

Buffalo Pride Flag Raising – Invocation

The Very Rev. Rebecca Barnes

Good afternoon. I am The Very Reverend Rebecca Barnes, Dean of St Paul's Episcopal Cathedral here in downtown Buffalo and I am a proud member of the LGBTQ+ community. Thank you Mayor Ryan for your kind invitation to say a few words today at the Buffalo Pride Flag Raising.

The past fifty-seven years have borne witness to a journey from oppression to liberation; from fear and shame to pride; a journey that is both historical and has been for so many, deeply personal. At the time of the Stonewall riots, I was a little kid growing up in our neighboring state of Pennsylvania. Were I an adult, I could have been arrested for being who I am. In truth, I could never have been who I am now. I would not have been able to stand here wearing this collar as an ordained Episcopal priest; I would not have been able to be an out lesbian, I would not have been able to be married to my wife of now, 39 years (15 legally). Knowledge of my orientation would have subjected me to public scrutiny, loss or ineligibility for employment, housing, health care, and I could go on and on.

The Stonewall rebellion is widely considered to be one of the most important events (and by many the most important event) leading to the gay liberation movement, and the modern fight for LGBTQ rights in the United States. The activists and those who fought for LGBTQ+ rights have enabled us to have so many freedoms and though progress, unimaginable in 1969, has been made, the struggle for social justice and freedom from oppression is far from over; and currently there are grave threats to the gains that have been made. We see this in the actions of extremists in Congress who tried to attach 50 anti-LGBTQ+ riders to the national budget; when politicians in Virginia, New Jersey, and Nebraska tried to rely on anti-trans attacks to win their elections last November, but fortunately voters rejected their fear mongering by overwhelming margins; and when the current administration took the Pride flag down at Stonewall, people fought back—and within weeks, they were forced to put it back up.

This Pride month, as we head into marking our country's 250 birthday, we need to continue to work for rights and protect freedom for all people so that this nation will be truly free from hate, free from discrimination, and free from the chaotic vitriolic actions of those who are trying to undermine freedom and equality at every turn.

There are many who seek to demean and ostracize those they deem as "other." Many project hostility out of fear, failure to understand, and yes sadly, sometimes sheer bigotry. In the face of that, the words of the Psalms offer insight and consolation. Psalm 139 says about God, "For it was you who formed my inward parts. You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works." In this Pride month, this is something really beautiful to contemplate, that God made each of us the way we are, and gave us to the world. You are God's gift to the world. You are, as the psalmist says, "wonderfully made."

So when you celebrate pride, appreciate how far we've come and honor the sacrifices of activists who came before, but never forget we've got so much more to do. As we celebrate this month of Pride, let us stand proud and strong, united in a community of kinship and let us continue to lead with courage to be advocates for people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. We must not be passively uninvolved. We must take courage and stand with one another and speak out against injustice and discriminatory legislation and become bold change makers.

Let us pray: God of love, you have given the human family the gift of diversity. Help us always to honor you with reverence for the many ways love is expressed in our community. Bless us all with passion, compassion and a commitment to strive for better things. May this pride month be a time of celebration and joy as we give thanks for each other. May all LGBTQ+ in our community see and know that they are of sacred worth, and immeasurable value. And may we all be moved to strive for justice respecting the dignity of all. All this we ask in your most holy name. Amen.