

Embracing Mystery: Pride Sunday
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
NPMC – June 11, 2023

Scripture: Genesis 1:26-27; Galatians 3:21-28

Hymn: VT 809 - Sing a New World into Being

Genesis 1:26-27 (Inclusive Bible)

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, to be like us. Let them be stewards of the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, the wild animals, and everything that crawls on the ground.” Humankind was created as God’s reflection: in the divine image God created them; male and female, God made them.

Galatians 3:21-28 (Inclusive Bible)

Does this mean that the Law is opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! On the other hand, we could have been justified by the Law only if it had the power to give life. Scripture has locked everything under the constraint of sin. Why? So that the promise might be fulfilled in those who believe because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

Before faith came, we were under the constraint of the Law, locked in until the faith that was coming would be revealed. In other words, the Law was our monitor until Christ came to bring about our justification through faith. But now that faith is here, we are no longer in the monitor’s charge.

Each one of you is a child of God because of your faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus.

I think it’s safe to say that our Sunday morning sessions on Understanding Gender and Sexual Diversity have been learning experiences for the majority of us who have packed into the lounge for the past number of weeks. A lot of new information was shared, along with stories of what it’s like to be nonbinary, transgender, genderqueer, and so on. For many of us at NPMC, these experiences are brand new, and broaden our entire understanding of the meaning of gender. Rather than being a strict binary, an either-or of maleness or femaleness, gender becomes a spectrum or even a constellation of diverse identities. Gender becomes much more complex and mysterious than previously envisioned by the majority of our society.

But while this understanding of gender is new to so many of us, it's also not new at all. It's just that our understanding is catching up to these diverse experiences of gender. Take, for example, this famous image of a Nazi book burning in 1933. It's a horrific image of destruction, even without knowing what books these were. But importantly, the particular books being burned here were the research and library of Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld who ran the Institute for Sexual Research in Berlin. Dr. Hirschfeld (himself a gay, Jewish man) had opened this institute in 1919 and his medical research and practice recognized transgender identities, nonbinary gender, and performed gender-affirming surgeries and hormone treatment. In 1919 - over 100 years ago! Tragically, as part of their genocidal mission against Jewish and Roma people, people with disabilities, and people who are part of sexual and gender minorities, the Nazis destroyed his library in this, one of their first and largest book-burnings. Some of his research can never be replaced.¹ This is part of the reason that we are only now re-learning what Dr. Hirschfeld could have taught us all 100 years ago.

But we could also, of course, go further back. Two-Spirit identities (an Indigenous term for those having male and female spirits – what we would call different LGBTQ+ identities today) have been recognized and given a place of honour in the community by Indigenous peoples for thousands of years, until colonialism attempted to erase these traditions.² And even if we look back at our own tradition, our own sacred Scriptures also contain evidence of an understanding of gender that goes beyond a strict binary of maleness or femaleness. These too date back thousands of years.

¹ See <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-forgotten-history-of-the-worlds-first-trans-clinic/>

² See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQe5qwRhvuk&ab_channel=TheAgenda%7CTVOToday

Our passage from Genesis 1 is one of those in which we find an expansive view of gender. This is the case both for how God's gender is identified in the story as well as what this means for humanity as made in the image of the Divine. It might stand out to us somewhat that God refers to Godself as "us" here, saying "Let US make humankind in OUR image, to be like US." What exactly is going on here? Are we maybe not as monotheistic as we thought? Well the notes in the Inclusive Bible point out that the particular Hebrew word for God here "Elohim," is actually plural, and there are several other places in which this plural comes through into the English translation (ex: Gen. 3:22, 11:7). When it comes to interpretation, there are some ancient ideas about God speaking in the royal "we" here, or perhaps holding a divine council with the angels. But Christians throughout the ages have brought in notions of God as Trinity here as well.

