bi-ness, and God loves me just the way I am. And nothing and no one can take that away from me: not even another person's disapproval, discomfort, or lack of understanding.

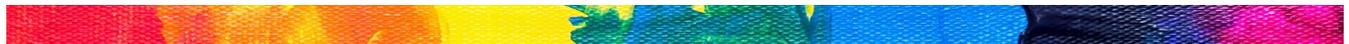
It matters because I do exist. And I should be free to feel proud of and celebrate the person God created me to be, rather than be made to feel so ashamed about who I am that I must keep it a secret.

It matters because there are many others who are not out due to their fear that nobody would understand or accept them. I want them to know that they are celebrated for who they are and that they are not alone.

No, I don't want to hide anymore. And I should not have to because others are uncomfortable or disapprove. And neither should anyone else be forced to hide if they do not want to.

So let us lead the Church in becoming a welcoming, loving, and affirming place for ALL people. Let us create safe, non-judgmental spaces for others to feel they can be true to themselves and can share their stories. Let us intentionally create spaces where people not only feel welcomed WHEN they share, but where they know they will have a safe space to share in the first place.

Forgive us, God, when our actions have hurt one of your Beloved Children. Help us create loving spaces where all feel safe and no one is invisible or feels forced to hide pieces of themselves. Teach us to recognize your divine image in each one.



"I Was Wrong"

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one." Matthew 18:15

One of the gifts of God I am learning to receive is the ability to admit I was wrong. I may have been wrong for many reasons (fear, unwillingness to be open to new ideas, apathy, anger, unsure of where I would end up if I let other ideas go).

About 4-5 years ago I felt compelled to readdress some conclusions I had held to for many years regarding what the Bible says and doesn't say about sexuality and gender. I was very nervous, because at that time I was in a denomination that I appreciated and had brought great warmth and friendships to me. So, I knew that if I changed my mind, there would be other decisions and consequences I would have to move into because of my growing desire to live from an authentic place.

I scoured the internet for articles, bought many books on Amazon, and attended a conference on human sexuality. After reading well over 1,000 – 1,500 pages and spending hundreds of hours thinking and talking with others, I decided I need to let go of my old thoughts concerning sexuality and learn to embrace the new idea, no matter where it took me.

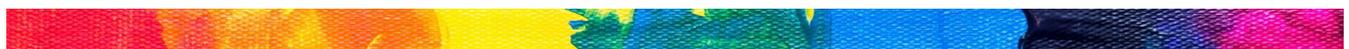
So, I made the inner choice: I will find a minister position that will allow me to fully embrace inclusion of LGBTQ individuals.

That decision (along with the grace of God and the love of my wife) led me to The Reformed Church of Poughkeepsie, where they said, “We want to be a church for everyone – no matter what. Period.” That brought me relief, because that meant me as well – a person, a pastor, who was trying to follow the Spirit’s leading and at times not doing it in a stellar way.

I am still learning what this new idea is bringing me. This is what I found to be the second gift: when I expanded my idea of who I thought God was pleased with, I found myself being loved even deeper, held even tighter, and with a new but mysterious kind of certainty that is found when one can say, “I might not be correct about this, let me (re)consider it.”

For me, my life changed when I began to think differently concerning my LGBTQ brothers and sisters. For that, my life has radically changed. It’s a new life, a second beginning. My prayer is that many more will rapidly and deeply reevaluate their views on the LGBTQ brothers and sisters around us and that the Spirit will baptize us anew and lead us forward to being ONE.

Forgiving God, help me to admit when I am wrong and have the courage to seek forgiveness and reconciliation. Open our eyes to the expansiveness of your love. Amen.



“Making Space for Grace”

“Have mercy on me, Lord, because I’m depressed. My vision fails because of my grief, as do my spirit and my body.” Psalm 31:9

On one of my visits with my 75 year old dad, we talked about my brother Richard—who we called “Ricky.” Ricky was gay and schizophrenic. He died of AIDS in 1996 at the age of 34.

During our conversation, Papí revealed his pain and grief over his estranged relationship with his first born child. He kept Ricky’s “issues” a secret. Denied them. “I didn’t want people to know.” “What if they made fun of me?” “Or said mean things about him?”

The tears of regret streamed down his face.

This father struggled: with loving his son fully; not having the resources and community necessary to help him with his mixed and deep feelings of love, shame and fear as a Latino father of a gay and mentally ill son; and, wanting to protect him from the pain an unwelcome world would bring.

