



HOLLYWOOD
United Methodist Church
the **heart** of hollywood

“BORN THIS WAY”

June 26, 2011

Sermon by Rev. Kathy Cooper-Ledesma, Senior Pastor

Scripture: Psalm 139

Welcome to Gaga Sunday! Amen! So good to be back in the pulpit with you all!

A quick story: last month we went to Boston to pack up Josh, and then took the trip of a lifetime: we flew to Paris and several cities in Italy. I've put some pictures on FB and have more to post. None of us had ever been to Europe, so we had a marvelous time seeing all the famous landmarks and especially the cathedrals. And I got some really great ideas on how we might renovate this Gothic-revival sanctuary. Well, not all of it – just the pulpit.

For example, at this wonderful Parisian cathedral see how there are eight steps up to the pulpit? And it's located in the center of the sanctuary so the preacher can make sure everyone is awake.

Or perhaps this one, the pulpit at a cathedral in Florence -- see how it is attached to a pillar way, way up high? That might be fun!

But I think I found my favorite pulpit in the small Italian town of Pisa, famous for, yes, its leaning bell tower. Next to the tower is the duomo, or cathedral. I fell in love with its pulpit, marble staircase and all. But then the statues supporting the pulpit might be too distracting for our congregation. They are even too racy to show them up close.

I wasn't allowed to enter any of these pulpits, even though I SO dearly wanted to try them on for size. And then our tour guide at Pisa took all the wind out of my sails... She pointed out the third level of the cathedral, where there was little air circulation and cramped quarters.

This, she said, way, way up there -- was where the women sat during the worship services. They weren't allowed to be anywhere near the same level as the men. They were unworthy of being in the holy portion of the cathedral. Now, 900 years later, women can of course walk around the cathedral... and of course they can sit in the congregation with the men....but they still aren't welcome in the pulpit.

Because when it comes to being pastors, women were born the wrong way.

Wanna hear some good news? Our texts this morning show us without question that God does not share that opinion. Amen? That it is we humans that separate ourselves into groups and divisions to be judged as worthy or unacceptable. Our texts tell us clearly what it means to be created by God; what it means to be born in the image of God and what we can find when we allow ourselves to experience the power of God's amazing and all encompassing love. And by texts I mean Psalm 139, and the lyrics of Lady Gaga's *Born this Way*.

With all due respect to Lady Gaga, I am convinced that she did not base *Born this Way* on a song by Madonna – as I've heard rumored. Instead, I believe she used verses 13-14 of Psalm 139 as her touchstone: *For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, [O God], for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.* Amen?

This Psalm, was thought to have been written by David, the shepherd boy who would be king. Now, from David's encounter with Goliath we can presume he understood something about physics but probably not much about medicine. Yet he proclaimed with certainty that it was God who brought him into being not by chance -- but by design, with an intent; with a purpose. With that same sort of poetic flourish, Gaga proclaims the same:

*My mama told me when I was young
We are all born superstars
She rolled my hair and put my lipstick on
In the glass of her boudoir
"There's nothing wrong with loving who you are"
She said, "'Cause he made you perfect, babe"
Listen to me when I say
I'm beautiful in my way
'Cause God makes no mistakes
I'm on the right track, baby*

Amen? In case you can't tell, there'll be a lot of amen-ing going on this morning.

So with only two verses of Psalm 139 and two verses of my favorite Gaga song, here's what we have already established: 1) God created each of us by design and with a purpose and knows and loves us just as we are... and 2) we are all created in God's good image, whether we are male or female or gay or straight or have blond hair or dark skin or speak Lebanese. The way we are born is the right way, because God makes no mistakes. Amen?

Not only does God not make any mistakes, but the Psalmist tells us that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Let's unpack what that means. One scholar has written that the word *Fearfully* comes from the root *yar-A*, which doesn't mean fear in the sense of

being afraid or need to defend oneself. It has a "larger meaning of awe, reverent respect, and honor... some scholars think the better translation might be "reverently." [so that means we can say] We humans are reverently made... Amen?

[Taking the second modifier]... *in verse 14, "wonderfully" comes from the verbal root pala', which means to be different, striking, remarkable - outside of the power of human comprehension. The word is used repeatedly in the Psalter to describe the acts of God on behalf of humanity, particularly God's actions in the history of the ancient Israelites.*¹

So what does all that mean? It means we are fearfully, reverently, lovingly, wonderfully, remarkably, strikingly, outside the power of human comprehension, made in the image of God. If that's the case, my brothers and sisters, if this is almighty God is telling us who we are, why do we find it so hard to believe it? Why in the WORLD would we listen to anyone, any group, any law, or any social convenience that would try to tell us otherwise? And, because we are fearfully and wonderfully made, we are called to live out who we are, to embody the diverse, grace-filled, inclusive love of God in Jesus Christ -- so that we change the perspective of those who would draw lines and boundaries that harm and exclude.

