**Living Proud Out Loud**

*Acts 15:5–13 | Pride Sunday | Squamish United Church*

**Happy Pride Sunday**!

There is something sacred about this day. Today, we celebrate the wildly diverse, deeply beloved 2SLGBTQIA+ community, and we declare:
**Love is holy. Diversity is divine. And living proud out loud is a sacred act.**

And isn’t it interesting—today’s reading from **Acts 15** lands us smack in the middle of a first-century church debate over who gets to belong.

In other words, *"You can sit with us—but only if you’re just like us."*

And then Peter stands up, takes a deep breath, and says:

**“Why are you trying to out-God God?”**
**“Why are you putting a yoke on people’s necks that we couldn’t even carry ourselves?”** *(Acts 15:10, The Message)*

Sound familiar?

Let me set the scene: some early believers—ex-Pharisees—say the only way to be “truly” Christian is to follow all the old religious rules. If you're not circumcised and have checked all the right doctrinal boxes, you're out.

Historically, Acts 15 describes the first recorded Church council held around 50 CE in Jerusalem. The apostles and elders, including Paul, Peter, James, and Barnabas, gathered to discuss whether new Gentile believers were required to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses in order to follow Jesus. This council was crucial in determining the future of the church, deciding whether it would remain a Jewish group or allow Gentiles to join without following Jewish laws. The council's decision was that Gentiles did NOT need to be circumcised or follow the Law of Moses, which allowed the church to attract more Gentiles and eventually become a distinct faith. This debate was not merely a theological dispute but also a reflection of the broader cultural and social dynamics of the time. The decision reached at the council had far-reaching implications, allowing the church to expand beyond its Jewish roots and embrace a more inclusive approach. Frankly, we wouldn’t be here today celebrating our 100th Anniversary without this critical council meeting.

**The key question during that meeting was this: “Why are you putting a yoke on people’s necks that we couldn’t even carry ourselves?”** That line hits me like a holy lightning bolt.

Because too often, the church has done exactly that—put heavy burdens on people that God never asked for. Especially on queer and trans folks. Too often, people have had to work twice as hard to be seen as half as welcome.

**The Church Learns to Dance**

Now, we in the **United Church of Canada** like to pat ourselves on the back sometimes -“In 1988, we were the first to ordain openly gay ministers. And yes—praise God! That was bold and prophetic.

But let’s also remember: it was *messy*. People left the denomination. Churches split. I know of one congregation in Ontario where someone protested by wearing noise-cancelling headphones every Sunday during the sermon.
(*Which I’m told had nothing to do with the preacher’s delivery... but no guarantees.*)

Peter's argument in Acts 15:10-11 is a powerful reminder of the core message of Christianity: salvation through grace rather than adherence to the law. By challenging the notion that Gentile believers must follow Jewish customs, Peter emphasizes the universality of the Christian faith. This passage has been interpreted by theologians as a call to reject legalism and embrace the freedom offered by Christ. The decision of the Jerusalem Council to not impose the Law of Moses on Gentile converts was a significant step towards defining the identity of the Christian community.

But even in that struggle, God was moving. People were being called, gifted, and loved—**before** the church was ready to recognize it.

And thankfully, people like Peter kept showing up to say,

“The Spirit is ahead of us—let’s catch up.”

**Inclusion Is Not an Add-On**

Pride isn’t a *theme* or a *season* we sprinkle into the liturgy like rainbow confetti.

It’s a call to remember that **radical inclusion is the DNA of the Gospel**.

The early church had to wrestle with that. And guess what? So do we.

Today, the question isn’t just whether queer and trans people are *allowed* in the church. It’s whether we’re willing to **celebrate the gifts** they bring, **center their voices**, and **challenge the systems** that still cause harm.

Because full inclusion doesn’t mean “you can be here”—it means *“this is your home too.” It means not just singing the words of our opening hymn – all are welcome. But breathing it into being. Living out each and every day.*

**The Rainbow Bench in Innisfail**

Let me tell you about something that happened in **Innisfail, Alberta**—a small prairie town you might not expect to make the national news.

A group of high school students asked the town council to paint a rainbow crosswalk for Pride. The council said no. So, the students said:
“Fine. We’ll build a **rainbow bench** instead.”

They placed it downtown as a quiet but bold invitation:
*“You are welcome to sit here. You are seen. You are loved.”*

At first, some folks scoffed. But others sat. Queer teens sat. Seniors sat. A grizzled farmer sat and later told the local paper, “I didn’t get it before. But now I do. Love’s not limited.”

That, my friends, is **living proud out loud**.

It’s not just parades and flags (though we love those!).
It’s creating visible, tangible, joyful spaces where no one has to question if they belong.

**Back to Peter**

Peter’s speech in Acts 15 ends with a mic drop moment:

**“Everything is falling into place—just as the prophets said.”** *(v.15)*

God’s dream for the world—of justice, inclusion, and wholeness—is *already unfolding*.
Our job is not to gatekeep it. Our job is to welcome it.
To live it.
To *live proud out loud.*

Reflecting on Acts 15:5-13, I am struck by the courage and wisdom of the early church leaders. Their willingness to engage in open dialogue and make decisions that prioritized inclusion and grace is inspiring. This passage challenges us to consider how we can create more inclusive communities today. It reminds us that the essence of Christianity lies in welcoming all believers, regardless of their background, and lifting unnecessary burdens that hinder their spiritual growth.

**So, What Now?**

Here’s what I think this means for us, Squamish United can start by doing a few things:

1. **Be a Peter.** Speak up when people try to narrow the Gospel. Say: “God already said yes—why are we saying maybe?”
2. **Build benches.** Literal or metaphorical. Find ways to create visible welcome—not just “open doors,” but open hearts. Perhaps we might consider flying the pride flag every day and not just on Pride Sunday.
3. **Laugh when it’s hard.** Humour reminds us that we’re human. If Peter and Paul could argue and still share communion, so can we.
4. **Center queer joy.** Not just queer pain. Joy is holy. Trans joy is holy. Nonbinary joy is holy. Love is holy.

**Final Blessing**

Friends, **Living Proud Out Loud** means trusting that your story and everyone’s is part of God’s story.

You don’t have to shrink. You don’t have to hide. You are *already* beloved.

So let us be a church that:

* Tears up the checklists,
* Puts away the gate keys,
* Builds rainbow benches and paints prophetic paths of love.

Because **everyone belongs** in God’s family—no exceptions, no conditions, no fine print.

**May it be so. Amen. And amen.**