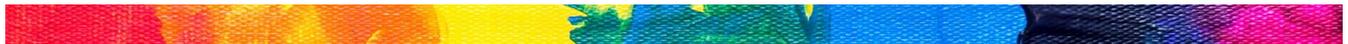
I had been angry at my father for hiding the truth about my brother until the day he, Ricky, lay in the hospital bed dying. That afternoon I listened. I saw his pain. I witnessed his love. I felt his regret.

I forgave my father. I believe that Ricky, watching down from heaven forgave him that day, too.

My family's story is a reminder that silence, secrets, shame and fear around sexuality and mental illness hurt everyone. While there has been much progress made since 1996, it is also a reminder of the resources still needed for the Latinx community to engage in the vital work around LGBTQIA issues within our unique and complex cultural settings.

Grace makes space for difficult work to happen in order for all to be truly welcome.

Loving God, Your compassion and mercy fail not. Help us to offer compassion to all seeking to more fully love and live out loud. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.



“Worshipping Fully”

“Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 3:13-14

I am an evangelist. I invite people to trust God with their whole being. For many years, my prayer has been to offer my own vulnerability in the struggle for LGBT inclusion. This prayer brings the challenge of being authentic on the journey.

As an openly lesbian United Methodist, my presence is “rewarded” with uncomfortable looks and hurtful situations. I can feel the hate.

But this vulnerability, this effort to keep my guard down, also allows me to worship with an open spirit and to sing the hymns in a way that fills my heart and soul for the good. I can feel the love as well. I am confident in Christ. I invite others to join me in faith.

The effort to educate, pray and cajole the UMC toward inclusion has been very important to me. I have committed my life and my passion to this for years. I have been faithful.

I think of Paul in Philippians 3. He was a role model for “righteous under the law, blameless”. Me too!

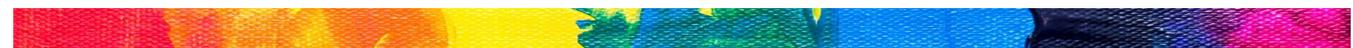
Then Paul divested from that way of thinking. He began to regard former place and privilege as rubbish. Paul put his trust in God, his faith in Christ.

Julie and I are church people; we have invested sacrificially in the United Methodist Church. But we are not to trust the church more than God. Our second class membership becomes a second class witness.

We need to worship in a place where we can invite others into the community — without warning them to keep their guard up.

We can no longer abide the duplicity of the UMC. We have had to go elsewhere—a neighborhood UCC—where we can invite others... to be authentic, to trust God, and thrive in the Spirit.

Help me to listen to the voices of the teachers you have put in my life, those whose wisdom surpasses my own and helps me to strain forward to what lies ahead. Holy One, guide this journey of life and faith we are each on. Help me to not dwell on the past, but rather to learn from it, and we move forward into the future you have for us - a future filled with hope, love, and justice for each one. Amen.



Opinion on Same Sex Marriage

By Justice Anthony Kennedy

“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.” Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

From their beginning to their most recent page, the annals of human history reveal the transcendent importance of marriage. The lifelong union of a man and a woman always has promised nobility and dignity to all persons, without regard to their station in life. Marriage is sacred to those who live by their religions and offers unique fulfillment to those who find meaning in the secular realm. Its dynamic allows two people to find a life that could not be found alone, for a marriage becomes greater than just the two persons. Rising from the most basic human needs, marriage is essential to our most profound hopes and aspirations.

The centrality of marriage to the human condition makes it unsurprising that the institution has existed for millennia and across civilizations. Since the dawn of history, marriage has transformed strangers into relatives, binding families and societies together. Confucius taught that marriage lies at the foundation of government.

This wisdom was echoed centuries later and half a world away by Cicero, who wrote, “The first bond of society is marriage; next, children; and then the family.” See *De Officiis* 57 (W. Miller transl. 1913). There are untold references to the beauty of marriage in religious and philosophical texts spanning time, cultures, and faiths, as well as in art and literature in all their forms. It is fair and necessary to say these references were based on the understanding that marriage is a union between two persons of the opposite sex.

That history is the beginning of these cases. The respondents say it should be the end as well. To them, it would demean a timeless institution if the concept and lawful status of marriage were extended to two persons of the same sex. Marriage, in their view, is by its nature a gender-differentiated union of man and woman. This view long has been held—and continues to be held—in good faith by reasonable and sincere people here and throughout the world.

