

“Pride 365”
June 27, 2021

Jeremiah 17:7-8
I Corinthians 16:13-14

The New England poet, James Taylor, sang of late spring/early summer as “the come again day,” echoing the New England poet, Samuel Longfellow, whose words we sang as the opening hymn this morning: “The summer days are come again.”

They have—and we rejoice. Even in this strange time that we have not known before, the summer days have come again and, again, I say, we rejoice. We go outside at night and look up hoping to catch a glimpse of that “Strawberry Super Moon” through the clouds. We go outside in the day and enjoy the garden and all things green. We go outside this Sunday afternoon and join together for a picnic in City Park.

One of the distinguishing features of Congregational hymnals is the number hymns on the subject of changing seasons. You can find them in the old *Pilgrim Hymnal*, from which our first hymn this morning was taken. You can find them in *The New Century Hymnal*. And our own hymnal contains some of these as well, even though it was published by the Presbyterians, who also take note of the earth tilted on its axis and revolving around the sun and the changes that brings to us.

When we sing, we take note of the cycles of the sun and the moon and the earth.

In part this is an echo of our past, rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures that praised God for appointing “the moon to mark the seasons;” that announced in the well-known words of Ecclesiastes: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.” Our faith has long recognized that the world changes and we change as well. Each new season brings new opportunities and new challenges and our hymns suggest that we can understand something of the Holy One through the natural world as it changes through the year.

We’re not naïve about this. Even if we’re not natives, we’ve lived in Iowa long enough to know that the beauty of spring and the fullness of summer bring with them the destructive power of tornadoes, storms, and derechos. And the cold of winter, during which one hymn tells us “love deepens round the hearth,” also makes travel dangerous and increases the problems of hunger and homelessness.

The changing seasons in all their beauty remind us that the life of faith—our lives—is lived with an ongoing awareness of both the challenges of the natural world and the providential care of God. This means that we must—as Paul and other early Christian writers urged—be alert. There is a kind of vigilance that is needed so that we recognize both the danger and the care that surround us.

One of the joys of the early summer is that June is Pride Month—and while the signs reminding us of that have shown up in our lawns and in front of our church, because of the pandemic, it was decided a few months ago to wait and hold Iowa City’s Pride Festival in October this year. And Congregational UCC will be on the Ped Mall as part of it as we have for some time.

Moving the Festival to October reminds us that Pride and the Open and Affirming commitments of our congregation are not seasonal activities—although I learned this past week that some see it that way. There’s a term for it: “rainbow washing”—it happens when businesses put out the rainbow flag in June in an attempt to cover up the bias that occurs the rest of the year.

Andrew Isen, founder and president of an LGBTQ marketing and communications agency, said recently that people can see superficial support. He adds: “Pride really is 24/7, 365. And companies that understand this and relegate themselves to a yearlong commitment rather than a one-month effort to reach out to the community, understand how to reach this consumer. Companies that rainbow wash are seen as pandering and tokenistic to this community.”¹

And, of course, what is true for companies is, in this case, true for congregations as well. So we work at living out our faith and our commitments year round—in the easy days of summer, in the difficult days of winter.

Pride is 24/7, 365.

In all seasons, God provides us with good things and accompanies us through the valleys of shadow. Filling our bodies with food and our hearts with joy. Everyone—*everyone*—is included in the love of God. Everyone—*everyone*—is accepted by God and is a recipient of that love.

People—especially those who have been wounded by the world—people sense the reality of the radical inclusion of God’s love.

Let us remember then, as we return to something like “normal,” something like “business as usual” in the coming months that it is normal and usual for us to do what we can and say what we can to make the accepting and welcoming love of God evident in all seasons. We speak and act as part of something far greater, more powerful, and filled with love and compassion for the whole creation. Let us be ready to explain—to be clear about what we believe and why we do the things we do. As a living community of faith, we are called to speak rather than keep silent.

So let me tell you a little of my own experience. And you know I don’t talk a lot about myself in sermons, so I hope you will grant me this indulgence. I tell you part of my story—in the hope that it will somehow connect with your story, even though they are not the same. I offer my story in the hope that later you will share your story with me and with other people.

I am a straight white male—but you know that.

I started college in the early Seventies. A few months into my freshman year, my roommate, came out as gay. This was, as I said, the early Seventies, and if this was difficult, it was ultimately liberating for him. It was uncomfortable, yet ultimately liberating for me. I’d never known an openly gay person until then. And I wasn’t sure how to deal with that knowledge at first.

There were no Pride Festivals then. But along with the rest of the people on the floor in my dorm, I grew up. We all quickly realized my roommate was gay and that was it. We saw a person instead of a label—something that Jesus was always able to do and something that all of us, by the grace of God, are capable of as well. We were roommates for a second year. After graduation, I lost track of him, but I’m pretty sure he died of AIDS in the 80’s, as so many of the friends and family of so many of us did.

And then there was my friend—we went to the same high school, but we didn't know one another until I was in college. We played guitar together. There were rumors, whisperings that he was gay, rumors that he denied. It was the Seventies and we were guys and so it was “don't ask, don't tell.” He was a friend—and was there in good times and in difficult times, in the seasons of life.

In the early nineties, when I was living in Milwaukee, I learned he was in Atlanta, dying from AIDS. I wrote to him. Looking back, how I wish I had asked, how I wish he had told. I wish I had asked about who he was, beyond the joyful, faithful person I knew. I wish he had been able to tell me of his struggle, his pain, his joy, his journey. I wish I knew more of his story.

I think of my roommate and my friend, I think of other friends and acquaintances, not just when the rainbow yard sign is posted in front of our church, but throughout the year—and simply because a rainbow flag decal is on our outside bulletin board year round.

We grow up. We grow in acceptance of one another. We grow in love.

This might be the real gift of this season—or any season: that we can change; that our sinfulness—those things that separate us—can be overcome and we can live together in families, in churches, in communities.

Every season is a growing season.

Each day is an opportunity to wake up and see the world and one another in a new light.

We live, alert, in these days.

We can look forward to the fall, to Pride days in October.

For now, well, the summer days have come again. Let us rejoice, be glad, and give thanks.

¹ <https://www.marketplace.org/2021/06/23/rainbow-washing-during-pride-hurts-both-brands-and-consumers/>