



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

Julie Rodgers, author of *Outlove: A Queer Christian Survival Story*

Pride Sunday Sermon 2022

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 26, 2022

The Third Sunday After Pentecost

Readings: 2 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

Good morning and Happy Pride Sunday. It's great to be here with you this morning. It feels really beautiful to be here in a pulpit, speaking at church, which has been the source of so much of the pain and anguish in my life—and likely for many of you—for much of my life. To be here on Pride Sunday, to be out and queer, to see so many priests and people in leadership here also: I can locate my own experience in you all, and that's such a gift. Thank you.

As I was preparing for this morning, I was reflecting on my first Pride experience, my first Pride celebration. I was 28 years old, and it was in San Francisco. It had been a long road to get *to* that Pride, and it was going to continue to be a long road *after* that Pride event.

When I was 16 years old, I came out to my mom in a suburb of Dallas, Texas. My family was very conservative evangelical. I was a very good Christian kid and always loved Jesus. I loved my community, and I really wanted to be good. So when I came out to my mom at 16, I was obviously terrified. A week later, she pulled me out of school early and took me to meet a minister named Ricky Schallete, who was the executive director of Living Hope Ministries in Arlington, Texas. Living Hope is still alive and thriving today; it has many satellite campuses. It's a Christian conversion therapy organization that is the primary place that conversion therapy happens here in the United States. Religious communities are protected by religious freedom laws, and it was an organization that claimed to help LGBTQ people heal their same sex attractions and live straight-looking lives.

I ended up there because I was at a susceptible age. You know, the age of 16 is earnest, and I got deeply sucked into that organization. I stayed around for about a decade. I devoted my entire self to this process: trying to live a life that I thought the people in my community might be proud of and might come to accept and love me.

It didn't work. And it was very damaging and very harmful. As I began to see the harm it was causing not only me but also my friends, I began to consider other ways of integrating my faith and my sexuality. And that took me to the Pride celebration in San Francisco. It was 2014. I was 28 years old, and I had gotten to a place of accepting the fact that I was gay and that it wouldn't change. But I also couldn't imagine leaving my conservative religious community, because it was the whole world to me. I couldn't imagine a life outside of it.

So I tried to live this Catholic-like walk, this sort of Catholic line for a while of, like, I'm gay. I was going to be honest about that, but I wouldn't "act out" on my sexuality. I wouldn't have sex. I wouldn't marry. I wouldn't be in intimate relationships. Then I realized I was going to be starved for affection in a relationship because I was totally closed off and isolated.

Then I had a friend come into my life who I developed feelings for. Her name was Miles (at the time he went by Amelia and identified as a woman), and the sparks flew between us. We entered into what we

were calling at that time a “spiritual friendship” because it was a way of expressing some sort of partnership where there could be some tenderness and some seeing and being seen and giving and receiving love in a way that I thought might be acceptable within my religious community and religious system.

Miles was in San Francisco marching in the Pride parade with an organization, and I was in San Francisco doing activism and work. I thought, this is my chance! I'm going to go to Pride, but I'm not going to be approving of sin. I'm not affirming gay sex. I'm just acknowledging and celebrating the beauty and the humanity of the LGBTQ community. We're all God's children.

When I got to Pride, I burrowed through the crowd and got to the front, next to the barriers. There was a CrossFit community coming by. I was like, yay, people get to be open and out, and this is good. I saw some churches and some moms wearing shirts that said Free Mom Hugs for people who were ostracized from their communities. There was a sense of warmth and beauty, and I felt, like, I can do this. I am celebrating all God's children.

Eventually some of the folks expressing kink and other sorts of BDSM expressions started coming by. Now, obviously kink is expressed in every kind of community. It's not just for the queer community. But I had grown up with all of these messages about the gay lifestyle, and it really triggered me. I started panicking, literally having a panic attack. By virtue of being here, am I approving of sin? Am I approving of gay sex, which I still thought was a sin?

I started spinning out. I met up with Miles afterward, and I felt that whatever was going on in that situation, I must flee from it. I must remove myself as far from it as possible. I cannot participate in it. He asked, “Does this mean you're breaking up our spiritual friendship?” And I answered, “Absolutely.” I broke up our spiritual friendship, and I doubled down once again on teachings that had been enslaving me throughout my entire adolescence and young adulthood.

I tell this story because this is the teaching that we hear in white nationalist Christianity, which really has a hold on our political system and so many of the communities that we come from. That teaching isn't just about that message alone. It doesn't just come for queer bodies and women's bodies and trans bodies and Black bodies. It's not just coming for us through legislation that absolutely harms us. It also gets deep into our nervous systems. The trauma runs deep. Whenever I would begin to feel moved by the spirit within me that delighted in every human being and delighted in the ways that we give and receive love, the religious system that I came from would take me back.

