

June 23, 2024
Pride Sunday
Mayflower UCC
Rev. Susie Hayward
Scripture: Psalm 23 (a Queer translation by M Jade Kaiser)

A Queering Faith

I offer you today a sermon in three acts.

Act I: This is an old, true story

(a story my colleague Rev. John Gage alerted me to, for which I'm grateful)

Imagine this setting: the 5th century Byzantine Empire, likely around present day Lebanon. A child is born within a Christian family – a girl, as this child is identified to be in the typical way. The child is given a feminine name, and raised primarily by the father, Eugenius, after the mother dies. The child is devoted to Christian faith. And so perhaps it is not a surprise that when it comes time to marry, they do not want this kind of householder life. Rather, they want to follow Eugenius into a monastic life, deepening spiritual practice and formation, living intentionally with and for God. This is their calling.

But there's a problem, because the child is not the right gender. Understood to be a girl, the norm was to marry, to bear children, tend the home. Certainly girls do not to enter a male monastery. Impossible, says Eugenius.

But it's not, they reply. Because they are full of faith in God and grit and a subversive, counter-cultural, imagination. And so they proceed to shave their head, change their clothing, their pronouns, and their name – to Marinus -- and to identify as male. And with that, Marinus becomes a monk and enters the monastery with his father. Ten years later after Eugenius dies, Marinus remains in the same monastery, clearly enamored with this life of asceticism, prayer, and discipline among his fellow brothers. He does not leave to become a wife to someone. He does not leave to join a female monastery – which existed at the time. He continues to live as Father Marinus, as God called him to be.

Oh, but that's not all there is to the story of Marinus, friends.

Because one night, when he is traveling with fellow monks, they stay at an inn. And that night, so the story goes, a Roman soldier beds – probably rapes – the innkeeper's daughter. And when it is discovered that she is pregnant, she accuses not the soldier but that monk, Father Marinus, of fathering the child. Rather than deny the girl, Marinus begs forgiveness and pays his penance – living in exile outside the walls of the monastery as a beggar for ten years, before he is invited back into the community under the stipulation that he continue to pay penance via hard labor.

But that's not all there is to this story, Beloved. Because early in the period of Marino's exile, the inn-keeper's daughter gives birth to a son, and the innkeeper takes the unwanted child and dumps him with Marinus, who raises him as his own son – both outside and then within the walls of the monastery.

It's only later, after Father Marinos dies, when his body is prepared for burial, that the monks discover Marinos could not have been the biological father of that child. The abbot, the innkeeper, many are said to have wept for the wrong they did to Marinos. And miracle upon miracle, during the funeral prayers one of the monks touches the sacred gender non-conforming body of Marinos and is said to have been healed from his blindness. And so today, Marinos is recognized as a saint by the Orthodox, Catholic, and Episcopal Churches. His saint day in the Catholic Church is June 18th, just this past week, though these institutions often call him by his initial name – what some might call his dead name – and refer to him by feminine pronouns. But not all Christians and Christian churches do. For some, for me, Marinos is venerated as the patron saint of trans people, and of transgender parenting. He is venerated as Father Marinos.

This is an old story, not a modern one. Because we queers have always been here, Beloved. *(And yes, I saw “we” because I identify as queer myself, for among several reasons the fact that I’ve loved and had long-term relationships with women).*

We have always had among our Christian tradition the gender non-conforming, diverse sexualities, gender expansiveness. We’ve had King David, whom the Bible tells us loved his male companion Jonathan more than any woman (2 Samuel 1:26). We’ve had Ruth and Naomi, who became each other’s chosen family, devoted only to each other (Ruth 1:16-17). We’ve had “eunuch” saints, gender non-conforming saints like Joan of Arc. And beyond the Christian tradition, still more: like the Two Spirit among the Indigenous community here on Turtle Island (North America), whose queer identity was often understood to be not a curse but a blessing – something offering them particular insight into the gender-full sacred, setting them apart to serve as spiritual leaders ... that is, until colonialism and European culture arrived and imposed its more oppressive understanding of gender upon the Indigenous and their sacred Two Spirit people – a story you hear as well in Asia, in Africa, in so many other places where colonialism enforced heteronormativity and patriarchy that was legitimated by a particular interpretation of Christianity that ignored an obvious fact: we have always been there, always been here, and they are among our revered spiritual ancestors.

And of course we have been, because we were created by a primordial force that was gender expansive, and that created us in their image. A God who never stops pushing against the boundaries that oppress and confine. A God we can see at work in the life of Saint Marinos, and so many queer people – especially gender non-conforming and trans folk in our lives whose very being implodes the confining boundaries of beingness that the world imposes, expanding the borders of gender, calling us to think bigger, to grow our hearts bigger, to love bigger. As God always intended for us. As our faith is meant to do.

