

27th June 2021 – ‘Taking pride in ourselves’

Led by Rev Kate Whyman with Kate Snewin

GATHERING MUSIC Soulbird Rise, India.Arie

<https://youtu.be/AXSMeVAllUg>

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome. It's good to be back in church again this week after a brief period of isolation for some of us, including me. We're all well – none of us ever had any symptoms – and we're back out in the world again once more. Hurray! Good morning, too, to everyone joining us online this morning – as you can see normal service (whatever that is) has been resumed with Myron back at the helm.

So let's begin, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice candle. *If you're at home do light a candle with me if you would like to.*

We light this flame
to ignite our hearts and minds—
the spark of knowledge that enlightens,
the shimmering hope that burns,
the blazing love that engulfs our actions,
the bonfire of our commitment.

We light this flame
to celebrate our kaleidoscope of diversity:
working, loving, and living on the side of love.
For this, we light this flame.

Today is the final Sunday of Pride Month, and I'm grateful to Kate Snewin for her wonderful input into this service. Kate has chosen our opening hymn, which is number 33 (P) Enter, rejoice and come in. So let's sing it now...

33(P) Enter, rejoice and come in

Enter, rejoice and come in.

Enter, rejoice and come in.

Today will be a joyful day;
enter, rejoice and come in.

Open your ears to the song.
Open your ears to the song.
Today will be a joyful day;
enter, rejoice and come in.

Open your hearts everyone.
Open your hearts everyone.
Today will be a joyful day;
enter, rejoice, and come in.

Don't be afraid of some change.
Don't be afraid of some change.
Today will be a joyful day;
enter, rejoice, and come in.

Enter, rejoice and come in.
Enter, rejoice and come in.
Today will be a joyful day;
enter, rejoice and come in.

Words and music by Louise Ruspini

PRAYER by Amy Johnson

Loving Creator, beyond our understanding yet closer than our breath,
breathe into us your love so that we may love ourselves and others as you do.
Help heal the fear, hate, and judgment that wound so many.
Help us know, deeply and certainly, that your love transcends all labels, all categories, all
words.
Your love is. Your love rains down on us all.
Everyone is invited to your table.
We each bring our whole and broken parts and come together in your love, which binds us
and heals us all.
May it be so. Amen.

STORY: The Golden Buddha Inside

During the mid-1950s in Bangkok, a huge clay statue of the Buddha began to crack due to heat and drought. When some monks arrived to investigate, they shined a flashlight into the largest of the cracks. What they saw surprised everyone. Deep under the grey clay was the gleam of gold.

No one had known that inside this popular but ordinary looking statue was a solid gold Buddha. As it turns out, the statue had been covered with plaster and clay six hundred years earlier to protect it from invading armies. Although all the monks who lived in the monastery at that time had been killed in the attack, the golden Buddha, its beauty and value covered over, had survived untouched.

WORDS by Kate Snewin

I am a queer woman. Queer, which was once an insult used to hurt and wound people like me, has been reclaimed and proudly worn as a symbol of strength and unity.

Why are these words important? Because this is part of my identity, part of who I am and how I have experienced the world. People who are heterosexual or cis gender (those of us whose gender identity matches the sex we were assigned at birth) may not give a lot of thought to this part of our identity as it is seen as the norm. Whereas those of us who are outside of that majority are given the task of “coming out”, of revealing ourselves to the world, over and over again. As children, young people and as adults, we ask those closest to us, family, friends, colleagues, even strangers to see and accept us as we really are. Something that has mixed results.

Within my family, my coming out was treated as a secret to be concealed from the wider family and beyond. “It’s a phase” were the words uttered to me at age 18 as I bravely said those words I had been flipping over in my mind again and again “I’m gay”. I had gone back and forth for years, hiding, avoiding, denying that this could really be me. I was ashamed. To be gay was not a good thing in my school. It was a stone to be hurled at any unsuspecting person who dared to be different. An accusation. I can say with joy that 18 years later I am a proud queer woman who if given the choice, would choose to be gay. I am grateful to have someone who loves me and who I love.

Why am I telling you this? Because it's Pride month and that is often met with denial that such a thing is still needed, with murmurs of straight pride and making a fuss. I want to tell you that:

Up to 24% of homeless young people identify as LGBT. For context 2.2% of the population in the UK identify as LGB and around 1% identify as trans. (Albert Kennedy trust)

Half of LGBT people said they had experienced depression in the last year. Almost one in 4 LGBT people have witnessed discriminatory or negative remarks against LGBT people by healthcare staff.

A third of lesbian, gay and bi people of faith (32 per cent), and one in four trans people of faith (25 per cent), aren't open with anyone in their faith community about their identity. (Stonewall)

Before I came to this church I equated religion with prejudice and shame. I was overjoyed to find a congregation with such an open heart and mind. We should all be able to be who we are and not have to hide these parts of ourselves away. We all have gold inside of us, that isn't tarnished by gender or our relationships, whatever we may have been told. We all deserve to be seen for the precious beings we are.

REFLECTION

This is a chance for silence and stillness, contemplation and meditation.

INTERLUDE 'We are a gentle angry people', arranged and performed by Josh Johnston (Hymn 182 in purple hymnbook) <https://youtu.be/AXSMcVAllUg>

ADDRESS

Some years ago, at a Ministers' Conference in Great Hucklow, a young black lesbian American minister was leading a session with great verve and vitality. She had great charisma. At one point she said, forcefully: 'We need to get the message out!' And after a

while, and feeling a bit stupid because presumably I was meant to know the answer to my question, I tentatively put my hand up and asked 'What IS the message?'

