

## **Love, Delight, and Pride**

**By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD June 11, 2023**

Where can we simultaneously experience fistfuls of glitter thrown into the air, all the colors of the rainbow plastered copiously on windows and storefronts and blowing in the wind from flags abundant, music of love and justice collected from throughout the decades filling the air, eyeshadow and lipstick and dresses and heels plentiful and shared among celebrants of all genders? Where can we find all that is delightful and beautiful and celebratory held as an intentional act of defiance and resistance as well as a celebration of selfhood? It is those same occasions that I have arrived at donned in clerical collar and stole, linking arms with colleagues as we affirm as faith leaders of myriad liberal and accepting traditions that God, spirit of love, source of all that is – this entity or essence or being in the sky – loves you – all of you. This place or compilation of places surrounds us this month as we affirm, honor, celebrate, and commemorate our lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual siblings during the month of Pride. It is a time when we proclaim, “Love is love.” That gender norms are no more than a social construct, and that gender diversity is beautiful. It is a time not simply to allow for those who have been marginalized, or to tolerate those who defy social norms, but to delight in these sacred differences.

Pride: an unabashed celebration of self, and a jubilant, joyful resistance. What often brings these gifts to fruition? An accepting, affirming, welcoming faith. How can we be that faith? Let us take this time to journey together.

Historically and in contemporary culture, alongside the joys and delights of Pride, was and is discrimination, hate, fear, stigma, and prejudice. The country experienced the AIDS epidemic swiftly and ruthlessly massacring a hidden subset of society that the public at large simply ignored. Six years ago, we saw on display the mass shooting at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Florida, where dozens of people were injured and murdered while doing nothing but dancing, a hate crime that prompted a terror that reverberated throughout the LGBTQIA+ community. In the

not-so-distant past there were couples deeply in love who were not legally allowed to marry because their love was deemed unnatural and sinful. Around the world there are still those who are not afforded basic human rights. To this day many of our transgender or gender non-binary beloveds cannot even safely use a public restroom demarcated by gender. We have lost our siblings to hate crimes and to suicide, and this needs to break our hearts wide open.

During Pride month this discrimination, hate, and violence is held in defiance as we work to create a beloved community where those who have faced ridicule can find peace. Where those who have had to fight can instead celebrate.<sup>1</sup> Where those who have faced a lifetime of uncertainty can find hope. Pride: a celebration, and a protest.<sup>2</sup> A rainbow flag rippling in the wind announces, “I will not be defined by stigma, hate and fear.” Bright blue eyeshadow and cheeks covered with glitter proclaim, “This is who I am, and this is who I will remain.” Dance music projected into the streets professes, “You cannot make me live in fear. You cannot make me hide.” These celebratory declarations of self are one of the most beautiful things I have ever experienced. We demand change and build community by dancing. Everyone is welcome in the streets of Pride.

How can we be a faith community that affirms and promotes love, gender expression, celebratory resistance, and radical acceptance? So many of our LGBTQ siblings have been hurt, condemned, and rejected by faith communities. It is time for all of us to reimagine and reinterpret faithful living. What is it that makes a faith open and inclusive? It is one where no one is threatened by divine punishment or damnation or judgment. Where each person knows that every identity they possess is good and whole and beautiful and sacred and holy. As a chaplain I understood myself as a conduit for the sacred and in that role, I offer affirmations to my LGBTQ beloveds: You have inherent worth, the divine loves you, you are not damned, you are a celebrated part of all that is, you matter to me, and you matter to all things sacred.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Pride Flame” by Linda lee Franson

<sup>2</sup> “A Protest and a Party” By Hannah Roberts Villnave

Our Unitarian Universalist faith draws from many sources, including Judaism and Christianity. Similarly, the dominant culture of our nation is largely based in Christian beliefs and norms, and so I continue our exploration of an open and inclusive faith through a survey of affirming and sometimes reimagined Christian and Jewish ideals. I am going to offer pieces of scripture interpreted through the lens of love and through the lens of Unitarian Universalism – ideals I hold as truth.

Let us lift up the first truth: LGBTQ folks are made from all that is sacred – what Christians call God, what we may call spirit of life – and no one is a mistake. In the Psalms it is written, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together... I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.”<sup>3</sup> I want to lift up in particular that first phrase: “You [God] created my innermost being” – there are no caveats to this statement, no people listed who are not divinely created. We are each intentionally and lovingly and purposefully formed. As a Unitarian Universalist, I understand this verbiage in a slightly different way: We all come from the same source, and to the same source we will all return. We are each birthed from the same stardust, the same essence of love. No one a mistake, but a unique and sacred gift.