Act II: God was preparing us

Many years ago, when Black trans actress Laverne Cox first rose to fame and Time Magazine was declaring we had reached a tipping point of trans visibility, the Rev. Ben Guess – at the time an executive officer of the UCC -- wrote something on his Facebook. He said: It feels like God has been preparing us for this time of consciousness about transgender experiences and identities. For decades, *decades*, in the UCC we’d been paying attention to pronouns. Informed by feminist and womanist thought in the 60s and 70s, we’d sought to understand how our exclusive use of masculine pronouns for God had undergirded patriarchal systems that devalue women and had limited our imagination and understanding of our God who is beyond gender, or who encompasses all genders. And so we got to work. We revised our liturgy and hymns. We wrote new prayers. We paid attention in our preaching to how we talked about God and God’s

people – attending to our gendered language. It was awkward, this work of moving towards gender neutral or gender inclusive language. We fumbled, we messed up. We still do! Some resisted or refused to make these changes. And some still do! But over time, as a community, it became easier, even natural. We became more used to awkward language construction to avoid gender exclusive words for God and God's people. And with it, our understanding of God expanded. Or maybe I'll just speak for myself – my own understanding of God certainly grew. And my love for this God in whom I could better see my own being.

And so now, years later when my stepchild came out as non-binary, and their cousin has shifted between various gender identities in their journey of self-discovery, I had been prepared by God and this denomination. I was already conscious of pronouns, of gendered words and language. I was better able to meet these children in their journey of becoming their authentic self, with dignity, and I knew already the importance of doing so, why we do so. For liberation. For love. To understand God better and to orient ourselves to this mysterious, gender-full source of our being.

Similarly, as both children changed their names to better reflect their sense of who they were, to names they found more liberatory, more deeply soul-aligned... that too, God had prepared me for. From the Biblical stories of name changes we've heard already this summer and will continue to hear throughout our preaching series. From the stories of our saints and ancestors like Marinos. Beloved, God was preparing us all along for this era of growing trans and gender non-binary visibility, for this step in the greater unfolding of liberation for all God's people. Without our even knowing, our Christian faith was being queered just as God had always intended – by inviting us to reject rigid binaries and marinate in the divine in-betweenness that does not conform to the ways of the world, to disrupt our easy assumptions, and by challenging us. By ensuring that our very language, our pronouns, the names we use, fuel love and dignity for all God's people rather than harm and pain any of them. Thanks be to God for all She did, for all They did, to prepare us for this moment, and for this work.

Act III: The work of God is not done

It is easy to be self-congratulatory. The UCC – Mayflower specifically – has a long history and commitment to queer rights. The UCC began ordaining out gay folk in the 1970s and recognized same sex marriage in 2006. Mayflower has been officially Open and Affirming to queer folk since 1992. Our clergy refused to sign marriage licenses until everyone in Minnesota could be married, and we were at the heart of passing marriage equality in this state!

We've long understood that what makes a sexual relationship sinful has nothing, *nothing*, to do with which genders are involved. What makes a sexual relationship sinful is the presence of violence, domineering power, abuse – something that can be found in straight and queer relationships alike. We know that.

This Pride Month, we should be proud. We have every right to be.

But friends, the work is not done. Our work is not done.

The threat to queer rights at this moment is enormous, including here in our state. Even with our governor's ban on book bans passed this year, with our declaration of Minnesota as a trans refuge state and the arrival of many displaced trans folk and families from elsewhere in the

country – and as of a few months ago from the wider world. We still have work to do. The work of liberation is never done, the forces that threaten it are organized and unrelenting.

And this is a matter of life and death.

Need I remind you that kids who identify as LGBTQ+ are four times more likely to attempt suicide than their peers, with roughly half of transgender and gender non-binary youth seriously considering suicide – not because they are inherently more prone than any others, but because of how the world fails to treat them with dignity: to affirm who they are, to call them by their chosen names or recognize their gender, to support them in their journey of discovery about who God created them to be. And let me be clear: I don't cast blame here on those who sometimes forget to say the right pronoun or name. It takes time and effort, we know this well. But I mean those who refuse to make the effort. And those powers and principalities seeking to wield state power to this end as well: to oppress gender queer kids. This kills kids, including here in Minnesota, and here in Minneapolis. We know this all too well, Mayflower.

And, the anti-LGBTQI+ rights community has well laid plans. We know because they've made it clear: they seek to undo the advances made on queer rights over the past few decades, to eradicate government programs that support queer Americans. To eradicate US foreign programs that support sexual and gender minorities overseas. They unite with authoritarian leaders worldwide – Putin, Orbán, Modi – in this agenda. The threat is very real.

So what will we do? What will you do?

I pray you do not stop. Do not stop listening to our still-speaking God and queering your faith – understanding how heteronormativity and patriarchy operate in insidious ways in our lives and world to distort love, fuel violence, and suffocate our imaginations. Queer your faith by celebrating love and diversity and subversiveness and the resisting joy found on the margins. I pray you keep working to protect our democracy and the rights of all vulnerable communities as we steadily are pulled toward a consequential election. I pray you remain awake and aware. Because our job is not done yet, and because God has prepared us for this moment.

Amen.