The petitioners acknowledge this history but contend that these cases cannot end there. Were their intent to demean the revered idea and reality of marriage, the petitioners’ claims would be of a different order. But that is neither their purpose nor their submission. To the contrary, it is the enduring importance of marriage that underlies the petitioners’ contentions. This, they say, is their whole point. Far from seeking to devalue marriage, the petitioners seek it for themselves because of their respect—and need—for its privileges and responsibilities. And their immutable nature dictates that same-sex marriage is their only real path to this profound commitment.

Recounting the circumstances of three of these cases illustrates the urgency of the petitioners’ cause from their perspective. Petitioner James Obergefell, a plaintiff in the Ohio case, met John Arthur over two decades ago. They fell in love and started a life together, establishing a lasting, committed relation. In 2011, however, Arthur was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS. This debilitating disease is progressive, with no known cure. Two years ago, Obergefell and Arthur decided to commit to one another, resolving to marry before Arthur died. To fulfill their mutual promise, they traveled from Ohio to Maryland, where same-sex marriage was legal. It was difficult for Arthur to move, and so the couple were wed inside a medical transport plane as it remained on the tarmac in Baltimore. Three months later, Arthur died.

Ohio law does not permit Obergefell to be listed as the surviving spouse on Arthur’s death certificate. By statute, they must remain strangers even in death, a state imposed separation Obergefell deems “hurtful for the rest of time.” App. in No. 14–556 etc., p. 38. He brought suit to be shown as the surviving spouse on Arthur’s death certificate.

April DeBoer and Jayne Rowse are co-plaintiffs in the case from Michigan. They celebrated a commitment ceremony to honor their permanent relation in 2007. They both work as nurses, DeBoer in a neonatal unit and Rowse in an emergency unit. In 2009, DeBoer and Rowse fostered and then adopted a baby boy. Later that same year, they welcomed another son into their family. The new

baby, born prematurely and abandoned by his biological mother, required around-the-clock care. The next year, a baby girl with special needs joined their family. Michigan, however, permits only opposite-sex married couples or single individuals to adopt, so each child can have only one woman as his or her legal parent. If an emergency were to arise, schools and hospitals may treat the three children as if they had only one parent. And, were tragedy to befall either DeBoer or Rowse, the other would have no legal rights over the children she had not been permitted to adopt. This couple seeks relief from the continuing uncertainty their unmarried status creates in their lives.

Army Reserve Sergeant First Class Ijpe DeKoe and his partner Thomas Kostura, co-plaintiffs in the Tennessee case, fell in love. In 2011, DeKoe received orders to deploy to Afghanistan. Before leaving, he and Kostura married in New York. A week later, DeKoe began his deployment, which lasted for almost a year. When he returned, the two settled in Tennessee, where DeKoe works full-time for the Army Reserve. Their lawful marriage is stripped from them whenever they reside in Tennessee, returning and disappearing as they travel across state lines. DeKoe, who served this Nation to preserve the freedom the Constitution protects, must endure a substantial burden.

The cases now before the Court involve other petitioners as well, each with their own experiences. Their stories reveal that they seek not to denigrate marriage but rather to live their lives, or honor their spouses' memory, joined by its bond.

The ancient origins of marriage confirm its centrality, but it has not stood in isolation from developments in law and society. The history of marriage is one of both continuity and change. That institution—even as confined to opposite-sex relations—has evolved over time. For example, marriage was once viewed as an arrangement by the couple's parents based on political, religious, and financial concerns; but by the time of the Nation's founding it was understood to be a voluntary contract between a man and a woman.

As the role and status of women changed, the institution further evolved. Under the centuries-old doctrine of coverture, a married man and woman were treated by the State as a single, male-dominated legal entity. As women gained legal, political, and property rights, and as society began to understand that women have their own equal dignity, the law of coverture was abandoned. These and other developments in the institution of marriage over the past centuries were not mere superficial changes.

Rather, they worked deep transformations in its structure, affecting aspects of marriage long viewed by many as essential. These new insights have strengthened, not weakened, the institution of marriage. Indeed, changed understandings of marriage are characteristic of a Nation where new dimensions of freedom become apparent to new generations, often through perspectives that begin in pleas or protests and then are considered in the political sphere and the judicial process.

