

## **We Are a Welcoming Community**

A sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

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In 1964 Marshall McLuhan told us that the medium was the message, and never has that been more true for me than in the creation of this service. I don't usually talk about the process of creating Sunday morning worship *as* Sunday morning worship, but in this case I think the message and how it has come to be delivered have a great symbiosis.

The original idea for this service came as part of the early discussions about the Worship Associates Program. Specifically it was at the suggestion of Bre Evans-Santiago that we began to develop a service around getting to better know our LGBTQ+ community. Unfortunately, work kept Bre from being able to participate in today's service. Though, since she's basking in the California sunshine I don't feel too bad for her. But anyway, the result is that I am presenting what was Bre's idea and, as we go along, some of Bre's life experiences. This has raised questions for me of who gets to speak for another person's experience, about who gets to speak from the perspective of another person's identity, of how do outside perceptions of who we are shape who we are.

The Macklemore song, *Same Love*, we heard earlier talked about how social standards can not only shape but confuse our sense of who we are. It said:

When I was in the third grade I thought that I was gay,  
'Cause I could draw, my uncle was, and I kept my room straight.  
I told my mom, tears rushing down my face  
She's like "Ben you've loved girls since before pre-k, trippin' "  
Yeah, I guess she had a point, didn't she?  
Bunch of stereotypes all in my head.  
I remember doing the math like, "Yeah, I'm good at little league"  
A preconceived idea of what it all meant  
For those that liked the same sex

The messages that rapper Macklemore got as a kid are the kinds of messages we hear every day in different ways, from different sources. Worse, they're messages our kids hear and they add up to the point where a third grader is worried about sexual orientation, where professing difference is cause for tears, where identity is a matter for judgment.

As Unitarian Universalists we have always taken a rather firm view on allowing people to define their own reality. Our stance of religious freedom is founded in the strength of personal experience, the use of reason and the application of individual conscience. Respect for the inherent worth and dignity of each person is our first principle. All of that is, of course, tempered by a covenant that calls us to be in community in respectful and life affirming ways. The upshot of it is that we do not trample on each other's religious beliefs. So if we are loathe to tell each other what to believe we should be as loathe to tell each other how to identify in terms of all the

factors that go into comprising personal identity: socio-economics, gender identity, sexual orientation, racial, ethnic and cultural heritage and more. Yet how very much a part of our American culture that is!

One of the stories Bre shared from her own experience is that of a little boy in her pre-school class who loved to wear dresses during play. His mother told him, “Take that off, son, boys don’t wear dresses.” How often have we heard reactions like this, have we recognized the same acculturated reactions as Macklemore described or even said some of these things ourselves? I don’t think there’s anything to tsk about that we have these reactions or thoughts. It’s what we do about having the thoughts or hearing the comments that might be cause for tsk’ing or not.

In the case of the little boy who like to play dress-up, Bre’s response was that in her classroom, people wore anything they wanted. This was enough to signal the mother that she might perhaps think differently about whether 3 year old boys wear dresses or not. But Bre has been at this work of identity inclusion for years, and admits that she did not always have a response or the strength to provide it.

She tells another story of an elementary school student who had two mommies and didn’t feel comfortable telling people that. She would call one of her mothers her “aunt” instead. Because Bre was not tenured, she did not take chances with publically identifying as a lesbian, so the student never knew that there were other people like her mom. Not only was child’s sense of self-identity challenged, but so was Bre’s.

During the process of seeking official designation from the denomination as a Welcoming Congregation, this congregation had to face many of these issues head on, and the process took years. It is my hope that someday it will boggle people’s minds that it takes years to intentionally offer a welcome to people of all identities, but the truth is that it did then and it still does take time and conversation and risking your heart, if not your paycheck or your life, to fully see and be seen, accept and be accepted, for who you are.

Misconceptions and social mores about gender identity are, sometimes, played out in ways we cannot even see or that are easy to miss. As I typed this sermon, the spellchecker in Microsoft Word corrected bunches of typos on the fly. When I typed the sentence from the preceding paragraph “She would call one of her mothers ‘aunt,” the spellchecker simply didn’t know what to do with it. It flagged the words ‘mothers,’ as in it is incorrect to write of someone having multiple mothers. Even my computer, a non-sentient entity, communicates the prejudices of its sentient makers and makes that part of my social reality. No, thank you.

These are what people who do equality work call micro-aggressions. My world is not rocked by spellchecker rejecting the notion of multiple mothers. I do not flee to my room in tears. But these tiny things, and their larger more direct comments of disregard, chip away at our sense of self, our sense of identity, of who we are. They make us feel unseen and therefore unvalued.

I regret that I don’t remember the name of the author who wrote that the worst part, the most damaging part, of slavery in the United States was not the physical work or physical abuse but

the mental abuse of having your identity stripped from you. The rapper Superstar Quamallah put it this way:

*That was the worst part of slavery  
They took our name  
And with that, they took our heritage  
Physical abuse was momentary  
But the name, that lasts forever*

It is a deep human need to be seen for who we are, and names reflect who we are. Even as a kid I knew that rhyme of “sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me” was just untrue. In some very real ways, name calling, belittling the soul of someone, trampling on their identity, can hurt far worse as it creates “a world so hateful some would rather die than be who they are.”

More subtle, but no less real, is the toll it takes on the one who slings the epithet, who fails to recognize the beauty of another soul. Frederick Douglass, in his autobiography, wrote about the wife of one of his owners when he was a slave. She began as a kind woman, even teaching Douglass the alphabet although it was illegal to teach a slave to read. Here is what Douglass wrote of her:

*The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon.*

The small slights of spellcheckers and casual acquaintances do not carry so much power as that, but even small slights dehumanize and once dehumanization begins it can build into throwing a high school girl down the stairs for being gay. It can become the murder of 44 people in one year for being transgendered. It raises the suicide rate of LGBTQ+ youth, and it makes the world an uglier place for everyone.

It is often the case that the path to acceptance is not wholly paved by the marginalized group but by the inclusions of allies from the prevailing social group. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this fact well and sought to build alliances in his work for racial justice. So it is in matters of gender identity and sexual orientation. It takes allies to help get the job done, which brings me right back to my questions of who gets to speak for another’s experience.

The poem Dear Straight People that I wanted to include in this service came from the viewpoint of a young lesbian woman from a particular social location, a context that differs from my own. Yet I not only have points of contact with her experience being a woman, a feminist, a Latina, and hopefully a dope ally. I do not speak from her experience, but I believe it is incumbent to speak *of* her experience so that more voices are added to the conversation. I understand why the poet Denice Frohman sets limits on who can perform her work. It is a piece of her identity and you don’t give that away easily, you don’t casually allow other people to speak for your experience, and particularly when you speak from a already marginalized viewpoint. But those

of us who do not hold that identity have to be ready to find something in our own that connects with the struggle to be seen for who we are, because that is universal.

This week, as we celebrate the final passage of marriage equality in Illinois, let our hearts be glad. But let us also remember

- that marriage equality is not full equality,
- that there remain folks who can't speak out lest they lose their livelihoods or their lives,
- that even small hurts are still hurts,
- that we are all called to be allies regardless of our individual identities,
- that we are called to the affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every individual.

And finally, let us remember the words of poet and Unitarian Universalist e.e.cummings, who wrote that “to be nobody-but-yourself—in a world, which is doing its best, day and night, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.”

May it be so.  
Por lo tanto puede ser.  
Namaste.

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