

## *Be Specific*

Central United Methodist Church is a Reconciling Congregation. Regardless of your race, ethnicity, immigration status, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic situation, age, ability, belief, or background, whether you are single or partnered, you are God's beloved and you are welcome here.

Every Sunday we begin our worship service with those words. This statement, I believe, is an accurate one thanks to Marcus Dickson's addition of immigration status and the Ministry Team agreeing.

However, today, I want to get a bit more specific. No matter what, you are welcome here! However, you may not be comfortable here. If you believe that gay people are an abomination, you will not feel comfortable here. If you believe immigrants are ruining this country, you probably won't feel comfortable here. If you dislike the imperative that black live matter, you might have a desire to leave during our worship service.

And that is okay. Actually, it is good. Comfort feels good but discomfort is better. Today, Pride Sunday is a reminder that we cannot be all things to all people. It is a reminder that discomfort is not the same as disenfranchisement. Being offended is not the same as being oppressed.

I say this because there are many people in the world, and in our metropolitan area who take offense to the fact that a church, a Christian church, is holding a Pride Sunday. "Gay Pride has nothing to do with church" they say. "It's appalling and it's a sacrilege!" they say. "Celebrating gay pride during a worship service is so offensive!"

And to that I say, okay, be offended. Because I truly believe that being offended is not the same as being oppressed. We progressive Christians are often handcuffed by the fear of offending others. Because a lot of us have been mistreated and even dehumanized by church people. So we don't want to do that to others. And that's good.

But when we stand up for goodness and justice and equality, people will feel offended. People will claim that they are being oppressed by our struggle for full humanity for all people.

When you've been brought up in a society in which you've always had the power and the privilege, even a little bit of equality feels oppressive. When you've been

led to believe that you are more holy because of your normalized sexual orientation, you're going to feel mighty offended when those LGBTQIA + folks start claiming they are just as holy as you.

Equality is offensive to those who are used to having the upper hand.

Churches might allow lesbians in their pews, but deny them the pulpit. Churches might say all are welcome, but only display hetero-normative examples of family. Pastors might call for equality but refuse to show up at a Pride event. Even the most progressive churches are sometimes afraid to be branded as the gay church, because that might be offensive to others.

In another church I pastored, we worked at becoming a fully inclusive and safe church. I tried to bring up the topic of being a Reconciling congregation, like Central is, which means that we state right up front and outright that LGBTQIA+ are affirmed and celebrated.

To say there was a lot of pushback would be an understatement. Here is what I heard: "Why do we have to explicitly say that we accept LGBTQIA + people? Everyone knows we are welcoming! They just need to come and see. Why should we make a statement about gay people being welcome but not other people? What if people think we only care about gay rights? What if people think we're a gay church?"

The LGBTQIA+ community has been the group most loudly ostracized by conservative Christianity. The religious right has built its foundation upon the purported sinfulness of that community. I am a preacher lady and I will never serve a church that doesn't explicitly welcome and honor everyone's sexual orientation. That's why we need to explicitly tell LGBTQIA+ people that they are welcome and cherished.

Many churches proclaim that everyone is welcome! The exclusive UMC bureaucracy even professes that all of our churches have Open Hearts, Open Doors and Open Minds. Yet they refuse to ordain gay folks and have brought me up on charges for officiating a gay wedding.

Churches don't want to explicitly support Pride because it might offend others. But, when we have the capability of choosing whether or not to offend others, we are privileged. And unless you are a trans woman of color, who is differently abled, undocumented, homeless, un-educated and non-english speaking, you probably

benefit from some level of privilege. This privilege shouldn't make us feel bad, necessarily but it should make us reflect.

Is it okay to offend those with privilege to bring justice to those who are oppressed? Well, you know who was really offensive?

Jesus, the answer is always Jesus. Jesus didn't talk in generalities. He didn't command people to love 'everybody.' He constantly, specifically, told stories and performed miracles and challenged systems in order to lift up the marginalized and oppressed.

In "Why Jesus Would Say 'Black Lives Matter'", author Derek Flood says this: "After all, Jesus did not say "blessed is everyone" but "blessed are the poor". He did not say "as you do it unto everyone, you do it unto me," but "as you do it unto the least."

Jesus did not say "love everyone," but "love your enemies." Continually Jesus drew our attention not to loving people 'in general' but to specifically caring for those we would tend to discount or condemn."