Martin Luther King, Jr., once said that *the only normalcy that we will settle for is the normalcy that recognizes the dignity and worth of all God's children.*

Lady Gaga proclaims the worth of all God's children, the normalcy we want for ourselves and our loved ones in a beautiful way.

*Don't be a drag, just be a queen
Whether you're broke or evergreen
You're black, white, beige, chola descent
You're Lebanese, you're orient
Whether life's disabilities
Left you outcast, bullied, or teased
Rejoice and love yourself today
'cause baby you were born this way*

*No matter gay, straight, or bi,
lesbian, transgendered life,
I'm on the right track baby,
I was born to survive.*

Her words just preach on their own, don't they? Yet Psalm 139 takes Gaga and goes further. David clearly wrote this as a psalm of reassurance, a psalm of survival, in difficult times; to remind us that God offers us unconditional protection in the midst of strife. As we work for the normalcy Dr. King envisioned for all people, *gay, straight, or bi, lesbian, transgendered life*, we too can take comfort in the vision of the psalmist that

wherever we go, God is there. There is no place we can flee from God's presence; there is no depth, physically, emotionally or spiritually to which we might plummet without finding God there, holding us close in his arms, embracing us to the fullest extent, reminding us that we are God's beloved children. There is no darkness with God; there no place -- absolutely no place -- we can escape from or fail to experience God's all encompassing love.

We might walk out of this church saying "ehh. That was an ok service but I am still not sure about God." Guess what? For the rest of your life – the REST OF YOUR LIFE – you will remember this day, this time in this sanctuary. Not because of me, or the great music, or the friendly people sitting in your pew. It's because you are hearing these words this morning like you have never heard them before: God created you in God's good image. You were born this way because God has a plan and a purpose for your life. God loves you, just as you are. And no matter what anyone says, or any law that is passed, or not passed; any pain or suffering someone else causes you, there is NOTHING that can separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Nothing. Amen?

One other thought about Gaga's poetry. Her last verse reads:

A different lover is not a sin
Believe capital H-I-M
I love my life I love this record and
– this is the part that I want us to focus on --
Mi amore vole fe yah (Love needs faith)

Love needs faith. Never have we had two better examples of that than this past week. Quoting Dr. King again: *the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice*. It certainly did in New York last Friday night. Amen? That didn't happen by coincidence. The vote for marriage equality there, like everywhere it has passed, happens because of two reasons: we understand that we are all born as beloved children of God – here's where I differ with Gaga – I'm not a fan of the term little monsters; I like children of God better.

But after we are born in God's image, we then CHOOSE how to live. And we, here as this family, as did many in New York; we CHOOSE to believe that love needs faith; we choose to follow Jesus the Christ, and take seriously his calling to bring forth hope and justice in this broken world. Amen?

That means we are actively working not only for marriage equality and civil rights for all persons, but we are also working against budget cuts that would hurt the least and the lost; we are speaking out for brothers and sisters who hunger for bread and justice, and working to make this world a safer place for us all.

But even as we are seeking to bring forth justice “out there,” we are also hearing our call to bring our beloved church to accountability; to reform the United Methodist Church so that all REALLY means all. This is where love REALLY needs faith.

Last week the Rev. Amy DeLong – Wisconsin elder in the UMC. Named as a highly effective pastor, she was brought to a church trial on two charges – one for being a lesbian and two for officiating at a holy union in 2009. She was acquitted on the charge of being a lesbian but convicted of performing the holy union even though it was part of her understanding of ministry. Her sentence? 20 days suspension for a period of spiritual discernment, and she must do some writing and teaching within the Conference.

This is the first time that an elder has been brought up on charges such as these and the trial court – all clergy – did not take away the pastor’s credentials. I pray that this is a harbinger for changes our General Conference will make to our *Book of Discipline* in 2012, and allow us as pastors to care for the people in our congregation and community, and to live our lives openly – in the words of Gaga, *No matter gay, straight, or bi, lesbian, transgendered life.*

Because if you are called to the pulpit, you should be able to enter it no matter who you are; no matter what country you live in. If you love someone, you should be able to marry, no matter what. Because you – you – you – each of you -- are God’s good creation.

You’re on the right track, baby, because you are born this way.

Alleluia! Amen.

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¹ Nancy DeClaisse-Walford, Commentary on Psalm 139, January 18, 2009, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=1/18/2009&tab=5