

I want to thank Beth Ogilvie for inviting me to speak with you today as a part of your program as a Welcoming Congregation. I'm going to tell you something about the T in LGBT. I can't tell you everything, because no one knows everything about the subject, and 15 minutes is barely enough time to open the door and peek in on what is really an extremely rich and complex topic. So I hope you'll continue your explorations in this area long after today. But I'm going to start with some basics and also talk about creating a welcoming community for Transgender people, a poorly-understood aspect of the LGBT community.

The T isn't really well understood by the Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual communities either, because T is about gender, while the categories of L, G, and B are about sexual orientation. And Transgender people can be heterosexual, or Gay or Lesbian, or Bisexual. So, what gives transgender people a place in the LGB world? The answer is heterosexism and similar unjust persecution based on fear: homophobia and transphobia. The alliance between the letters of the acronym is a political one – a somewhat uneasy one – but it is an absolutely necessary one when you think about civil rights, social safety, and the education that's required for all four of these disparate communities to attain equality in the United States.

After more than 60 years of what was originally called the "Homophile" movement in the US, I think most of our citizens have an idea about what it means for someone to be Gay or Lesbian – and that's usually that they want to be intimate with people of the same sex as they are. There is much more to being Lesbian or Gay than that, of course, but that's the simplest common assumption. Still, many people have a lot of other assumptions about gay and lesbian people. One of the most common is that gay men want to be women, and lesbians want to be men. That's because the only gay or lesbian people they can perceive or are conscious of are those they think act, dress, or somehow suggest they are not the sex they appear to be, because they are feminine men or masculine women. How we perceive people and what we do with those perceptions are crucial factors in homophobia and transphobia.

One very sad manifestation of this occurred in Tennessee in the mid-1990s: a man and his wife were at a shopping center, and his wife asked her husband to hold her purse while she went to the ladies room. While he was waiting for her, he saw a blind man looking for the men's room, and he offered to escort the man, holding out his arm for the blind man to take. Another man saw this male couple, one of whom was carrying a woman's purse, walking into the men's room. That man went out to his truck, got his rifle, and went back and killed the man holding his wife's purse. This is an example of how dangerous homophobia is – how it can harm us all.

This is related to the experience of transgender women, who were born with male bodies, who are sometimes perceived as men in dresses, and suffer horrifying abuse by those who do not understand. Indeed, masculine women can suffer similarly. Masculine women may be straight, lesbian, bisexual. Some masculine women may be transgender men who are what's known as

“genderqueer” and do not want to change their bodies, while others may be “pre-transition” so they have not yet begun medical treatment to affirm their male gender identity, so they feel they should be using women’s restrooms. Masculine women are often screamed at or evicted from ladies rooms, or subjected to hostile glares.

This is gender-based prejudice: there’s no evidence of sexual orientation in these scenarios. It’s persecution based on what gender-based characteristics and behaviors the perpetrator has decided are right and proper. The fact that the perpetrator links what he or she sees to a presumption about the victim’s sexual behavior is what makes it homophobia. The fact that the perpetrator judges the victim’s appearance and links it to breaking some presumed convention of masculinity or femininity is what makes it transphobia.

Transgender people are ordinary people whose gender identity – their deeply felt sense of who they are doesn’t line up with the expectations for the sex they were assigned at birth.

EVERYBODY has a gender identity. When you think that you are what your body tells you you are – for example when you think you must be a woman because you have a female body, and that’s just fine with you – you are not transgender. If you are a man who likes to knit or to hold babies, or something that’s usually associated with woman’s gender roles, that doesn’t mean you are transgender. Transgender is about a mismatch between your gender and your body that causes you real misery, not about your hobbies or your dissatisfaction with what others expect from you as a woman or as a man.