Jesus didn't play nice. He especially didn't play nice with the Pharisees. He didn't worry about offending them. He said, "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside you are full of greed and self-indulgence.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth."

Jesus knocked over stuff at the temple and broke the rules of Sabbath and told rich people to give up all of their wealth. And he encouraged and blessed and was present with the least of these. He knew that specifics mattered. He loved everyone for sure, but he took special care to focus his efforts toward those who desperately needed to hear that their lives mattered. He made sure the widows and the orphans and the adulterers and the undocumented immigrants knew that they were fully human and fully lovable.

Jesus threw a pride parade for the most despised in his community. And for this, he was despised by the religious and political elite.

Now, I know that for some of you, this idea of Jesus at a pride parade might be disorienting. Celebrating Pride during church might feel awkward and misplaced.

And for those who have been molded in the Christian tradition, the idea of celebrating pride can be difficult. Followers of Jesus are supposed to be meek and humble, not proud. How is it okay for people to celebrate how awesome they are?

When I was working on my doctorate, down the street at the Ecumenical Theological Seminary, I had the great challenging opportunity to take some courses that examined race, religion and how they were interconnected. One course made me examine my own whiteness. Another helped me investigate how religion contributed to the civil rights movement. And one day after this course someone asked the professor, some questions about power and pride.

They asked, “Within a Christian context that promotes peace and humility and sacrifice, is it okay to stand and shout for black power? Or for LGBTQIA + pride?”

Now I don’t remember the exact words of his answer, but I will never forget what I learned in that moment and throughout many other conversations. He said, as long as he has to teach his black son to keep his hands out of his pockets in convenience stores, it is a religious imperative to help make him proud of his black skin.

As long as LGBTQIA+ youth are attempting suicide at alarming rates, it is a religious imperative to help make them proud of their sexuality and gender identity.

As long as transgender women of color are the most likely victims of a violent attack, it is a religious imperative to help make them proud of their gender identity and the color of their skin.

Beloved souls within the LGBTQIA + community are being shamed, fired from jobs, beat up, bullied, turned away and murdered and yet we question if Pride has a place in church. And we’re scared of being branded a gay church. And we’re afraid to wear our rainbow hearts on our sleeves.

I say, no more! Sitting comfortably in our own cocoons of privilege and loving everyone who joins us is not enough. I hope the whole word calls Central the gay church. That way LGBTQIA + people who are barely holding on know that they have a place to come and be known and be loved.

I hope someday people will call us the immigrant church or the black church or the trans church. And I will say, yes, yes we are that. I will say it proudly, because being specific matters.

Like Jesus we are called to be visible. We are called to be present on the margins. We are called to be utterly specific about our pride. Phrases like all are welcome or all have a place here, or yes, even all lives matter; those phrases carry no weight. They don't have the teeth to sink into the systemic oppression that is killing people. Lives depend on being specific.

If we don't wave our rainbow flags and shout our pride from the top of the steeple of our church, then who will? The lives of beloved LGBTQIA + people depend on our specific pride.

And, my friends, don't hear this as a criticism. Central has been Prideful for many years. Many of you are Prideful advocates in the community. This is a reminder that Pride matters, and it matters big.

And this is a challenge, because it sure is easy for us to get comfortable in our safe spaces and grow weary of venturing out to challenge oppression in places where we aren't so comfortable.

We have to challenge our own privilege, our own fears of being judged or fears of offending those with the power or the money or the respect. Offending power for the sake of justice is not merely okay, it's a Biblical and moral imperative.

And, as a reminder, unless you are a trans woman of color, who is differently abled, undocumented, homeless, un-educated and non-english speaking, you probably benefit from some level of privilege.

I have to check my privilege all the time. I'm white, I'm cis-gendered, I'm educated, I'm married, I'm financially stable...the list goes on. This privilege should not make us ashamed, but it should make us reflect.

Reflect. Be visible. Be proud, specifically. And do everything in your power to make sure every marginalized and oppressed child of God knows how deeply they are loved.

And remember what love looks like. Religious intolerance cannot be disguised as love. Refusing to nurture another due to our beliefs is not love. We don't love others by simply tossing up prayers for them. We love others by getting in the trenches with them and staring them in the face and saying, You will not do this alone.

Love hard. Love, specifically. And in the words of one of my favorite theologians, Killer Mike, “Stay encouraged, stay invigorated, stay confronting bullshit at every turn.”

May it be so. Amen.