

## **Stonewall Was a Riot**

Guest Preacher: Lou Daniel Thomas Rochford

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First Congregational Church UCC of Burlington, Vermont

*Live by the Spirit, [and] let us also be guided by the Spirit* (Galatians 5:25). What Paul is telling the Galatians here sounds like common sense today. It is what our Welcome Team practices every Sunday at First Church when greeting members and visitors with joy, kindness, and generosity. We are Spirit-led and, by the guidance of the Spirit, love our neighbors. I will admit to my challenging moments following this commandment. Easy in theory, extending this to those who may threaten the freedom that Paul speaks about is hard.

Paul teaches that "If the Spirit leads you, you are not subject to the law." In Vermont, our statutes have banned discrimination both on sexual orientation and gender identity in employment, public accommodations, education, housing, credit, insurance, and union practices since 1992. On May 5, 2021, Governor Phil Scott signed a bill – [H.128](#) - repealing the gay and trans panic defense.

Vermont has at least five openly LGBTQ+ candidates in statewide elections, including U.S. Senate, House, and Governor. In 2018 Taylor Small, Vermont House Representative was elected as Vermont's first openly transgender legislator. A position they hold while employed at the Pride Center as the Education Program Manager and moonlighting as Nikki Champagne for Drag Queen Story Hour.

Our church's history includes conducting the first Civil Union on July 1, 2000, of Holly Puterbaugh and Lois Farnham.

The Spirit has led us to ensure our state laws acknowledge that LGBTQ+ individuals are human beings who deserve the same rights as their straight kinspersons.

This is not the reality in the rest of the country today.

We've lived with these divisions for almost a century. An early act of oppression was in 1924 when a Broadway show in New York City, [God of Vengeance](#), was shut down. The theater owner and cast were arrested for having a "lesbian theme" in the production.

This division is depicted in the movie [Milk](#). In an early scene of the movie Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man to be elected to public office in California, and his boyfriend ask a store owner, McConnely, about joining Castro Village Business Association in San Francisco in 1972. McConnely observed the two at a distance and informed Milk, "There's Man's Law, and there's God's Law in this neighborhood." The "Law of Men" that McConnely refers to is the strife, anger, and factions that have existed far too long.

This is similar to the gay scene in New York City in the late 60s, a modern-day example of what Paul says to the Galatians. New York State Liquor Authority refused to issue liquor licenses to establishments, often owned by the Mafia, that they deemed to serve "disorderly" clientele.

Stonewall Inn was not a "house of ill repute" where sexual immorality ran rampant. The clientele was as far from disorderly as possible; patrons of the bar included college students and activists, journalists, former military men, union men, and even a novice nun. These individuals were not criminals. These patrons sought fellowship; these bars were sometimes the only places to accept them.

It was not the classiest environment. High-priced, watered-down, bootlegged drinks were on the menu, and it was an unlicensed "bottle club" where patrons brought their alcohol. Conditions of these bars were bare minimum. There was no running water behind the bar, the toilets overflowed, and there was no fire exit.

Stonewall Inn, catering to the gay men of New York City, was busy after the death of Judy Garland on June 22, 1969. A gay icon of that time and today, people related to Garland, who embodied Paul's message, "Love your neighbor as yourself." When a reporter asked Garland if she minded having a large gay following, she responded, "I couldn't care less. I sing to people!" One fan is quoted saying, "Homosexuals understand suffering. And so does Garland."

On June 27, a hot, humid 96 degrees shrouded New York City. Garland's funeral occurred at Frank E. Campbell's Funeral Church on East Eighty-first Street and Madison Avenue. Gay men lined the streets as the hearse passed. Garland was such an icon that the phrases such as "Buddy of Dorothy" and "Friend of Dorothy" are euphemisms used today for an LGBTQ+ person.

Stonewall Inn, the only gay bar in town, four miles away from the church, became busy with those grieving and looking for fellowship. Unwarranted, this created an "ideal situation" for police raids.

