



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**
Presbyterian (USA)

Why Church? Because love is God's gift.

SCRIPTURE:
John 3:16-17

June 11, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Dionne Boyice

Good morning, Village Church, and happy PRIDE! I am so excited to be here celebrating a time of year that means so much to me, the community I love, and the community I serve. Just in case you were wondering... I, we, are definitely PRIDE proud! Thank you for allowing me this opportunity. I would like to share a story with you.

In 2017, God called and equipped me to create a new and innovative worshiping community in the greater Kansas City area. The ministry of WHOSOEVER: Community of FAITH was the first of its kind in both the Kansas City, Kansas and Kansas City, Missouri areas that was created and led by a person of color who identifies as a part of the LGBTQ+ community.

The idea to start a church was first suggested to me by my wife who wanted nothing more than to attend worship without the worry of being shamed, shunned, ridiculed, talked about, and condemned to hell from the pulpit. Soon after that, one of my closest friends came to me and asked if I would just “start a church” in the basement of my home. In her desperation, she asked if I could at least do Bible study once a week because she wanted to continue to grow in faith, worship with others, and do it all with her wife by her side—proudly representing her as her wife without being made to feel unwanted, unloved, or an abomination.

The third confirmation I experienced was the invitation to preach for the first Black PRIDE worship service here in Kansas City. It was at this service that I met many people who asked where my church was because they desired a place to worship that was spiritually and emotionally safe for them as members of the LGBTQ+ community. Well, at the time, I did not have a church. But I quickly remembered that this was not the first time I had heard similar language. So, the gears in my mind began to turn.

All these instances happened within a couple of

months of each other and I soon realized that it was God speaking to me through my wife, my late friend Donna, and that Black PRIDE worship service. I had known for some time that this was definitely an unmet need within the Black LGBTQ+ spiritual community. A need that was choking the very spirit of this loving community. I felt God was speaking to my heart—to go forth and begin this important work. Yet, I was also overwhelmed at the thought of creating such a space and tried to toss it from my mind at every turn.

But one day, as I continued to do my best to ignore the urge to meet this need, the Lord helped me realize that God had been preparing, equipping, and training me for this call for many years. I then knew it was time to do something about this immense void within and around my community. I could no longer allow us to suffer the spiritual death we were facing, when I knew God had been preparing me for this. Now don't get me wrong; it took some time, some real time, for me to be okay with what I believed God was speaking to me, but I eventually said “yes” to what God was asking me to do.

At the time, I was in my senior year of seminary earning my Master of Divinity degree and it was time to begin working on my Capstone and final project. Therefore, the call-to-action God had recently placed on my heart made it a no-brainer in making the decision that starting a church would be my final project. With trembling fear and much concern about having what it would take to make all the right moves, I forged ahead and began building the ministry of WHOSOEVER. My wife was excited, my friend Donna was pleased, my family was happy, but me? No sir! I was completely terrified.

However, after spending time researching, learning and planning how to form a new worshiping community, I decided to name the ministry “WHOSOEVER: Community of FAITH” with FAITH being an acronym for Finding Answers In The Hurt. The “hurt” being those who desired spiritual healing because they had, or were,

experiencing religious and church trauma, spiritual abuse and/or moral injury within the church setting.

We decided on the name WHOSOEVER because we believed the scripture in John 3:16 to be true. That God did love the world and that Jesus did die for the sins of all the world—whosoever we are. We had fond memories of that scripture being planted in our little minds as children and we knew that story all too well. Therefore, we wanted the ministry of WHOSOEVER to express the same inclusive love, welcome, and affirmation that John 3:16 offers.

Even though it was mostly LGBTQ people of color who approached me about their desires to have a place to worship, I did not want WHOSOEVER to be exclusive to that or any other community. I wanted any and everyone who wanted, needed, and desired spiritual healing to know that they were always welcome. And that they would be spiritually, emotionally and morally safe at WHOSOEVER. So, our doors were and still are open to all people. Why? Because God so loves the world and so do we.

