

2020 06 07 - Pride Sunday – Four People Share

1 Corinthian 13:1-3 (NRSV)

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love,
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,
but do not have love, I am nothing.

³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,
but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Introduction to Sharing

We can never overestimate the power of love in our lives. Today we are going to hear four people talk about their experiences with the pain of fear and the power of love. Their stories are filled with honesty and vulnerability. Each story is personal and powerful because of the truth and the love that is shared.

Between each story the speakers will lead us in a moment of silence (probably 15-20 seconds) and then we will chant "Open our Hearts, Open our Minds." The moment of meditation between speakers is an opportunity to take a deep breath and to honour and reflect on the words that you have just heard. We ask that you refrain from using the chat during this time of sharing. You will have an opportunity, those who wish to, to talk with those who sharing at the end of the service.

Let's begin this sacred time of sharing with the chant.

Chant: MV #21 *Open Our Hearts, Open our Minds*

Sharing from Janet Keene

Good Morning Everyone: My name is Janet Keene and most of you know me as a dedicated and grateful member of this congregation. Some of you may not know that I am also the proud mother of three amazing children, one of whom happens to be gay.

When our son came out to us, the summer before he was to enter High School, I remember my heart being filled with so much love and pride for him. To have the honesty and courage to share with us who he really was at such a young age showed such incredible strength.

I also remember the fear I felt- paralyzing fear. Fear for what he may face in his life because he would not be accepted by others who may view him as different. The truth is, I also felt the fear of what others may think- my mother, our siblings, his siblings and their friends, our friends, co-workers and colleagues. Those were fears that I didn't admit to him at the time.

You see, I wasn't Public, Intentional and Explicit about how our son identified. Our family didn't talk about it the way we should have. When I heard offensive comments, inappropriate jokes or slurs against the LGBTQ community, I remained silent. I knew that there was a support group called PFLAG- (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) that met regularly at Maverick School here in Swift Current. I didn't attend.

I told myself that his story was not mine to tell and that I wanted to honour him by allowing him to share it with others when he felt it appropriate. While I believe this was partly true, I also recognize my decision to keep silent was the result of that paralyzing fear. I deeply regret that decision today.

It has been 13 years since that warm summer evening in July when our son spoke his truth to us. Many of those years have been tumultuous, for all of us, but especially for him. He has experienced much pain (some known to us and some that we will never know), faced many struggles and has overcome them time and time again. If I were him, I would probably be an angry, bitter and resentful person. Our son is not that person. He is incredibly kind, compassionate, fun loving, strong and resilient. He is much loved by our whole family, his co-workers and his solid circle of wonderful friends. We are so proud of him!

I joined the Affirming Ministry Committee because I want our Church to take the steps to become an Affirming Congregation. I want us to be Public, Intentional and Explicit-standards that we hold ourselves to when we become an inclusive community of faith.

I want this so that every child who has ever been teased on the playground, shunned on school trips or made to feel shame by inappropriate comments from school peers, will know that at our Church, they will be regarded as a Child of God. At our Church, their diversity will not only be welcomed, not only be accepted, but will be greatly celebrated!!

Silence & Chant

Sharing from Dawn Caswell

I expect that my story is much the same as others of my generation: small rural elementary school, small farming community, deep family roots, and lots of secrets.

Just as I have always recognized that I was different, I also inherently knew that it was a topic I would never voluntarily bring up with anyone. It was clear to me, even by age 8, that the topics of homosexuality and bisexuality were taboo and potentially dangerous. So...I never said a word. Not to my family, not to my friends.

I kept very much to myself in elementary school, studied hard, got excellent grades. Once I reached high school, I made a few close friends, and even dated a couple of boys. I did exactly what was expected of me. In the back of my mind, however, university was always my payoff. I couldn't wait to get to a place in a bigger city where I

could meet and get to know other people like me. Where I didn't have to hide who I was, or who I wanted to date.

I took tentative steps out of the proverbial closet in my first year at university. When family circumstances beyond my control took priority, however, I was forced right back in.

Another 2 1/2 years would pass before I would again take that step. By the time I was in my last year of university, I was living my life on my terms, and I was in a relationship with a wonderful, funny and caring young woman I met at work, and hit it off immediately.

A few quiet, well-placed words from my academic advisor brought my world crashing down. An older man, in a significant position of authority over me, told me point-blank at our last meeting, that no parent would ever want someone like me teaching their children. I was told that I needed to put my lifestyle in my back pocket and act the way women were supposed to.

His words rang true. After all, the same words and fears had echoed in my brain as long as I could remember. It's why I never came out to my family, or my friends back home.

So, I folded.

I convoked with my teaching degree, started a job right away, and threw myself into my work. Within the next two years, I was married, and 5 years after that, had 3 kids and a mortgage. I did all the 'right' things, until I couldn't any longer. I had not been truthful with my family, with my friends, and most importantly, myself. I had failed to live authentically. Days in school were spent coaching young people to be true to themselves, reach for their potential, live authentic lives, and I, myself, was the biggest hypocrite.

