

St James United Church

Message for July 12, 2026

Pride Sunday



“Queer like Jesus” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Romans 15:2-7; Matthew 9:9-13; Audre Lorde, “A Litany for Survival”

Queer. It’s a strong and challenging word. Traditionally it means odd, strange, different. It’s been applied to people with judgement, though less so in Newfoundland where it is a bit gentler, an observation that someone is peculiar, eccentric, “a bit queer” but isn’t rejected, included even if not readily, sitting on the edge of the circle of the community but still part of it. But for many of us in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, queer is much more loaded word, especially for those of us, me included, who are older. We remember it thrown at us as a taunt, usually by a bully, sneering the question, “What, are you queer?” and at times the words followed by a physical attack.

Though Audre Lorde doesn’t use the word queer in her poem, acknowledging that the poem is about her experience as a Black woman as well as a lesbian, there is a sense that the taunt, if not more, could be hurled at any minute toward her in “A Litany for Survival.” And yet her focus isn’t on the pain that comes with rejection and anger and hate. Those feelings are present but her “we weren’t meant to survive” points to how we have survived, points as well to the strength and resilience that makes that possible. That same strength has enabled the reclaiming of the word queer not as a taunt but an identity to be proud of, first used by activists in the 1980s as they pushed back against homophobic violence with the chant, “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it,” a retort to the bully’s taunt - “Yeah, I’m queer. Your point?” A word of hurt flipped over.

Which is why as much as I self-identify as gay, I embrace queer too. As I’ve grown older, I’ve come to appreciate the power that is found in flipping the script, turning a taunt upside down so the bully is disarmed with their own weapon. Jesus did something similar in his ministry when he told his followers to turn the other cheek, to present to a bully the cheek that they would have to punch rather than slap, something you could only do to someone of equal status; or to carry a pack an extra mile, taking the law that let a Roman soldier conscript you for a mile, and only a mile, and use it to get them in trouble. In these ways Jesus encouraged his followers to use the system to shame the system, to reveal to others the harm being done to uphold the status quo.

He was turning things upside down, seeking change, and did so most profoundly in our gospel reading as he sat at table with those viewed as sinners, outside the circle of God’s love. I believe Jesus saw that view as the real sin, the tendency to see the world in binaries and so to include some people while excluding others as the real sin. He saved us by modelling the opposite, showing us that salvation comes, healing really, when we are part of the whole. That is why he

called a tax collector into the same circle as a rebel, called fishers with those connected to the royal court. That crossing of boundaries was very taboo, so Jesus initially would have been viewed as queer in the Newfoundland sense, an odd duck but initially tolerated.

The operative word is initially because over time he pushed the boundaries even further and so angered those who had a vested interest in keeping whole swaths of people beyond the circle of God's love, angered enough that they had him killed. They killed him because Jesus was queer in another sense, a very contemporary theological sense. Jesus didn't just eat meals with "sinners" but questioned why they were viewed that way in the first place. He read the scriptures with what we'd call a queer lens, looking beyond the binaries, looking for who is overlooked because of those binaries and then expanding the circle to include them. This led him to emphasize love over legalism and so to question purity laws, expand notions of kinship, and challenge gender norms (seen profoundly as he washed his disciples' feet). He always centred the most excluded and vulnerable as he assured them of God's welcoming and inclusive love. His death is a reminder of the cost of making that love our calling, the cost of making sure everyone is part of the whole. But there is life beyond that cost, the risen Christ meeting us with strength and resilience and courage to be as queer as he was.

Paul got that memo, was queer like Jesus. As we heard in his letter to the Romans, he emphasized the priority of welcome. His main concern was breaking down the boundary that had defined so much of his adult life, the binary teaching of separation between Jews and Gentiles. Paul was convinced in his heart that Jesus had broken down not just that but every wall - between genders, social circumstances, in our context between cultures, races, sexualities, ages. As Paul writes, we are to be concerned with the needs of our neighbours and so the aim is not to be right, whatever that is, but loving. This means that we go beyond putting up a sign that says people are welcome, even putting up a flag or having a Pride service, to nurturing a community everyone can offer leadership, share ideas, participate to the degree they want to, hear and see their lives and loves reflected in what we say and do, doing so in a way that acknowledges the reality of someone's intersecting identities and so possible multiple exclusions, and honours the full scope of a person's life. This queering of our community fosters harmony, not just Jesus saving us, but us saving each other because everyone is part of the whole. Jesus did just that and so gave glory to God.

I am so glad we do this at St. James. We don't always get it right but we're called to keep trying, keep welcoming and loving like Jesus did, keep questioning why some are sinners and so outside of the circle knowing that the sin is believing some are outside, keep looking for who is missing and when we find them show them they're loved. In this we are queer like Jesus, like Paul, not as a taunt but an approach that makes sure everyone has a place at the table, not chairs begrudgingly added but already set in welcome, set out wherever people may be. Taking on that viewpoint is being queer. And so, I am glad to be queer, glad this congregation is queer, queer like Jesus. Amen.