Our second truth, every church needs its LGBTQ members. I offer words from 1 Corinthians. “The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit.”<sup>4</sup> Jew, Christian, Muslim, pagan, Buddhist; gay, straight, bisexual, transgender, cisgender, male, female, and anywhere in between: without each of us we are an incomplete whole, a body missing its heart or liver or lungs. Every identity and human experience brings with it its own wisdom, insights, joys, and worldviews. Our society at large as well as our individual houses of

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 139:13-14

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:12-13

worship are incomplete if we do not celebrate in the wholeness of all that is – the wholeness of unique identities and experiences. All forms of love. All genders.

Our third truth: Love is a gift from all that is sacred. In Galatians it is written, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”<sup>5</sup> Nowhere in this text is there mentioned a forbidden love, but instead we hear of a love that is held as universal – a universality that no arbitrary law can interfere with. Love is the greatest gift that any entity or essence could bestow upon us. It is my firm belief and is held in this sacred text that there are no exceptions or caveats to this sacred gift. Love is love – heterosexuality or homosexuality or bisexuality or pansexuality – any sexuality is simply one expression of love.

Our final piece of scripture is more of a poetic representation of love than a statement of truth. A love many biblical scholars interpret as gay. It is an ancient, biblical profession of devotion from one woman to another. In the book of Ruth it is written, from Ruth to Naomi, “Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.”<sup>6</sup> Let those beautiful sentiments sink in. If that love is not a gift, I don’t know what is. If that love is condemned, then I have lost all faith.

That, my beloveds, is an open, welcoming, and inclusive expression of faith. That is the liberal Christianity and Judaism we draw upon as two of our several sacred sources in Unitarian Universalism. May this theology serve to guide us. May we be accepting, affirming, and welcoming.

As a faith of intentional acceptance, one of our greatest strengths is our commitment to inherent worth. In our faith, inclusivity is held at the forefront. The very first principle by which

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<sup>5</sup> Galatians 5:22-23

<sup>6</sup> Ruth 1:16-17

we covenant to live is to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Every person matters. Every person is sacred. When we fully embrace this covenant, assuming the worth of all becomes a way of life – a way to orient ourselves in the world. Judgment falls to the wayside; love guides our actions. We embrace those who may be rejected elsewhere. As such we cannot be a passive faith but an active faith bringing these ideals into fruition through our daily actions centered in love and acceptance – one small, perhaps even seemingly insignificant act at a time. A smile to one who is not expecting it, an act of kindness to one whom other faiths have rejected, an offering of compassion to the spiritually wounded. An affirmation that love is love. That any gender expression is beautiful and sacred.

One of our greatest practices as well as intentional aspirations is that of radical welcome and a focus on safety. In these walls may no one be harmed or threatened – physically, emotionally, or spiritually. And that takes intention and commitment. Tangibly, we can offer gender neutral bathrooms and share our pronouns. We can also offer acceptance and welcome from our hearts. May our very presence and collective energy be open and inclusive so that any person who enters our doors and those of us who are already here know love and belonging and safety. Our actions need to be grounded in intentional love – to not offer judgment or condemnation to anyone in this sacred space, but compassion and acceptance – no matter what a person is wearing, how their hair is styled, or who they are holding in embrace. If we can cultivate this here, we can bring this into each of our homes and workspaces and any public setting.

Finally, let us not forget our faith's history and foundation. We are a faith that embraces judgment free love – the very history of Universalism and universal salvation embodies this. May we let each beloved know, just as we know, that damnation is not and has never been a part of our faith. Historically, we were all divinely saved. In our contemporary faith this phraseology may carry with it certain baggage, but one thing is clear: no one is judged or condemned by anything held sacred.

Today, in this moment, may our ideals call us to resist enthusiastically and delightfully – the opportunity is right before us and impossible to ignore. As a sacred collective, may we each proclaim openly and publicly and unabashedly that love is love. That any gender expression is beautiful. May we embrace Pride – this celebration and this protest! May we join in the streets hand in hand with joy and delight, with glitter and rainbows. May we love, may we affirm, may we dance.

May it be so, and Amen.