I won't share the details of the actual event, but in response to a local, but terrible story on the news, I realized suddenly that all the power that I had let that academic advisor have over me, was gone. The fact that I had let his words and my fears govern my life for so long angered me.

That day, I began to take steps to change. I had individual conversations with some, but not all, family members. I met with my two oldest friends and had an open and honest conversation with them. Over time, the conversations became easier, although there are people and places that I still struggle with.

I was lucky to have had an opportunity to attend a provincial GSA conference. GSA's, or Gay Straight Alliances, are school groups that provide a safe and supportive space for diverse youth and their allies. After the conference, I returned to my school and shoulder-tapped a few students that had previously expressed interest in having a GSA. We drafted some guidelines, set a scheduled meeting time, and it absolutely took off. When those students left my school for the high school, they carried with them the determination to start a GSA at SCCHS, too! It was clear that the support they received

in GSA was powerful, and became an integral part of their school experience. They had been heard, recognized and validated. That is powerful. That is the key to growth.

At the same time, I joined Swift Current Pride, just in time to help it through the growing pains of becoming Southwest Saskatchewan Pride. That year, we celebrated the first ever full Pride Week in Swift Current, with an extensive list of activities and events, including installation of the province's first permanent rainbow crosswalk.

Though those events hit major milestones towards awareness and visibility in our community and surrounding districts, my heart still aches for those youth that don't feel they have a voice, or a place, and struggle to come to terms with who they need to be. As a teacher and administrator, it's impossible for me to ignore the students that are most at-risk. I will continue to provide safe spaces and support at the school level, and work towards education and awareness at the Pride level. I don't just do it for them. I do it for me, too.

I can't tell you that I've had every conversation I need to have. I haven't. I probably won't ever have them all. But the people who are most important in my life, know who I am.

Tomorrow is my 50th birthday. I have spent most of those years in the closet, and I still have a long way to go to get past the long-held fears that kept me there. My wish for my birthday is to see our youth grow confidently into themselves, and never know the kind of fear that has paralysed so many of us for so long. They are our future, and we all need them to carry forward the truth that we are a diverse tapestry of genders, orientations, cultures, colours and beliefs. And, still, at the end of the day, we are all HUMAN.

Silence & Chant

Sharing from Deb Fletcher

Our daughter, Jill, came out in 2005. My husband, Jim, was shocked by her announcement. I, on the other hand, had been thinking for a while, that she might be gay.....My response to her, as she struggled for words to explain, comfort and justify, was simply,..... "Finally!"

Our love for our beautiful daughter increased that day....that day when she courageously stood tall for her true self, after struggling for so long.

I had prayed that she was not gay because I had seen the difficulties that others had experienced when they came out. But,..... I am so thankful.....

that Jill did not hide behind a mask, that she allowed herself to shed the fears and tears. Some folks think that gay people "choose" the lifestyle.

I don't understand these beliefs!..... because I wonder why anyone would choose a life that can be so subjected to hatred and judgement.

Sadly, most of the difficulties, criticisms and harsh judgements have come from Christians.....some I have known for years.

In our family, "some" who are good people with good intentions, can't accept homosexuals. They quote bible verses and declare that God didn't make people to be "like that". And they are against same sex marriages...more bible verses and judgement.

I was involved in a Lutheran Bible Study group in Eastend when they proposed everyone sign the petition to ban gay marriages. I found courage to speak up and share my feelings about how Jesus would not want us to prevent two people who love each other from being together. I shared heartfelt emotions about the opportunity to support diversity....to show what being a true Christian is....to be followers of Jesus and reach out in Christian love and support to so many in our small community and beyond.....and to send a great message to the bigger church. The group listened and, I believe, some wanted to rip up the petition but unfortunately, most of them went ahead and signed it. One of my close friends, whose light for Jesus shone so brightly, asked me to pray for Jill's sins. I felt so distressed, disappointed and discouraged.

My solid foundation of faith was shaken. And then, I realized that I was..... "judging" others!!

I went into a wasteland... I looked at churches and "Christians" with anger, bitterness and resentment. My "Mother instincts" kicked in and I wanted to protect my daughter and her community. It is shocking and sad how divided the world is still in accepting differences in others. There is much work to do to get the message of love out there.....

I am so thankful to be part of First United Church.....it feels like "coming home".....

I believe that I needed to experience that time in my life.....possibly, to be more empathetic to how it feels to be alone and judged.....

It is my hope and prayer that the First United Church will continue to create that feeling for whoever needs it.....to feel that they, too, are "coming home" to God's Grace and a church family who will show love and acceptance without question! just as Jesus does!

Silence & Chant

Sharing from Jesse Koethler

What I want to discuss today is the progress that has been made, and how we should be proud of it, while also recognizing how far there is to go. The idea of PIE, being

public, intentional, and explicit, is absolutely crucial to bridging the gap between where we are and where we need to get to. I'll recount some of my own experiences in support of this statement.