Most transgender people know they are different from a very young age. They may try to hide it because they know it upsets other people, or they may attribute their difference to other things or try to pretend it isn’t there. More and more today, younger people are able to find the language to express themselves, and more and more parents are able to hear their child’s expression of their identity and to honor it and give their child options that transgender people have never had before. So at this time in history, more young trans people, teens, young adults, and children, too, are able to say they are trans (the shorthand for transgender), but we still see older people, even those in their 60s and 70s finding themselves able to speak out for the first time and express their full selves.

There is no one way to be transgender. Some trans people are cross-dressers, and do not want to change their bodies; some are what used to be called androgynous – combining both male and female characteristics and behaviors without a need to change their bodies – and some are Transsexual, people who need medical attention to modify their bodies so they can live congruently in a body that corresponds with their gender identity. For these people, the pain of their gender incongruence is debilitating.

For decades, like homosexuality, transsexualism was thought to be a mental disorder. Homosexuality was removed from the list of mental disorders in 1973, but transsexualism is not quite there yet, even though more and more scientists and physicians who work with

transgender and transsexual people are convinced there is a biological basis for a person's gender identity as well as for gender-variance, just as they are learning that sex is not the simple, either/or binary construction that we once thought it was. In fact, scientists now realize they cannot tell us what constitutes a 100% male or 100% female human being. People may not choose to be trans, though they may—to some extent—choose how to manage their transness. And many trans people cannot choose to look ordinary, and so stand out; however, you would never know by looking at most trans people that they are trans. I think it is interesting to ask oneself the question: why do I care whether or not someone is trans?

The point of all this is that people with trans experience are just people who have experience you may not have yourself. The goal of trans awareness is to reduce your surprise and discomfort when you see or meet someone whose gender is unusual to you, or who has had experience of life in more than one gender role. The goal is to treat everyone as an equal human being, no more, no less.

You already have trans people here at Starr King. You may or may not know it. You may see someone you think might be trans, but your perception might be wrong. At this stage of our knowledge about the subject, and I'm talking about our culture's cumulative knowledge, not our individual knowledge, the best way to welcome a trans person is not to ask them if they are trans, but to treat them like anyone else of the gender they are presenting to you. If you don't know what gender they are presenting, or you are getting mixed signals, you may need to let go of the idea that you need to know someone's gender before you can be comfortable with them. If you ask their name, and they give you a feminine name, you can safely assume she wants to be referred to with feminine pronouns; if not, they will politely correct you. If the name is androgynous or clearly masculine, but they are clearly presenting a feminine appearance, you might politely inquire what pronouns they prefer.

But people who are not transgender usually don't appreciate it if you tell them you can't tell what sex they are, and many people who are transgender just want to be accepted for who they are, and not explain things about who they thought they had to be before they were able to be themselves. Are you feeling a little confused right now? That's okay. It CAN be confusing, even for people who are trans. But really, it's about being willing to not know something about another person, and still show them respect and care and bid them welcome.

The reading that Regina so ably delivered earlier refers to a period in my life in the early 1990s when I had been asked to take over a community-based newsletter for transsexual and cross-dressing people who were born with female bodies and who lived as men some or all of the time. In those days, most trans men were hidden, and very fearful of anyone learning about them or about their past. There was a lot of misinformation about who transsexual people were, and the term transgender had not been popularized and politicized as it was later in that decade. I was writing about being inspired to let go of my shame of being a transsexual man,

because I knew that education –being able to learn and speak about the topic—was the path to good health, social safety, and full civil rights. Our battles are not yet won, but we have made incredible strides.

So, this was not meant to complete a dialogue, but rather to begin one. You may actually have more questions now than when you sat down. And that's okay. I will be available to talk during fellowship today, but I also recommend reaching out to the newly forming Interweave chapter here. You have a number of passionate and informed people here who are committed to helping guide Starr King toward being fully welcoming, and your support and involvement will only enrich that effort.

My time is almost up as your pulpit guest, and this topic is vastly complicated, but I offer myself as a sounding board for your ideas and your questions. I may not have all the answers, but I am not afraid to talk about it. So, thank you for being a Welcoming Congregation, and for your kind attention.