



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Pride is a deadly sin...or not

Clay Nelson © 17 February 2019

Pride Month in Auckland has always been celebrated in this community. As your minister I have always invited members of the LGBTQ community to speak to you, for as someone who self-identifies as a male-gendered heterosexual I have not felt it was my place to speak about an experience that wasn't mine. Beside it has gotten so much more complicated than it was for someone who began puberty in the fifties. Then there were only straights, gays and lesbians and the last two were spoken of in mostly dark, derogatory terms. It is hard to keep up in a world where our understanding of gender and sexual orientation has become more fluid and self-determined, adding ever more letters to the list of those who makes up the Rainbow Community.

But this year, after the controversies that have arisen around the Pride parade, I've decided I might have something to say, especially as a life-long ally of the community. My wider whanau is liberally sprinkled with members who identify with all of the letters, so to some extent it is personal. But theologically and simply as a human being I am drawn to those who have been oppressed at the margins of society by those empowered and protected by privilege to impugn others' humanity and impoverish their personhood. My bona fides are: I have not only marched and preached and published op-ed pieces in the paper in support of that community, I was a caregiver to a victim of HIV/AIDS in the early days of the epidemic when doctors and scientists still did not quite know what we were up against. I have chastised both church and state for their discrimination against the community in billboards that went viral internationally; I took my bishop to the human rights review tribunal for discrimination against a gay man in a committed relationship who desired to be ordained; I was the only Anglican priest in New Zealand willing to defy the bishops' prohibition to officiate at same-sex civil unions; I worked hard with MP Louisa Wall for the passage of her marriage equality act. After it was passed, I was invited to do the first same-sex wedding, but the bishop forbade me, threatening me with being defrocked. So, the honour fell to my predecessor at this church, Matt Tittle, to hold that first service here. And now I serve here in a denomination that since 1984 has ordained members of the Rainbow community as ministers and performed marriages where the law has allowed and commitment ceremonies where it has not. In New Zealand, while the Rainbow community has strong allies in other denominations and faiths, ours remains the only one that fully welcomes and includes them in all aspects of our common life.

I confess to being proud of being one of countless others seeking to bend the arc of history towards justice for the Rainbow Community in whatever small way we can. Now pride is a challenging emotion to untangle. Is it a sin or a virtue? Fortunately for you, you are in safe hands. With pride, and in all humility, I can assure you I have been theologically trained and have years of scriptural study behind me to sort it out for us with my tongue firmly implanted in my cheek.

St Augustine worried a lot about sin, especially his own. I paraphrase now, but he once famously prayed to be without sin but not yet. He came up with a list of seven deadly ones,

which Hell Pizza has turned into marketing gold. Pride was first on the list. Augustine put it there based on Eve's eating of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. Her eating of the forbidden fruit and tempting Adam to do the same got them evicted from the Garden of Eden. In the view of the Old Testament, Eve pridefully put herself above God. Yes, women, it is your fault. Your pride has caused all the troubles for which patriarchy has never forgiven you and continues to punish you. But that is for another sermon.

Based on this story, Augustine gave pride primacy in the list of sins, for he saw it as the one from which all the others flowed. It was the one that required God to send his son to die in humiliation on a cross for our pride-induced sinfulness.

In contrast, prior to Augustine, Aristotle had viewed pride, which he did not equate with hubris, as the crown of virtues. For without it nothing noble or great could be accomplished. Hubris on the other hand was an emotion that allowed naïve men to think that by ill-treating or despising others their own superiority would be enhanced.

Psychologists have varied views of pride, but in general they see pride and self-esteem as tightly entangled. In contrast to the classical Christian theology that sees high self-esteem as the sign of the sin of pride, psychologist Carl Rodgers argues that low self-esteem and self-contempt engender unwarranted pride in one's self. For Rodgers, raising self-esteem frees us from shame and guilt, allowing us to take genuine pleasure in real achievements or what some would call "proper pride".