There had already been a raid earlier that week by New York's Sixth Precinct, who tipped off the owner. Tipping off the owner was a business transaction at the time. The owner would bribe the police, which allowed the bars to stay open and give the owner enough time to stash the liquor and other illegal activities. The patrons were the sacrificial lambs. Individuals were arrested, and charges were brought for anyone not wearing at least three articles of "gender-appropriate clothing."

The evening of the 27<sup>th</sup> into the 28<sup>th</sup> was different. It had been hot and muggy. By the early hours of the 28<sup>th</sup>, temperatures still hovered in the 80's. Another difference, there was a second raid that week at the Stonewall Inn.

Unannounced.

Because of the bar's heat and poor air conditioning, patrons gathered outside to stay cool. They began seeing the Public Morals Squad of the Sixth Precinct arrive. Resistance started immediately.

During the initial non-violent resistance, Stormé DeLarverie, a black butch lesbian, realized that this was the time to throw off the yoke that Paul warns about. Hit with a baton by the arresting officer, tired of the harassment, uncomfortable from too-tight handcuffs, DeLarverie looked over at hovering residents and asked, "*Why don't you guys do something?*" Residents nearby started throwing pennies, bottles, and cobblestones in response to unprovoked violence.

Lest we forget, *Stonewall was a riot!*

The raid was against the oppressed.

The fuel of the raid is the same anger and enmity existing over a millennium ago, prompting Paul's warning to the Galatians.

Over half a century later, violence towards the LGBTQ+ community remains unprovoked. On June 12, 2022, white national groups disrupted a Pride event in Idaho and a Drag Queen Story Hour in San Francisco. Time Magazine reported on June 16, that in the previous two months, eleven different pride events across the country were targeted by white nationalist groups or delayed due to threats of violence. On June 18, the Manchester, New Hampshire Pride event was delayed after a suspicious van attracted bomb-sniffing dogs resulting in an evacuation. According to the Human Rights Campaign, more than 320 anti-LGBTQ bills in 2022 have been introduced.

The recent overturning of Roe Vs. Wade has put women's and transgender person's rights to an abortion in limbo. This is not the only oppression that occurred on Friday (June 24). The overturning of Roe Vs. Wade has created a dangerous new precedent based on what words appears in the US Constitution. The question of revisiting other rulings on constitutional rights puts same-sex marriage in danger of being overturned.

And we are not halfway through the year.

Vermont is not spared from violence. A theft occurred at Northern Vermont University, where its pride flag was stolen. Fern Feather, a trans woman, was murdered after the suspect told police that Fern allegedly flirted with him, and he killed her in self-defense. The Pride Center has had its door smashed by rocks. Our State Legislators reviewed a bill, which died in committee, regarding protecting healthcare providers' right of conscience, which would have allowed healthcare providers the right to refuse to advise, counsel, and perform health care services that go against their personal beliefs. In this instance, not only was the LGBTQ+ community a potential target, but the bill also included the right of healthcare providers to deny women birth control, IVF, and statewide access to abortions.

Despite this oppression, progress continues.

The surge of small-town pride events and a federal initiative cracking down on "conversion therapy" aimed at changing a person's sexual orientation is an indication that if history tells us anything, it is that we will not be silenced. Progress continues not just for my generation but for the 43% of 1.6 million trans people in the United States ages 13 through 24.

The [Christian Post](#) recently published the sentiment that: "Thirty years ago, "Christianity was generally respected by society while homosexuality was disdained." We do not have to grieve, though. It does not have to be "If gay is good, the Church is bad."

As an *open and affirming* congregation in the [United Church of Christ](#), we can be that connection for people seeking a faith home where they are accepted for who they are and the wounds they carry in their fights for justice. To walk the path of the instructions from Paul is to affirm, celebrate, and accept people for who they are when they walk through our doors. Dana Kaplan, Executive Director of Outright Vermont said, "*We will not back down, and we cannot back down.*"

This is what it means to love your neighbor as yourself.