

East Plains, June 14, 2026.

Pride Sunday

RADICAL HOSPITALITY

Leviticus 20:13; Romans 1:26-27, 32.

Rev. Jan has given us our title: “Radical Hospitality.” We read of the generous hospitality of Abraham and Sarah in our Genesis text this morning; last week we read of Jesus’ hospitality, at table with tax collectors and sinners. Hospitality, especially to strangers and people in need, is often praised in both Testaments of the Bible.

Here at East Plains, we seek to practice hospitality, announced by that wonderful painting on the front wall of our church, the work of Barbara Townsend. It displays different kinds of people, of various races, ages, and abilities, flying high the rainbow flag, indicating our welcome and hospitality to all, here at East Plains.

The flag, of course, indicates that, as an affirming congregation, our intention is to be supportive of LGBTQ people – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, etc.

Since this is Pride Sunday, and June is Pride Month, there will be parades, marches, festivals, celebrating the self-affirmation of people of the sexual orientation minorities.

And why do they speak of Pride? Just what are they proud of? Well, they’re proud to affirm themselves as the people that they are. Why should this be necessary?

Because for centuries folks like them have been horrendously put down. They’ve been told to be ashamed of who they are, told that they’re perverts, disgusting sinners, even told that they’re condemned to hellfire.

They’ve been thrown out of their families, fired from their jobs, sometimes excluded from their churches. If you go back a century or so, they had to hide for fear of being prosecuted and jailed.

A prominent case was that of Oscar Wilde, the famous Irish author and playwright, a highly creative, artistic individual. He was prosecuted in England for his homosexuality in the 1890s. Oscar Wilde was sentenced to two years in prison with hard labor. After release he lived as a broken man in France, estranged from his family, living in poverty, where he died in 1900 at the age of 46.

Another was Alan Turing, the famous mathematician, the ingenious code breaker of Nazi codes during World War II. As recently as 1952, this brilliant wartime hero was discovered as a homosexual. He was prosecuted and subjected to chemical castration. He became very ill. He died, of cyanide poisoning, at the age of 42, apparently of suicide.

These are famous cases, but there were thousands of others like them.

If you go back a few more centuries in Europe, you’ll learn of great numbers of people accused of homosexuality, often young teenagers, who were tortured and executed by burning or drowning. In other words, there is a horrendous history of shame and suffering.

In our own country things have changed. As recently as 1969 homosexual activity was still a punishable crime, but in that year, it was removed from the criminal code, with Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's famous words: "The state has no business in the bedrooms of the nation."

Then same sex marriage was legalized in Canada in 2005. Shortly after that, we here at East Plains congregation had a series of speakers, public debates and discussions about it, and finally we voted to allow same sex marriages to be celebrated in this church. And, as you know, just last year East Plains voted to identify as an Affirming Congregation.

But these positive developments do not mean that problems have disappeared for these folks. There are still many among us who hate people of the sexual orientation minorities. Or simply despise them or look down upon them. They know it, and they feel it.

There are still employers who fire or demote them, landlords who discriminate, families that exclude, churches that condemn. Young gay and lesbian, or transgendered people find themselves bullied online, or beaten up in a back alley, or simply snubbed by their peers.

Now, same sex relationships are much more widely accepted today, especially among young people. It is transgendered people who now most often feel the brunt of it. While transgendered, or so-called 'trans' is not really a sexual orientation as such, these folk too often find themselves in emotional turmoil about their gender identity. Many of them suffer deeply and deserve our empathy.

The great tragedy, still in our society, is that suicide is four times more common among gay and lesbian and transgendered youth, than in the general population of young people. Four times as many suicides! Such frequent suicide is clear evidence that many of these people are in deep pain.

This is a current, serious social problem.

So, that's why people who identify as other than heterosexual feel the need to proclaim their pride. Many of them have gone through painful personal struggles: first, to face and acknowledge their own inner feelings, and then also to face the hostility, or disappointment, of parents and families.

The pride parades are a way of saying to the world. This is who we are. We are proud of who we are. We are not ashamed. We love ourselves, and each other.

Oscar Wilde had a famous saying: "Love of yourself is a lifelong romance." Love of yourself is essential. If you don't love yourself, respect and value yourself, there's no way you can love anybody else.

