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“AN ATTITUDE OF LOVE: REFLECTIONS ON NATIONAL COMING OUT DAY”

Rev. Matt

I was walking around the parking lot of the Stockton Ballroom two weeks ago—interacting with all of the various organisations that were present at Stockton Pride showing their support for the LGBTQIA+ community (including the intrepid souls who showed up in the heat to represent First UU Stockton at our table). As I turned the corner, it was hard to ignore the table with gigantic banners on all sides displaying the words “FREE MOM HUGS.”

 I am not ashamed to admit that I come from a slice of the South that is populated with avid huggers. I happily walked over to the table to claim my free mom hug. After being asked and giving my enthusiastic consent, I leaned down to be hugged by a mom who was about half of my height. I was not prepared for the deeply emotional mama bear hug that I received. I came out 17 years ago to my parents. We have had our own roller coaster relationship over the years, but we are at a point now where they have finally accepted me. That being said, we are not a family that hugs or does physical displays of emotion or affection. I did not even realise until that hug that it was exactly what I needed in that moment. I did not realise that this mom would be willing to give me the love and acceptance that I as a queer person was so hungry for.

 For those who are not familiar with their story, Free Mom Hugs—which is a familiar presence at Pride parades and Pride Fest celebrations around the country—is an Oklahoma City based nonprofit organisation that was founded in 2014 by Sara Cunningham, who started the group after her own son Parker came out to her as gay. Cunningham writes on the organisation’s website of her decision to start Free Mom Hugs:

 *“I’m a Christian mom with a gay kid living in Oklahoma saying enough is enough. If I don’t fight for my son (and his rights) like my hair is on fire, then who will? It’s time we celebrate our LGBTQ+ children. And I won’t stop until I no longer hear horror stories from the LGBTQ+ community and their mothers.*

In addition to the free mom hugs, the organisation’s website also mentions how they support a mission of education, visibility, and conversation through events such as speaking engagements, webinars, interactive discussions, and other programs and activities. Their mission goes on to say that:

 *Visibility can open people’s minds and encourage change in our society. We want our work to inspire the LGBTQ+ community to be who they are and encourage allies to stand in the gap for the community we hold dear.*

 The “gap” that the mission statement mentions is a staggering one; one that can feel like a chasm that grows bigger every year. In a recent 2021 survey from The Trevor Project, 45% of LGBTQIA+ youth—those that identify as ages 13-24—reported that they seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year. 14% of those surveyed admitted that they had actually attempted it, including 1 in 5 transgender and non-binary youth. For us in Stockton—who are aware that we live in a city that has a majority population of people of colour—the numbers also showed that LGBTQIA+ youth of colour were more likely than their white peers to consider or attempt suicide. And this is not just a youth phenomenon. In a 2021 Washington Post article by Kellie B. Gormley about National Coming Out Day and her decision at age 48 to come out as a lesbian after growing up in a fundamentalist Christian background, she writes that for the majority of her life, **“I believed that I was better off dead than gay.”**

 October 11—two days from now— is celebrated each year as National Coming Out Day. National Coming Out Day was started in 1988 in the wake of the 1987 March on Washington for queer rights. The momentum from the March on Washington over the next year saw the creation of several LGBTQIA+ organisations. It inspired psychologist Rob Eichberg and lesbian political activist Jean O’Leary to—according to The Advocate— “create a holiday that celebrated queer identities in order to decrease stigma and homophobia.” As a progressive faith tradition that has been one of the leaders through its support for rights and full inclusion of the queer community, our UU congregations have become beacons of hope for those who are looking for a community and a family that will love and support them for who they are. For us, there is much about this day that we have to celebrate. It is our members and friends in the queer community that lend their voices, their stories, their time, and their talents toward making our sacred spaces the beautiful intentional communities that they always have been, and they hopefully will always remain.

 But make no mistake. Even in the years since National Coming Out Day was first commemorated, there is still much work to do. Coming out is one of the most difficult things and arguably the bravest thing that those in the LGBTQIA+ community are choosing to do. It means that we are choosing to live our lives as our most authentic selves despite all the risks that we know exist and how difficult that it may make our lives as a result. The decision to come out and live authentically as ourselves is not an easy one. It is also not one that we make lightly. The reality of living life as an openly queer person in this country is the realisation that society will develop a very clear idea of the person that you are. They will assign that perception to you, whether or not it is true. And all too often, that picture is less than flattering. You will be seen as “confused” or “chemically imbalanced.” You will most likely be branded as a promiscuous sexual deviant. You will be seen as someone who cannot be trusted in any role that involves taking care of or interacting with children. You will be seen as someone who drinks too much, does illegal drugs, and goes out partying every single night. Any attempts at trying to be respectable and create a life and a family for yourself will be seen as corrupting the hallowed heterosexual institutions of marriage and family. If you are a member of a community that is particularly religious, you will be seen as someone who is an abomination in the eyes of God and because of your “choice of lifestyle” that the only thing that you have to look forward to is a lifetime of hellfire and eternal damnation. And if you are a trans person, especially a trans woman of colour, you are “better off dead.”

 In order to have a message of hope and inclusion—and in order to truly affect societal change—you have to begin with an attitude of love. What we in the LGBTQIA + community need more than anything is a group of people that is willing to come out publicly and shout from the rooftops that they love us. Not only do they love and respect us for who we are, but they let us know that we have a safe space amid this wild and crazy world. We want to have a place where we can not only be our authentic selves, but where it is safe and secure to be those authentic selves. We want a community that is not simply “okay” with us being who we are. We want a community that is willing to take the bold step to say loud and proud to others that we are valid, we have inherent worth and dignity, and that we are deserving of the same rights and freedoms and protections as anyone else. We want a community who will not only celebrate who we are, but who will reach out and say to others beyond our church walls that they should be celebrating too. We want a community that says others should love us just as much as they love us.

 The last time that I was up here in this pulpit, I said that there was no doubt in my mind that there was enough love contained within these walls to continue for another 130 years. Today, I need to ask you a favour: I need you to take that powerful spirit of love and help us radiate it out from beyond these hallowed walls to meet those in the LGBTQIA+ community—whether they are at a point where they are ready to come out or not—who are on the margins and who feel that they have nowhere else to go. I need you to let them know that they are welcomed in with open doors and open arms. I need you to be the ones who are saying to them that you truly love them for everything that they are and have the potential to be. The truth is you may be the only one that they have in their lives who is saying “I love you.” It may not seem like very much, but it may be exactly what they need to hear in order to save their lives. It can help them find the strength and courage within themselves that they did not know they still had to keep going. It can help them become the beautiful children of God that they have never stopped being.

 I also want you to not be afraid to let everyone in Stockton, everyone in the Central Valley, everyone in your slice of northern California, and everyone that you encounter in this greater world that you inhabit to let them know that this is the kind of love that First UU Stockton has: a love that is not ashamed to love people fearlessly. I want everyone driving back and forth along Pacific Avenue to have the first thing in their minds when they see our building and read our sign is this is that church that loves everybody. I want us to be the sanctuary that church has historically been that tsays to people—in the words of Rumi that we sang this morning—“come, come, whoever you are.”

 I want us to love and to fight for others like our whole soul is on fire, not just our hair. And I want us to find and stand with all of the others in our community willing to love that deeply—organisations like Free Mom Hugs and others—who are willing to allow themselves to be governed by an attitude of love. I want it to change the world, just like we know that it can.

 May it ever continue to be so. Blessed be. Amen. Shalom. Assalamu Aleikum. Namaste. Thank you all so much.