Under the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, no State shall “deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.” The fundamental liberties protected by this Clause include most of the rights enumerated in the Bill of Rights. In addition these liberties extend to certain personal choices central to individual dignity and autonomy, including intimate choices that define personal identity and beliefs.

The nature of injustice is that we may not always see it in our own times. The generations that wrote and ratified the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment did not presume to know the extent of freedom in all of its dimensions, and so they entrusted to future generations a charter protecting the right of all persons to enjoy liberty as we learn its meaning. When new insight reveals discord between the Constitution’s central protections and a received legal stricture, a claim to liberty must be addressed.

Applying these established tenets, the Court has long held the right to marry is protected by the Constitution. In *Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U. S. 1, 12 (1967), which invalidated bans on interracial unions, a unanimous Court held marriage is “one of the vital personal rights essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free men.”

This analysis compels the conclusion that same-sex couples may exercise the right to marry.

A first premise of the Court’s relevant precedents is that the right to personal choice regarding marriage is inherent in the concept of individual autonomy. Like choices concerning contraception, family relationships, procreation, and childrearing, all of which are protected by the Constitution, decisions concerning marriage are among the most intimate that an individual can make.

Choices about marriage shape an individual’s destiny. As the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts has explained, because “it fulfils yearnings for security, safe haven, and connection that express our common humanity, civil marriage is an esteemed institution, and the decision whether and whom to marry is among life’s momentous acts of self-definition.”

The nature of marriage is that, through its enduring bond, two persons together can find other freedoms, such as expression, intimacy, and spirituality. This is true for all persons, whatever their sexual orientation. There is dignity in the bond between two men or two women who seek to marry and in their autonomy to make such profound choices.

A second principle in this Court’s jurisprudence is that the right to marry is fundamental because it supports a two-person union unlike any other in its importance to the committed individuals. “Marriage is a coming together for better or for worse, hopefully enduring, and intimate to the degree of being sacred. It is an association that promotes a way of life, not causes; a harmony in living, not political faiths; a bilateral loyalty, not commercial or social projects. Yet it is an association for as noble a purpose as any involved in our prior decisions. ” *Id.*, at 486.

And in *Turner*, the Court again acknowledged the intimate association protected by this right, holding prisoners could not be denied the right to marry because their committed relationships satisfied the basic reasons why marriage is a fundamental right. The right to marry thus dignifies couples who “wish to define themselves by their commitment to each other.”

Marriage responds to the universal fear that a lonely person might call out only to find no one there. It offers the hope of companionship and understanding and assurance that while both still live there will be someone to care for the other.

A third basis for protecting the right to marry is that it safeguards children and families and thus draws meaning from related rights of childrearing, procreation, and education. The Court has recognized these connections by describing the varied rights as a unified whole: “[T]he right to ‘marry, establish a home and bring up children’ is a central part of the liberty protected by the Due Process Clause.” *Zablocki*, 434 U. S., at 384

Under the laws of the several States, some of marriage’s protections for children and families are material. But marriage also confers more profound benefits. By giving recognition and legal structure to their parents’ relationship, marriage allows children “to understand the integrity and closeness of their own family and its concord with other families in their community and in their daily lives.” Marriage also affords the permanency and stability important to children’s best interests.

Excluding same-sex couples from marriage thus conflicts with a central premise of the right to marry. Without the recognition, stability, and predictability marriage offers, their children suffer the stigma of knowing their families are somehow lesser. They also suffer the significant material costs of being raised by unmarried parents, relegated through no fault of their own to a more difficult and uncertain family life. The marriage laws at issue here thus harm and humiliate the children of same-sex couples.

That is not to say the right to marry is less meaningful for those who do not or cannot have children. An ability, desire, or promise to procreate is not and has not been a prerequisite for a valid marriage in any State. In light of precedent protecting the right of a married couple not to procreate, it cannot be said the Court or the States have conditioned the right to marry on the capacity or commitment to procreate. The constitutional marriage right has many aspects, of which childbearing is only one.

Fourth and finally, this Court’s cases and the Nation’s traditions make clear that marriage is a keystone of our social order. Alexis de Tocqueville recognized this truth on his travels through the United States almost two centuries ago:

“There is certainly no country in the world where the tie of marriage is so much respected as in America . . . [W]hen the American retires from the turmoil of public life to the bosom of his family, he finds in it the image of order and of peace [H]e afterwards carries [that image] with him into public affairs.” *Democracy in America* 309 (H. Reeve transl., rev. ed. 1990).