Now, historically speaking, the Christian churches have a lot to answer for. That goes for both Catholic and Protestant churches. As a minister of the church, I must blush when I think of our long history of cruelty to the sexual orientation minorities. It's not a history I'm proud of.

Most notably, some texts of our sacred scriptures, our foundational documents, the Bible, legitimize, and call for, the persecution of these people.

For example, the book of Leviticus, part of the Hebrew scriptures, part of our Bible, written many centuries before Christ, clearly calls for capital punishment: I quote Leviticus 20:13: “If a man lies with a male, as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.”

But in the New Testament too: there is at least one unambiguous condemnation: the letter of the apostle Paul to the Romans chapter 1:26f. Paul writes:

“... God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another... They know God’s decree that those who practice such things deserve to die....”

Now, we know that from the very first century the Christian Church set aside much of the Old Testament law.

While honoring the Ten Commandments, they no longer kept the long list of rules and regulations, such as the dietary laws, forbidding the eating of pork, or shellfish, for example, the regulations regarding animal sacrifice in the temple, the law of circumcision, the elaborate rules for washing, and so on.

One thing they did not set aside were these texts condemning homosexuality. These continued to be quoted as reasons to condemn and punish both homosexual men and women. “It’s in the Bible!” they would say, and some still say it. All those other things in the Bible are set aside, but not this one.

It is particularly shocking that the apostle Paul should take this approach, since it was he above all others, who argued for setting aside the dietary laws, the strict rules for washing, the circumcision, and the animal sacrifices. This was the apostle of freedom!

But, with the approval of the apostle Paul, the author of substantial portions of the New Testament, both the Catholic and Protestant churches down through the centuries continued to prosecute and persecute this minority population.

This was so, even though there is nothing at all in the four gospels about homosexuality. Jesus is never quoted as saying anything at all about it. Considering his sympathetic attitude to tax collectors and adulteresses and prostitutes, it’s hard to believe Jesus would have favored the execution of homosexuals.

How do we explain this persistent rejection and hatred among the Christian churches?

Perhaps it was because in that pre-modern world, people suffered much from infant mortality. Children so often died at childbirth, or as babies. So, the procreation of children was important for the survival of the community, to carry on to the next generation, and to look after their parents in their old age.

So, sexual activity that produced no children was considered a waste, and a danger to society. Surely even today most people hope their children will get married and give them grandchildren. Which is understandable. Homosexuality, therefore, feels like a threat.

Further, in that pre-modern world there was no psychological understanding of sexual orientation. The apostle Paul, for example, had no such concept. People who practiced these things were thought to be foolish and irresponsible, in short, sinners.

What we understand now is that sexual orientation is a given. No one chooses who they are attracted to. If you're a heterosexual man, you are naturally attracted to women, and vice versa. You don't choose that. You discover that about yourself sometime in your childhood or adolescence.

So we know now that it's a mistake to blame someone for how they feel within themselves. They didn't choose it. It's a given.

With this new understanding, in the United Church we've come a long way. In 1988, the General Council voted that self-declared homosexual persons are eligible for ordination to ministry. That was a momentous decision, at the top of the CBC news at the time.

In 2003 the United Church officially endorsed same sex marriage, and decisions whether to perform such marriage ceremonies was left to the individual congregations.

Then in 2005 East Plains Church voted to allow same sex marriages to be solemnized in this church. As far as I'm aware, it's happened only once.

Rev. Jan informs us that now in 2025, just last year, the United Church of Canada General Council, meeting at Calgary, declared an official apology to the LGBTQIA+ people and communities, naming the real harm caused by words, actions, silence and systems, that failed to protect and affirm God's beloved people.

Rev. Jan affirms that "Pride is more than celebration. It is remembrance. It is resistance. It is a witness to the sacred truth that every identity rooted in love and authenticity is a divine gift. Radical belonging is not optional – it is at the heart of the Gospel.

"May we continue the work of becoming a church that learns, acts with courage and lives out love in word and deed. Amen."

Prayer: By your spirit, holy and merciful One, guide and lead us to live more faithfully in relation to all who are marginalized or persecuted. In Christ we pray, Amen.

Hymn VU 582: "There's a Spirit in the Air"