For a moment she looked a bit nonplussed. Perhaps she *did* think the question was ridiculous, and wondered who they were letting in to ministry these days. Or perhaps she wasn't quite sure what the answer was herself. I don't know. But either way, there was a pause, just for a couple of beats, before she looked me straight in the eye and said, with utter conviction, 'You are loved'.

I think I would have fallen over backwards if I hadn't already been sitting down. I felt the power of those words land on my body, in my gut, in my heart, in my soul. I felt winded.

'You are loved'. It's quite a message. It can't be proved, of course. It's a statement of faith. But that day my body knew it was true. 'I am loved.'

How many of you, when you heard those words 'You are loved', immediately had the thought – 'I'm not'. And how many of you wanted to ask 'Yeah, but who by?' '*Who* loves me? Or *what* loves me?' Is it God, Spirit, Life, the Universe?

The words 'You are loved' simply don't address the question of who or what is doing the loving. And I like that. Because this is a message that's not limited by your theology. And it's not contingent either on whether you have someone who loves you - children, a partner, or friends. And it cuts straight through who you think you are, how you've lived your life, whether you're black or white, gay or straight, whether you think you've failed or succeeded in life.

It's just a plain and simple statement of fact. It is absolutely unconditional.

'Take that as your starting point,' it seems to say. 'You are already loved. You were loved before you were born, [as Ann's story last week also told us,] and you are loved now, regardless of the circumstances or your beliefs. Deal with it.'

I could stop there. After all, that's the message. You are loved. What else is there to say?

But maybe there IS more to be said, because so many of us do struggle to believe it. So many of us do feel ashamed, inadequate, judged, lesser, marginalised simply for being who we are. For being different, for not quite fitting in to the mainstream narrative.

I found Kate's words of testimony powerful and moving, and the figures she quoted were shocking, weren't they? A third of LGBT people aren't open with anyone in their faith community about their identity. A third! That one particularly struck me because we are a faith community. And I'm so grateful to Kate for speaking up and coming out here.

Sometimes people will say, 'There's really no need to talk about your sexuality. Why do LGBT people have to keep mentioning it? Why can't they just be?' But as Kate explained, if you are queer, as she is, then that is more than just your sexuality, it's a vital part of how you understand and experience life. It's part of what makes you you. Keeping quiet about it can feel like a denial of your very self.

Initiatives such as Pride Month and Black Lives Matter are clearly important for LGBT people and people of colour, but more than that they have the potential to help us all – that is if we're able to drop our fear about them. There shouldn't be anything threatening about other people articulating the ways in which they experience prejudice and judgment. Rather they can give each of us the courage to 'come out', in our own way. Seeing another person take a leap of faith in themselves, and take genuine pride in who they are, is a joy and an invitation for us *all* to be encouraged, to take heart, and to take pride in ourselves too.

So thank you Kate, for being so brave, and trusting your faith community enough to 'come out' to us today. I know how much courage it takes to speak up and to be seen. It is a great gift to us all.

May we each find, in our own ways, the courage to be honest about what makes us us; the generosity to accept ourselves and others just as they are; and the willingness to see the golden Buddha within each one of us.

Remember, the message. It is the starting point for every one of us.
And it's the holiest and the most powerful message of all.

You are loved.

HYMN 208 (P) When our heart is in a holy place

*When our heart is in a holy place,
when our heart is in a holy place,
we are blessed with love and amazing grace,
when our heart is in a holy place.*

When we trust the wisdom in each of us,
every colour every creed and kind,
and when we see our faces in each others eyes,
then our heart is in a holy place.

*When our heart is in a holy place,
when our heart is in a holy place,
we are blessed with love and amazing grace,
when our heart is in a holy place.*

When we tell our story from deep inside,
and we listen with a loving mind,
and we hear our voices in each other's words,
then our heart is in a holy place.

*When our heart is in a holy place,
when our heart is in a holy place,
we are blessed with love and amazing grace,
when our heart is in a holy place.*

When we share the silence of sacred space,
and the God of our hearts stirs within,
and we feel the power of each other's faith,
then our heart is in a holy place.

*When our heart is in a holy place,
when our heart is in a holy place,
we are blessed with love and amazing grace,
when our heart is in a holy place.*

Words and music by Joyce Poley, arranged by Lorne Kellett.

© Songstyle Music (SOCAN)

CLOSING WORDS 'Blessed Are the Queer', by HP Rivers, **Director of Religious**
Exploration at the UU Church of Tallahassee

Blessed are the wanderers,
Seeking affirmation.

Blessed are the worshipers,
Praying from closets,
Pulpits, pews, and hardship.

Blessed are the lovers of leaving –
Leaving family and familiarity,
Leaving tables
Where love is not being served.
Blessed are those who stay.

Blessed are those
Who hunger and thirst for justice –
For they will be satisfied.

Blessed are the queer
Disciples of Truth,
Living, breathing, sacred
Reflections of
Divine Love.

Extinguish chalice

CLOSING MUSIC Power of Two, Indigo Girls – chosen by Kate Snewin

<https://youtu.be/hj0yVN8pFNw>