This mystery at the heart of the Christian tradition reminds us that God "contains multitudes" - that God, in the words of these stickers by the Illustrated Ministry group, is "the original 'They/Them.'" The Divine is Three-yet-One. Theologian Annie Selak puts it this way: "Historically, the Christian tradition has recognized many pronouns for God, including 'he/him,' 'she/her,' and 'they/them.' This is partly because God does not have a gender. ...Referring to God with many titles, descriptions and images invites many of us to recognize the mystery of God. God is like all of these things but also more than all of these things."³ So when we're told in Genesis that God as they creates male and female "as God's reflection," we see all genders reflected in God, too. God is all of these genders and more, overflowing our human notions of gender. In recognizing and embracing the mystery of how we are all – though different – reflections of the Divine,

³ <https://theconversation.com/why-the-pronouns-used-for-god-matter-200141>

we realize that mystery is at the centre of our faith. An openness to mystery is in fact built into our faith. And as our 2SLGBTQ+ siblings have taught us, this openness to mystery, this commitment to loving despite not having all the answers, can also be what connects us to one another as we embrace each other's different ways of imaging the Divine.

Our second passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians in a similar way speaks of different stages of understanding through faith at a moment of much change and newness – during the time of the early church growing pains. This must have been in some ways a very disorienting time for those who had been part of the Jewish or Hellenistic faiths, as they took on these new beliefs and ways of living. It must have taken them firmly out of their comfort zones, at times! But then again, so much of our faith is new or “queer” in this way. Queer Mennonite pastor Pieter Niemeyer speaks of it this way:

The world is not a clear place, nor is the Bible in its reflection of us, yet God seems comfortable to work with it, even if we are not. The genealogy of Jesus introduces us to the strangest story of them all. We might even call it a queer story. God gets Mary – a young, unmarried woman – pregnant. God then encourages Joseph to step up and take the heat for the situation. Jesus grows up with one mother and two fathers. The Christian confession is that Jesus himself is part and parcel of the Godhead, three in one! Talk about a blended family and queer, non-binary identity!”⁴

In other words, there's that mystery, that queerness again, at the heart of our faith!

Sounding much like his well-known statement, “now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face” (I Cor. 13:12), Paul speaks here in Galatians of a previously incomplete understanding that has since become clearer. So the previous

⁴ Pieter Niemeyer, “Attempted Erasure,” in *Resistance: Confronting Violence, Power, and Abuse within Peace Churches*, ed. Cameron Altaras and Carol Penner (Elkhart, IN: Institute for Mennonite Studies, 2022), 106.

understanding, while it still had “the power to give life,” and was in keeping with God’s promises of abundant life, was reinterpreted and opened up to be even more inclusive in Christ. And there is this beautiful metaphor of baptism as “clothing ourselves with Christ” – of wearing our faith as an expression of who we are, of that pride of being created in God’s image, and each being God’s beloved child. Our passage ends with this expansive vision of unity: “In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus” (v. 28). This verse is held as a central vision of equality in the Bible – not in the sense of erasing our differences, but in the sense that they cease to be obstacles or to cause divisions among us. Instead we are all taken up and embraced as who we are in the expansive love of Christ.

A couple of months ago, we received a snail-mail, paper letter from Toronto United Mennonite Church. They sent these to all 2SLGBTQ+ affirming churches across Mennonite Church Canada (a growing number). The message? They simply wanted to thank us for being openly and clearly affirming. In their words: “We are glad to celebrate ...with you, along with other congregations and organizations who have made the important and courageous decision to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches; that God’s love is for all, and that sexual orientation, gender identity, and family model are no barrier to God, indeed are a sign of God’s vibrant and diverse creation, made known to the world!” What a gift to be in relationship with TUMC and other MC Canada churches who are learning together what it means to affirm gender and sexual diversity! I felt much the same way throughout our Sunday-morning conversations on gender and sexual diversity. What a gift to hear from those who are trans and non-binary about their experiences – both challenges and joys, and how they got to places of celebrating their

identities. What a gift to hear about the journeys of families to be mutually accepting and loving in their constellations of gender identities. What a gift to be the church at this moment when the queer Holy Spirit is moving us in ways that remind us of the depths of the mystery of who God is and who we are as reflections of that Divinity. This Pride month, may we not only be open and tolerant, but truly grateful for these gifts and these mysteries that are ours to embrace. AMEN