There is a lot to be proud of in terms of progress made in raising awareness and acceptance of the queer community in Swift Current. We installed the first permanent rainbow crosswalk in the province. Every summer we host a varied and exciting Pride Week. Many schools in Swift Current have gay-straight alliances for youth. Several businesses sponsor pride events, and show their support with flags and decorations. There are many people in this city that are outspoken and relentless in their pursuit of justice and awareness.

However...

We are not done. We have a rainbow crosswalk, but resentful drivers frequently try to damage it. People often question why we need a Pride Week, since we want equality: to be treated like everyone else. They ask, "why are you calling extra attention to yourselves?". We host pride dances and drag shows, but people still drive by and harass performers and party goers. Last month, a rainbow crosswalk and affirming church in Saskatoon were vandalized with homophobic graffiti.

When I wrote my first draft of this speech, it was fairly impersonal. I talked more about the movement in general and included only a few anecdotes. However, I was encouraged to personalize my message more for good reason; messages resonate better when they have specific events, and names and faces attached to them. So I revised. In doing so, I realized a couple of things. One is that I, personally, don't have a large amount of negative experiences to draw from. I also realized how lucky I am for that. Regardless, I'll share what I know.

This is a moment that has stuck with me since it happened. I was driving around with an old school friend last summer and he told me that there were rumours about me in high school. One in particular was that I liked women. He said he didn't believe the rumour for a second, because he knew me and it was too outrageous of an idea. I laughed. I didn't want to shake up his world too much, so I didn't argue. It's funny to me, but it speaks to the greater problem of homosexuality being seen as absurd and uncommon. If you've known someone as straight for your entire life, that's just how they are, right? I've also encountered people, both friends and family, that have felt like they were somehow entitled to information about my sexuality. I didn't explicitly tell them when I realized I liked women too, and they were upset because they thought they weren't important enough to me to talk to about it. There are boundaries that exist in heterosexual lives that people do not respect in LGBTQ+ lives.

Queer people are bombarded with intrusive questions about their sex lives and romantic experiences all the time. One of my friends is bi and married to a man, and she said that a coworker asked her, in the middle of work, if she regretted never being with women before she got married. Outsiders often feel like they have the right to know intensely personal things, and they don't.

The last real-world event I will discuss today is the heaviest. I'm in a relationship. She's one of the most talented poet/musicians I've ever met, and one of the most generous, selfless people I know. And she's funny! We have stupid arguments all the time, about sharks, and sticky notes. And her father just told her that he will never accept our relationship, and if she's upset about her families' disapproval, then maybe that's a judgment on her.

She told me that she loves me, but that sometimes she wishes we could just stop. It was painful to hear. She's hurting. Her family doesn't accept her, and I can't do anything about it. I realized how much I had been taking for granted that I can freely talk about who I'm interested in in my home. Everytime I hear a story like this I wish that I could share my mom with the kids who aren't allowed to be who they are at home. And I have, as best I could.

So, how does being public, intentional, and explicit factor into any of this, and to the church?

There is a large portion of the queer community that grows up in church and religion, and grows out of it as they age because it becomes clear they will not be accepted. It always strikes me when I meet religious and church-going members of the LGBTQ+ community, because I've heard so many stories of people leaving the church, or being forced out. There are also non-religious queer folk that end up resenting the church because of how it treats them and their community.

It's not necessarily that there are no open-minded churches (though this may often be the case in smaller centres). One of the problems is that many "supportive" organizations are very quiet about it. Yes, they accept queer people, but the public can't know. This may be done to avoid uproar in the community, and to ensure that more close-minded members do not leave the church because of their opposing views. But approaches like this are damaging; those that need that support may not be lucky enough to know it's there.

Being upfront about your support is deeply important. It lets those in need know it's there, with no conditions. It fosters a way forward and sets an example for other organizations and community members. It shows that you are welcoming, and there is no reason to be ashamed of making that obvious.

It will also anger some people. The thing is, there are always other churches for those that disagree to attend. There may not be anywhere else for the outsiders that need it to go.

It is not easy to be openly and explicitly supportive of a group that a large percentage of society is in defiance of. But indifference and non-action can be just as damaging as outright discrimination. Non-action and silence prevent progress and advancement. So we should be proud of what we've done. But we can't lose sight of what's ahead and the work that has to be put in for equality and acceptance across the board.

The queer community is expansive; much larger than many of us can comprehend, myself included. I will close with a quote from Harvey Milk, who in 1978 became the first openly gay elected official in the United States: “Gay brothers and sisters, you must come out. Come out to your parents. I know that it is hard and will hurt them, but think about how they will hurt you in the voting booth!”. Progress takes a long time. But if everyone came out, and everyone that supported them was open and explicit about it, the world would get better, faster.

PIE (Public, Intentional, Explicit) increases education, awareness, and acceptance, and it's importance cannot be understated. It's the best way to combat injustice, misinformation, and close mindedness. It's why my experiences growing up queer are better than my mom's, and it's how the next generation will have an even easier time than I have.

Silence & Chant