



First United Church of Oak Park

Happy Pride

2 Samuel 1: 1-4, 23-27

The Rev. Lydia Mulkey

June 27, 2021

Happy Pride! We are an Open and Affirming, More Light congregation, which means this congregation once went through an educational program to learn about LGBTQ+ issues and to make us aware of how we can be the most affirming and supportive we can be as a community. We do our best to live this out. We do our best to look for our biases and our internalized homophobia and transphobia and to create a space for the whole rainbow spectrum of God's beloved people.

It's a lot easier to be an Open and Affirming, More Light Congregation than it was when then congregation first made the decision. The culture has shifted and is shifting. Marriage has been legalized. It's not cool to be overtly homophobic anymore. In most circles, it's not seen as right and responsible to disown your queer kids anymore. Even so, there is so much work left to do, especially to make sure our trans and gender expansive siblings are treated justly. Trans rights are sometimes one step forward and two steps back, but things are moving, and we will keep moving. Progress makes life for churches like ours a bit easier on this particular front, but it's still so important, because homophobia and transphobia are far from dead, especially in Christianity. It's still important that we are loud, proud, and unequivocal in our love and affirmation and celebration of all of our LGBTQIA+ siblings. So, that's what I plan to do today. To offer some loud, proud, and unequivocal love and affirmation in the form of a story that God's rainbow people have claimed and loved for a long time.

As we enter our story today, Saul is king of Israel. He has a son named Jonathan, and there's a young man named David, who's been very successful in battle, and who will one day take Saul's place as king. In 1 Samuel 18: 1-4, Jonathan and David's first meeting is described like this, "When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father Jesse's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul.

Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.”

At one point King Saul says to his son Jonathan, “Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse (that’s David) to your own shame, and to the shame of your mother’s nakedness?” And when Jonathan dies, David grieves bitterly saying, “Jonathan lies slain upon your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love was wonderful, passing the love of women.” These are just a few highlights. There’s more. But in these few excerpts we have from the story of David and Jonathan, what you could argue sounds a lot like love at first sight, a covenant made between soulmates, and a declaration made in grief of abiding love after death.

As a child in Sunday school, what I learned about this story was that David and Jonathan were good friends and that I should be a good friend, too.

It’s easy to see why people think these two might have been more than good friends. There are even records of early Christians reading this text and naming David and Jonathan as symbols of romantic, not brotherly love. Scholars have studied and written about the love between David and Jonathan. Queer Christians have long used this text in their unions and weddings. This interpretation is nothing new.

But, of course, some folks are horrified at the idea that one would “read homosexuality into the Holy Bible.” They claim that “you are coming at the text with your own agenda, instead of letting the text stand.” And they ask indignantly, “How could you corrupt the text this way?” Speaking of corrupting the text, let me share with you one half of a verse from this story, from the Hebrew. A word-for-word translation of 1 Samuel 20:41 from the Hebrew would sound like this: “David fell on his face to the ground and bowed down and three times they kissed one another and they wept one and together, until David was exalted.”

Here are a few modern translations of that half a verse:

The New Living Translation: “Both of them were in tears as they embraced each other and said good-bye, especially David.”

But the Hebrew said they kissed. It was in the original uncorrupted text.

The Living Bible translated this: “Both of them were crying as they said good-bye, especially David.”

Where's the rest of it? You don't want to think about men kissing, so you mistranslated it right out of the Holy Bible. The second translator didn't even let them hug, much less kiss. Talk about coming to the text with your own agenda, not letting the text stand as it is, and corrupting the text.

Reading the Bible is not always easy. It's an ancient book. There's some strange stuff in there. It's confusing sometimes. But reading a gay love story into the Bible is no more anachronistic an overlay than reading a straight love story into the Bible. There may or may not be queer love and there may or may not be straight love as we understand it today in the Bible. The actual stories of the Bible read with women as property, acts of violence against women, recommendations for celibacy, and just about every arrangement you can think of other than a loving and equal marriage between one man and one woman. That is the kind of relationship it is most difficult to read into the Bible, since that just isn't what marriage was. That wasn't the purpose of the institution. Marrying for love was not the norm. Marriage for property exchange was the norm. Daughters were given away by their fathers to their husbands, the language many still use in wedding ceremonies. So what was marriage like for ancient people? Where did love come into those relationship? What was the nature of the relationship between Jonathan and David?

Here's the only thing I can say with complete certainty: I don't know. I don't know if David and Jonathan were in a loving and romantic relationship. It sure sounds like it to me, but who knows? I didn't know David and Jonathan. But I do know Brian and Robert, and I know Deb and Pennie, and I know Caitlin and Kate, and I know Melinda and Jane, and Ellen and Aubrey, and I know so many beautiful queer families in our community and beyond, many of whom have souls that are absolutely knit together in a covenant of love. And I know that for many queer Christians, this story has offered a sense of affirmation. If David and Jonathan's souls were knit together, if they had a covenant, if they loved each other as they loved their own souls, if they kissed and wept when they could not be together, if their love surpassed the love of women, maybe my love is valid and your love is valid, too. What was the original literary intent for their relationship? I don't know. I can't know. But when I hear their story read at a wedding, and the two souls standing at the altar are hearing *their* story in the story being read, I know that the God who knit those two souls together smiles, and so we here at First United Church of Oak Park smile, too. Beloved of God, happy Pride!