As I said earlier, my wife and I strongly believed in the John 3:16 scripture and we understood that we only exist because of God's unconditional love and the loving sacrifice of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ at Calvary. But what we didn't understand and had a hard time believing were the words that followed in John 3:17. We knew what it said—that Christ did not come into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved—but what we didn't understand was why the churches and the church people that we encountered did not grasp or believe in the truth of John 3:17. You see, like many others in the Black LGBTQ+ community, Le and I grew up in a Black church where "homosexuality" was often a huge topic of discussion. In sermons, "homosexuals" were an abomination and disgrace unto God, condemned to hell because of our "sinful" ways and "lifestyle." "Homosexuals" were considered the scum of the earth. And sadly, many churches still believe and teach this.

To this day, we are told that God does not accept us, that God does not embrace or love us, and that God would spew us from "His" mouth because of who they, the good Christians, think we are. Unfortunately, my Village friends, the Church as a whole has not been kind to us rainbow folk. And it has always been an extremely hard and painful pill for our hearts and spirits

to swallow. Trust me, I know firsthand.

However! I have shared all of this with you today to help bring us to the question of the day: "Why Church?" That in itself is a loaded question. Yet, despite how the LGBTQ+ community has been treated by the Church, I have allowed God to move me in and out of many phases, stages, and places of ministry over the last 16 years. And what I've learned throughout those years is that Church (the big "C" Church, the Body of Christ, the Church universal) is where we find the true gift of God's love. Love is God's gift to the Church, to the people of God and to all of creation.

Who are the people of God? Who does God call, "my people?" Well, I'm so glad you asked. But I'm betting you already know the answer. Yep, you guessed it! WHOSOEVER! Whosoever is defined as "whatever person; any person at all." Which proves the Apostle John's story in Chapter 3, verse 16. God so loved the world... meaning God so loved God's people and the gift of that love is God's only son, Jesus.

So "Why Church?" Because God did not separate or exclude anyone from the promise of the cross. So "Why Church?" Because God said whatever person, any person at all. "Why Church?" God did not speak to one section of the world and ignore the others. God did not say that Jesus would come to save the southern-most regions of the world, or the parts of the world that believed that love is only meant to happen between a man and a woman. No, God simply said that the promise of the cross was offered to the world in its entirety—there were no exception clauses or footnotes attached to God's love for the world. Therefore, God sent Jesus to save the world, not condemn it. God's gift to the world.

Jesus, the ultimate gift to this world, never spoke a word about homosexuality, same-gender love, or LGBTQ+ communities. Jesus, the Savior of this world, only demonstrated unconditional love for all humankind. Jesus, the hope of this world, was sent to love the world, not hate it. This was the same Jesus that taught about God's Spirit being poured out among all flesh... whosoever we are! And this definitely includes our LGBTQ+ siblings as well. We matter to God and we mattered to Jesus and we should also matter to the world.

Village Church has been loving and kind to me over my 10 months on staff here. I have met many beautiful and loving people in this place. I have not been made to feel unloved, unwanted, or unwelcomed in

this space. And because of that, I will challenge you all today to take that loving kindness, the encouragement, and the affirmation you all have shown toward me and others and boldly carry that example out into the world. Let your affirming light shine bright for others to see, feel, hear, and know. Encourage other congregations and spiritual spaces to open their hearts with the love that God offers to all the world. Not just the parts of the world that make us feel all warm and fuzzy inside. But everywhere.

With Village Church being one of the leaders of this inclusive movement, other churches just may have questions for you. They may ask: How does the church embrace, empower, accept, and affirm those within the LGBTQ+ community? How does the church begin to make space for those who have been excluded from worship spaces and religious places? How does the church begin to reconcile the broken relationships between the LGBTQ community and the church? And, possibly, the most important question may be: How can the church become a safe and loving space for those within this community that simply seek to be loved and cared for in the same manner as any other human that walks the face of God's earth? These are some questions one may have if they are truly interested in transformation and radical welcome.