Marriage remains a building block of our national community. For that reason, just as a couple vows to support each other, so does society pledge to support the couple, offering symbolic recognition and material benefits to protect and nourish the union. Indeed, while the States are in general free to vary the benefits they confer on all married couples, they have throughout our history made marriage the basis for an expanding list of governmental rights, benefits, and responsibilities. These aspects of marital status include: taxation; inheritance and property rights; rules of intestate succession; spousal privilege in the law of evidence; hospital access; medical decision making authority; adoption rights; the rights and benefits of survivors; birth and death certificates; professional ethics rules; campaign finance restrictions; workers' compensation benefits; health insurance; and child custody, support, and visitation rules.

By virtue of their exclusion from that institution, same-sex couples are denied the constellation of benefits that the States have linked to marriage. This harm results in more than just material burdens. Same-sex couples are consigned to an instability many opposite-sex couples would deem intolerable in their own lives. As the State itself makes marriage all the more precious by the significance it attaches to it, exclusion from that status has the effect of teaching that gays and lesbians are unequal in important respects. It demeans gays and lesbians for the State to lock them out of a central institution of the Nation's society. Same-sex couples, too, may aspire to the transcendent purposes of marriage and seek fulfillment in its highest meaning.

The limitation of marriage to opposite-sex couples may long have seemed natural and just, but its inconsistency with the central meaning of the fundamental right to marry is now manifest. With that knowledge must come the recognition that laws excluding same-sex couples from the marriage right impose stigma and injury of the kind prohibited by our basic charter.

These considerations lead to the conclusion that the right to marry is a fundamental right inherent in the liberty of the person, and under the Due Process and Equal Protection Clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment couples of the same-sex may not be deprived of that right and that liberty. The Court now holds that same-sex couples may exercise the fundamental right to marry. No longer may this liberty be denied to them. *Baker v. Nelson* must be and now is overruled, and the State laws challenged by Petitioners in these cases are now held invalid to the extent they exclude same-sex couples from civil marriage on the same terms and conditions as opposite sex couples.

God, you established the covenant of marriage, uniting two people as one. Pour your spirit upon all couples who seek this union, Bless each one in their communication, in their decision making, in their livelihoods, in their dreaming, and in attaining deep meaning and satisfaction from their shared lives together with you. Bind us together with cords that cannot be broken. Amen.

Resources to Learn More:

[An Ally's Guide to Terminology \(GLAAD\)](#)

www.glaad.org/sites/default/files/allys-guide-to-terminology_1.pdf

[Bisexuality.Org https://bisexual.org/](https://bisexual.org/)

[Bisexuality 101: Identity, Inclusion, and Resources \(UUA.org\)](#)

www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/13/5-key-findings-about-lgbt-americans/

[Bisexuality: Making the Invisible Visible in Faith Communities \(Religious Institute\)](#)

religiousinstitute.org/projects/bisexuality/making-the-invisible-visible/

[Bisexual Resource Center \[biresource.org\]\(http://biresource.org\)](#)

[Connecting the Dots: Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Online Teach-Ins \(More Light Presbyterians\)](#) <https://mlp.org/connecting-the-dots-gender-identity-and-sexual-orientation/>

[Homosexuality and the Bible \[www.bridges-across.org/ba/wink.htm\]\(http://www.bridges-across.org/ba/wink.htm\)](#)

[Lutheran Introduction to Our Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Neighbors \(Reconciling Works\)](#) <https://www.reconcilingworks.org/resources/sogi/lgbtq/>

[More Light Presbyterians Resources <https://mlp.org/resources/>](#)

[Open and Affirming Process and Information \[www.openandaffirming.org\]\(http://www.openandaffirming.org\)](#)

[Resources for Advocacy and Education \[pflag.org\]\(http://pflag.org\)](#)

[The Trevor Project \[www.trevorproject.org\]\(http://www.trevorproject.org\)](#)

[Understanding Pronouns Selection \[www.mypronouns.org\]\(http://www.mypronouns.org\)](#)

[The Naming Project \[thenamingproject.org\]\(http://thenamingproject.org\)](#)

The Task Force thetaskforce.org

Transgender Day of Remembrance <https://www.glaad.org/tdor>

Welcoming Resources welcomingresources.org



www.parkridgecommunitychurch.org