I would hear in my head those voices that were sometimes from the religious leaders directed at me; sometimes it was my own imagination rehearsing the lines I'd heard. I'm sitting there at Pride, where it's a celebration of how beautiful God has made the queer community; and I'm sitting there hearing the apostle Paul cherry-pick verses that have been weaponized against me.

It was a long road to freedom. I'm still on that road. It has been a long road to get to get to this place where I can truly feel the love of God in this space and in my relationships and in the ways that I give and receive love.

I think the impact of white Christian nationalism is very real. I think we're feeling that this weekend. I'm sure many of us are feeling unsafe with gun violence and with the backlash that we've seen in recent years to the freedoms we've gained. We're seeing a backlash that likely allows many of you to feel as unsafe as I do.

In these troubled times, I would like to reflect on things that have brought me solace and comforted me.

The first—and this continues to be a big lift for me—is finding my place in a spirituality that can hold the whole of who we are. Like my example from that Pride day, the very verses that can proclaim freedom and offer us comfort and solace have also been weaponized against us. Take this morning's reading. I was looking over it in preparation, and I found many of the verses to be triggering, which is really upsetting because there's so much that's beautiful here. For instance, it says, "For you were called to freedom brothers and sisters. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence. But through love become slaves for one another." (Galatians 5:13) I remember hearing verses like that, and every time I entertain the possibility that my queer body might be beautiful. That the way I give and receive love might be a gift.

And then I'd be called back, and I would feel that I was giving into fleshly desires—enslaved once again to abusive teachings. It was such a vicious cycle: the faith that was the cornerstone of my life was also the biggest pain point and the thorn in my flesh that kept me from being able to live a wholehearted life.

So, at a certain point, I realized that I needed a new orientation to this faith that was enslaving me. I didn't need a new sex orientation, like I'd been told. I needed a new orientation to this faith. And I began to wonder if this faith, this community, this religious system that had been a source of so much pain might also be an occasion for healing. And I'm really relieved to tell you that it has been.

I began to find that we read *into* the text of scripture as much as we read *from* it. Right alongside those verses that triggered me, that could take me back into places that were really dark, were also verses that offer healing and give signposts along the way to where we should be headed to live in the spirit as Jesus has called us. Our reading today says the whole law is summed up in a single commandment: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. It says to live by the spirit is to be led by the spirit. We can have confidence that we're led by the spirit if we see the fruits of the spirit in our lives: joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

We can find rest from our religious anxiety when we let go of our need for certainty and rest in the mystery that we were created *in* love and *for* love. That's our purpose in life. That's it; that's the whole of the text, the whole of the scripture, the whole of our faith communities and our religion that's so often used as a weapon against us. Jesus just summed it up and boiled it down for us: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

And that call to love is both a comfort and a challenge. It affirms that we're on the right path, and we can have confidence we're on it when we see the fruits of love in our lives. But it's also a challenge, to use whatever freedom and whatever strength that we have found to lift up those who are suffering around us.

On this Pride Sunday I want to reflect for a minute on an aspect of the LGBTQ movement over the last decade that I think highlights this idea of the freedom that we found in love and also the responsibility that we have when we begin to find that freedom. I think we've seen rapid changes in our society when it comes to LGBTQ rights. It's such a gift to see Jane Lynch, who was just here, to see *Glee*, to see all these shows where we can locate our experiences in popular culture, and to be able to imagine a positive future for our lives as being openly LGBTQ people. To be able to see people marrying, to see priests who share our identities. There's so much positive change. But I think when we look back at decisions made along the way in the fight for LGBTQ rights, we see that we still don't have basic protections from discrimination in housing and health care and public accommodations.

We seemed to go all-in on marriage equality—such a win and such a gift—but in going all-in on that, many of us who had access to wealth got a little complacent. We were like, okay, we got it. We're good. As a result, the most vulnerable in our community who still don't have those basic protections are suffering even more. We've seen an absolute assault on transgender folks, the people who were not born into bodies that were naturally privileged nor into communities that were safe for many of them. They

need to be prioritized. They need for us to put money and energy and all those resources that we were putting into the fight for marriage equality into their cause. We need to continue with that sense of urgency for the most vulnerable among us. Not many of us around the country are experiencing the sort of freedom that we feel today on Pride Sunday, here, in a church that affirms us and celebrates us.