You could suggest that they simply yet wholeheartedly believe in the story that tells us that Jesus sacrificed his life for every single one of us—no matter who or what we are. No matter what we've done or how we've done it. Tell them it does not matter whether we understand or agree on who people love, but what does matter is that we know that love is a precious gift from God. And God calls us to love one another. Matthew 22 tells us that love is the first and second greatest commandments. The first being to love God and the second being to love of one another, to love our neighbors, which includes our LGBTQ neighbors. Love is the glue that holds the world, the family, the church, the community, the heart, and the spirit of humanity together. It's all about love. What the world needs now is love, sweet love. "Why Church?" Because love is God's gift, and we, as the Body of Christ, the Church universal, are called to love and to be loved.

Sometimes we make love, agape love, one of the most difficult things to accept and achieve. Agape love is the highest form of love and charity. It embraces a

deep and profound sacrificial love that transcends and persists regardless of circumstance. In other words, agape love is unconditional love. Agape love is a Godly love. And again, Church, this is why God sent Jesus to save the world and not condemn it because the love God has for each of us transcends any condemnation. Let us love the world and not condemn the world. Let us speak love and not hate into our LGBTQ+ communities. Let us practice what we preach, Church. And you, my Village friends, can help the Church universal do that.

To preach the love of God is to preach the heart of God. Whether our message addresses ministry to the sick, global missions, evangelism, social justice, family issues, or LGBTQ+ PRIDE, the message should always be rooted in God's love or it is not rooted in God. Jeremiah 31:3 tells us that the Lord appeared to us in the past, saying, 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore, with loving-kindness have I drawn thee.' Church, if the Triune God can love us and draw us, or beckon us to God's self with an everlasting love, who are we as mere humans to pass judgement or decide who we are going to love or show love to?

There's a movement that needs to happen; there's a shifting that needs to occur. We need to widen our screens, so we can widen our view. Our churches with the narrow mindsets and small screens are hurting, dismantling and killing our communities—especially my community, the LGBTQ+ community. We should want the word "church" to be a blessing to the souls of all people, not a trigger of detriment and destruction. We should have a positive answer and a welcoming vibe when someone asks the question, "Why church?" We should be quick to say, "You are loved, you are welcomed, and you are affirmed here." We should be eager to greet the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning with radical and authentic acceptance.

Why Church? Because the church must continue to pursue ways to remain inclusive to a community of people that society and the government seek to exclude and deny. The church should be the place where me and my LGBTQ+ siblings can come for support, grace, encouragement, and most importantly, love. I tell people all the time when I talk about WHOSOEVER that leading that ministry is a bittersweet experience for me. It is bitter because there had to be a ministry created for those who live with church trauma and spiritual abuse, but it is sweet because there is a ministry that was

created to embrace those who deal with those ungodly experiences. The Church as a whole must do better; the Church as a whole can do better. Where there's a will, there is a way, and if we will, God will make a way.

In 2019, I decided that "finding answers in the hurt" was not offering the ministry of WHOSOEVER much hope or a forward path. Lingering in the hurt was not what I wanted for the church. So, I decided to change the FAITH acronym from Finding Answers In The Hurt to Finding Answers In The Healing. Because we, as the people of God, are continuously offered healing through the love of Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit. We, as the Body of Christ, are not meant to stay and live in hurtful spaces. God has given us life and wants us to live it in abundance and healing allows us to do that.

So, WHOSOEVER is now a virtual, healing ministry with more than 1,200 members who are committed

to loving one another and the world in the ways that Christ has loved us. We are a truly diverse ministry that hosts people from all over the world, including people from the LGBTQ+ community and our allies. We are not exclusive to any one group of people because God is not exclusive. God is inclusive and so are we. And so, we join Village Church in answering the question that was posed here today: Why Church? We join you in continuing to answer that question in faith, hope and love. Because love is God's gift. A gift that was sent here not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through the gift of God's love known to us as Jesus Christ. It is the only real answer to the loaded question: "Why Church?"

Let us pray: May the Holy Spirit open up our innermost being to what God wants most: to give love to us, receive love from us, and for us to love one another with a true and everlasting love. Amen.