

St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery
The Seventh Sunday of Easter
Acts 16:16-34; John 17:20-26

Love at the Center

The Rev. Dr. Patrick S. Cheng
June 1, 2025

Happy Pride! It's an honor to be here today at this historic church to celebrate the beginning of LGBTQ Pride Month. A big thank you to your amazing rector, Rev. Anne Marie, for the invitation to be here.

If someone had told me back in junior high school that someday I would be preaching a Pride sermon at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery as a priest and as a queer theologian, I would never have believed them.

You see, I grew up in the Roman Catholic Church. As a young boy, I wanted to be a priest. While my classmates were playing cops and robbers, I was playing priest in our living room with Wonder Bread and grape juice.

But when I realized that I was gay, my dreams of becoming a priest were shattered. I learned that the Roman Catholic Church considered me to be "intrinsically disordered." And so I even started to question whether I could remain a Christian.

I slowly drifted away from my faith. I majored in English lit in college, and I went to law school. I came out of the closet to my first-generation immigrant parents, which was not easy. The first thing that my mom said to me was "Don't tell your father or your grandmother – they'll have a heart attack and die."

But I am grateful that God never gave up on me. It took several decades – including writing a Ph.D. dissertation on the doctrine of sin and becoming a theology professor – before I summoned up the courage to enter the ordination process in the Episcopal Church.

Looking back, I now realize how hard it was for me to be liberated from my deeply-ingrained beliefs that one could not be both religious and queer. I was locked in the prison of my own beliefs that God hated me.

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It's fitting that today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles is about liberation and being freed from prison. I'll admit that it's a pretty unusual reading. I bet that most of you had never heard of the story of the spirit-possessed slave girl who was a fortune teller, and how Paul expelled the spirit from her because he was "annoyed" at her.

What I find most interesting about the reading, however, is that Paul and his companion Silas were freed after they were thrown into prison by the Roman authorities. Specifically, a violent earthquake shook the foundations of the prison, and it broke open the prison doors and their chains.

Sometimes it takes an earthquake to break open the prison doors and chains of our childhood beliefs that God hates us because of our nonconforming sexual orientations and gender identities.

Sometimes that earthquake takes the form of scholarship. An important turning point in my own faith journey was reading the late John Boswell's groundbreaking book *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. Boswell, a history professor at Yale, argued that Christianity was actually more tolerant of homosexuality in the beginning. It was only in the 13th century that homophobia became the dominant perspective in the Church.

And sometimes that earthquake takes the form of a historical event. One such event occurred during the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, when the Stonewall Inn – a gay bar in the West Village – was raided by the police. Instead of passively submitting to being arrested, the patrons of the bar, including trans people and queer people of color, fought back.

That event, the Stonewall Uprising, gave birth to the modern-day LGBTQ rights movement in the United States. And that is why we celebrate June as Pride Month.

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I'm proud to be a member of the Episcopal Church. I was so moved by Bishop Mariann Budde's sermon from earlier in the year at the National Cathedral in which she begged for mercy for "gay, lesbian, and transgender children . . . who fear for their lives." How many of you also felt that way?

I'm also proud that Sean Rowe, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, will lead a livestream service at 6:00 pm tonight that will bless all upcoming Episcopal pride events and participants. Did you know that our national church has a gender justice staff officer, Aaron Scott, who identifies as trans and has had two decades of organizing experience?

And I'm proud that yesterday we celebrated the ministry of Bishop Mary Glasspool, the first openly-lesbian bishop in the Episcopal Church, and the Assistant Bishop of the Diocese of New York since 2016. Bishop Glasspool is retiring at the end of this month after nearly 45 years of ordained ministry. She has epitomized for me what the radical and unexpected nature of God's love is all about.

Today's gospel reading from the Gospel According to John reminds us that love is at the very center of our faith. In this reading, we hear Jesus' final words at the Last Supper. Jesus prays not only for his apostles, but also for all those who will believe in him in the future. So Jesus is literally praying for you and for me.

And what is the message of Jesus' prayer? It's love. Jesus prays that we may all experience the same love that God the Creator has for him. He says: "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you. . . . and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

This explains why LGBTQ people are such a gift to the Church. Our radical love for each other – even in the face of hatred and persecution – is a window into the infinitely deep love that is shared among the persons of the Trinity. Our radical love helps the Church to understand and experience what the very grace of God is all about.

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Today's gospel reading calls upon each of us, during this Pride Month, to love our LGBTQ siblings in both word and in deed. We are living in a time in which the very lives and existence of our transgender, nonbinary, two spirit, and intersex siblings are under attack by our government as well as people who claim to hold Christian values.

Since January of this year, over 100 anti-trans bills have been passed by 24 state legislatures around the country. There are nearly 1,000 anti-trans bills that are still pending on both the state and federal levels.

And numerous executive orders have eliminated anti-discrimination protections for trans people as well as access to gender-affirming care, not to mention bans on gender-neutral passports, discussion of trans-related issues in school curricula, and trans people serving in the military.

One thing that each of us can do is to visit the website of TransEpiscopal, the organization that works toward the "full embrace of transgender and nonbinary people in and through The Episcopal Church." There are a lot of great resources on the TransEpiscopal website about how each of us can welcome, support, and love our trans, nonbinary, and intersex siblings in the church and in the world. You can find the website at <https://transepiscopal.org>.

There is still so much work that needs to be done. Fifty-six years after the Stonewall Uprising, Pride Month is needed more than ever.

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Let me close by saying that I eventually did come out to my grandmother. And, no, she did not have a heart attack and die. It turns out that, more than anyone else in my family, my grandmother welcomed and embraced my then-boyfriend – and now-husband – Michael. And, because she did that, everyone else fell in line. Thanks goodness for the matriarchs!

This July, Michael and I will celebrate thirty-four years together. Thirty-four years. If that's not a sign of God's grace, I don't know what is. And that is also something that the junior high school me would never have believed.

Remember that God loves you. Without exception. And for this, we give thanks to God.

Happy Pride Month! Amen.