The call to love is a radical one. It's one that prioritizes the most vulnerable. When I think about what that looks like practically, I think it's a lot easier than we often make it. When I was a kid, I wanted to save the whole world. I grew up evangelical; we believe that we're here on a mission to literally save the whole world. It's really daunting; and you know, you can't love the whole world. So in response to realizing I couldn't love the whole world, I found it easy to swing to the extreme of focusing on myself and the people who are right around me.

When we think about Jesus's call to love, when we think about the life of Jesus, he was aggressively present to the individual people around him. Aggressively present, and it was always to the one, right? The one lost sheep, the one lost coin—that was all of us. It was the person who was in front of him. I think that love is less complicated than we try to make it. As much as we can get into big religious and political theories, it's really quite simple. It's paying attention, seeing the people around us, having that conversation on behalf of someone else. It's not something that we post on Instagram. It's not in memes. It's just simply seeing people and responding to them out of the overflow of love we've received.

I'm working in a bar right now while applying for jobs over the last six months or so. (My whole background is in evangelicalism, and that is not a resumé that translates easily to the work force.) There's a guy named Henry who will pop in regularly, and he's become our guy. He'll say, "Sister, I'm homeless; can I get some food? Can I have some wings? Can I have a shot of whiskey?" We'll sometimes give him a little shot. Give him a burger.

When he came in recently, I said, "Hey, Henry. What's up, man? How's it going? What do you need?" He responded, "Hey, sister, can I just have a hug?" Such a tender moment. I said, "Yeah, Henry; come on, bring it in." I thought, man, the vulnerability and tenderness of coming in and asking pretty much a stranger for a hug because he needed that affection.

It reminds me of a poem that in many ways sums up the life of Jesus, how he lived, and what his message was. It's a poem called *The End of Poetry* by one of my favorite poets, Ada Limón.

*Enough of osseous and chickadee and sunflower
and snowshoes, maple and seeds, samara and shoot,
enough chiaroscuro, enough of thus and prophecy
and the stoic farmer and faith and our father and tis
of thee, enough of bosom and bud, skin and god
not forgetting and star bodies and frozen birds,
enough of the will to go on and not go on or how
a certain light does a certain thing, enough
of the kneeling and the rising and the looking
inward and the looking up, enough of the gun,
the drama, and the acquaintance's suicide, the long-lost
letter on the dresser, enough of the longing and
the ego and the obliteration of ego, enough
of the mother and the child and the father and the child
and enough of the pointing to the world, weary
and desperate, enough of the brutal and the border,
enough of can you see me, can you hear me, enough*

*I am human, enough I am alone and I am desperate,
enough of the animal saving me, enough of the high
water, enough sorrow, enough of the air and its ease,
I am asking you to touch me.ⁱ*

People just want to be seen.

And it's easy, especially in weeks like this one, to get caught up in theory and rage. It's easy to get caught up in religiosity and to miss sight of the fact that most people are simply asking us to touch them. People want to be seen, and that's what Jesus modeled for us. He modeled seeing people, seeing the most vulnerable, seeing their suffering, and moving toward them.

Finally, as I think about what I find comfort in and what I believe we can find comfort in and what's so beautiful—what's kept me coming back to this faith, to the message of Jesus over and over and over again—is that the fundamental truth about you and me and the person sitting next to you, the truest thing is that we are loved. We were created *in* love, *by* love, and *for* love. That love is not contingent upon anything we do. It is not something we earn. It does not discriminate. The message of Jesus is that we are loved because we breathe.

I think one of the challenges of coming of age in oppressive communities is that we often develop coping mechanisms that lead us to create more pain for ourselves and the people we love most. We have to deal with the shame of those coping mechanisms on top of the struggles we already face by virtue of being a human being in the world, especially in a the world that specifically does not want us to flourish.

The message of Jesus is that even the pain we ourselves cause can be mended. Even when we fail, even when we lose decades to addictions, even if we hurt the people we love most in the world, we are loved and we are wanted. I'm not a fan of the kind of pride that says we're all perfect angel babies because we're queer. We know ourselves too well to know that's not true. We're not above reproach. What we need to know is that we are seen in all of our complexity and our darkness, our failures, the efforts we're making to be better than we actually are. We're fully seen in all of that, and still we are loved. You are loved. You are loved.

So, let that love hold you in these troubled times. Let it inspire you to use your gifts and resources to make the world a little gentler for those who are suffering. Let it expand your imagination for what's possible in creating communities where everyone, especially those who are suffering and vulnerable, can know that they're wanted. Let it heal your deepest wounds, and let it remind you over and over and over again that the world is better because you're here.

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For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022

ⁱ Ada Limón, "The End of Poetry," The New Yorker, May 4, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/05/04>