For the Rainbow Community pride is about rejecting the shame and judgment that has been heaped on them and claiming their sense of self and well-being in an often hostile world. At this point it would be good to remember that all the labels we put on each other tell us nothing meaningful about anyone as a person. Mark Belletini, a Unitarian minister and a gay man explains it this way:

"Me telling you I'm gay gives you very little information about who I am or what I do. Almost none at all, actually. Remember, the word 'gay' is a political word only. It does not tell you anything about my sexual life, my ways of affection, my style of living at all. You may think it does, but believe me, everyone in this room, including me, have had ideas put in our heads by the vast army of remarkably ignorant people who claim to run this globe of ours. Ideas that even with study, experience and reading don't entirely leave us. I assure you, these ignorant people are wrong. This is how Jane Hirshberg puts it:

It doesn't matter what they will make of you or your days: they will be wrong, they will miss the wrong woman, miss the wrong man, all the stories they tell will be tales of their own invention.

Can't be clearer than that. 'They will be wrong.' All of my experience from childhood on confirms that. Nothing said by any negative cleric, politico or pundit has ever had the slightest thing to do with my experience. They are inventing everything. For the words gay, lesbian, bisexual in particular are political words, not experience words. Politics is a provisional joining together of folks to interpret experience generally, but it is not in any way individual experience, which remains sacred and inviolate and entirely particular."

So why this insistence on being wrong about others? The problem seems to lie in a human discomfort with difference. It really upsets some people.

People seem to feel that they have more control if they can lump everyone into some category, good or bad. So, they come up with distinct categories which claim to circle human experiences. The category of “Homo-sexual” was invented by an Hungarian physician named Karoly Benkert in 1869, not a very long time ago. “Gay” dates from the 1920s we think. Lesbian goes back further, to the 1700s. “Sodomy” was used from the fifth century to mean both a particular kind of sexual action between any two people, and to refer to same-sex sexuality. But before the invention of these categorical words, would you believe that no variant sexuality existed? When Leonardo DaVinci, the great artist and scientist, for example, embraced his partner in life of thirty years, Francesco Melzi, he did not think of himself as a “gay man” or a “homosexual.” Nor did Eleanor Roosevelt seem to categorise herself as a lesbian when she wrote love letters to Lorena Hickok. All these words are relatively new to the vocabulary of difference. Oh, I am sure that Eleanor had heard demeaning words applied to women who loved women. And I am sure that Leonardo knew that some church people thought of him as a sodomite, but both of these folks knew themselves from the inside as tender, loving human beings. Nowhere in their vast collections of surviving expressions do either of them define themselves by how they are different, but rather, by the fact that they loved.

For it turns out that difference is what allows for relationships in the world. Difference is wonderful. It is necessary. We can take pride in our differences. If we were all the same, we would not have relationships, just shared instincts, like bees or ants. We would relate to the world in the same way, we would have no questions for each other, and I’m not even sure love would have any power or sway, since everyone would be the same.

Our struggle with difference brings me to the controversy in the Rainbow Community over whether or not the police should march in the PRIDE parade in uniform this year. I know that this will be a shock to Unitarians, but not everybody in that community thinks alike. It became a hot-button issue not only within LGBTQ circles, but in the larger community as well. The result being the police, corporate sponsors, some LGBTQ groups, former allies such as some churches, the Auckland Council and others withdrew their support. There were heated meetings, votes of no confidence called, and social media was awash with those from both sides taking aim at those they differed with. The end result being a march instead of a parade last Saturday. I was amused and pleased the Pride Board could have enough sense of humour and sense of purpose and place to wear T-shirts with rainbow targets on their backs. They were prepared not to be afraid of difference, even within their own community. They seem prepared to work through their differences to remain in relationship with each other and the broader community. They who have been marked for being different, can now take proper pride in their difference. They have modelled for us that there is no love anywhere without our differences. That pride is the virtue which Aristotle saw as ennobling our humanity giving all of us the self-worth granted us at birth. It is not Augustine’s pride that would leave us alone and humiliated on a cross of guilt and shame.