

MAHWAH PRIDE CELEBRATION | JUNE 11, 2023

Before anything else, I want to thank the organizers who put on this great event. It's a huge amount of work, and they do a remarkable job with it. And I thank them for the invitation to speak.

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Joseph Schattauer Paillé, and I serve as pastor of Advent Lutheran Church in Wyckoff. A few years ago, I went to a town council meeting where there was a debate about whether the town should fly a Pride flag in June. And a woman about my age got up to the microphone and said, "When I was growing up here, the only place I felt like I could really be myself, where I could be out and have people support me, was at home." That means she looked around at my town's dozen or so houses of worship, including the one I currently serve, and thought, "That's not a place I can be myself."

And I say that just to acknowledge that harm that religious leaders and institutions have caused to LGBTQ+ individuals. And so if you see people like me and think, *Those aren't my people*, I understand completely. But I'm here today, and we're here today, because you're our people.

Our church is one of a growing—but unfortunately still too small—number of churches that has committed to full inclusion, affirmation, and celebration for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. That means we don't see people's sexual orientation or gender identity as something sinful that they need to change or as something that we just begrudgingly tolerate. But that LGBTQ+ individuals are a good and beautiful part of God's creation, and their participation in our community makes us more faithful in our service.

Sometimes people from churches that don't practice full inclusion ask me if we read the Bible. And we do. Quite a lot! And I'm always happy to remind them of one of my favorite Bible passages. It comes from one of St. Paul's letters, where he writes that there is nothing in all of creation that can separate us from the love of God. So if you're wondering whether God loves you even if... whatever comes after "if," the answer is still yes. There is no thing, no person, no experience that can separate you from the love of God.

Too many people in our world want to build a stronger community by separating people. By saying that there is some group of people over there that you're not supposed to love. It could be because of their gender. Or what language they speak. Or their sexual orientation. Or how much money they have. Or what country they were born in. Or what religion they practice. But whenever you start drawing lines and separating groups of people into people you should love and people you shouldn't, God is always on the other side of that line. One of the ways we love God is by loving the neighbors God has given us. And as the theme of today's event puts it, our diversity makes us a community.

We know what actually hurts our communities. And it's not pronouns. It's poverty. It's not books in libraries. It's guns in schools. It's not that too many trans kids are playing sports. It's that too many trans kids don't have the support networks they need. We know that LGBTQ+ people are not a problem or an issue. But that your flourishing makes our communities stronger.

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Sometimes when I think about that woman at our town council meeting who said she didn't feel supported outside her home, I wonder what advice I would have given to her if she had shown up at our church one day. And I'd like to think I would have said something like this. Remember that you are created in the image of God. Remember that you are a source of joy. And most of all, remember that you are loved. Not because of what you accomplish, but simply because of who you are. There is nothing that can separate you from the love of God.

Have a great Pride, everybody.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor