



Well, this sermon is inspired by improvisation in more ways than one. This was supposed to be a day in which TJ preached, but he had a family emergency so we switched. So it's been improvisation all the way to this moment. And so many other things happened this week, including my computer and printer not doing the right thing. So I have all kinds of wacky notes here. I'm going to do my best. Okay.

But we're starting here with pride, Richard Blanco and his celebratory poem, because on June 28th, 1969, 57 years ago today at 1:20 in the morning, plain clothes police officers raided the Stonewall Inn, in New York City. They aggressively emptied the bar, confiscating alcohol, arresting employees, arresting patrons who defied the "masquerade" laws. The authorities used this discriminatory law, the masquerade law, which mandated that individuals wear a certain number of gender appropriate clothing items. They used it to target and arrest transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals. And the Stonewall Inn, which was a popular Greenwich Village gay bar was also operating with no liquor license, and so they were targeted.

And so on this day, 57 years ago and some hours ago, instead of peacefully dispersing as they usually did, the large crowd of angry patrons and neighbors gathered outside while the officers began roughing up people the crowd revolted, throwing objects and forcing the police to barricade themselves inside the bar. For nearly six days, thousands of protesters came to Christopher Street and Christopher Park clashing with police forces and demanding an end to the systemic persecution that they understood. The Stonewall events were a series of spontaneous and apropos of today improvised demonstrations against the police that began on this day in 1969. And it sparked by systemic police harassment, these protests galvanized the modern LGBTQIA+ civil rights movement globally.

The site was designated as a national monument in 2016 by President Barack Obama. Broader Monument includes Stonewall Inn and Christopher Park and nearby Gay Liberation Monument. In 2025, the National Park Service decided they should update the Stonewall National Monument website and decided to remove the verbal references to transgender people, shortening LGBTQIA+ to the acronym LGB. In February of 26, the Department of the Interior removed the rainbow flag from the monument's grounds citing a policy against flying any non-agency flags, but they lost because in the courts it was decided in April of 2026 that the monument could legally mandate the permanent restoration of the Pride Flag. So besides marking the anniversary here as we had been in some sense this month and certainly we do today in this sermon, what does this have anything to do here? For one, the events led to this freedom movement.

They opened the door of the closeted and often abused communities of LGBTQIA people and it was an improvisation, an urge of we've had enough. We're not going to put up with this anymore. We are sick and tired of it and we're not going to take it any more kind of stuff and we celebrate that. And secondly, this church is for freedom. We are for dignity and we are for all people. And if we don't mark this moment, we become complicit with a great evil that is trying to control narratives and rewrite history that we see so often today in our society. And thirdly, Stonewall was great. It catalyzes dramatic shift in the gay rights movement. It accelerated the formation of even more radical activist groups like the Gay Liberation Front and Gay Activist Alliance.

The first anniversary of this uprising was commemorated on June 28th, this day in 1970. Was anybody there for that? We had members of the church at one point who had been in the Stonewall Inn that night. The Christopher Street Liberation Day March in 1970 was widely recognized as the first official gay pride parade. And because it's important to remember this, because victories, especially when you feel like you are losing all the battles, because recognition when you feel invisible, because markers are good signposts for improvising our way through life, we mark today as a beautiful day. Can I get an amen? Stonewall was an improvisation also. Backed into the corner, the bar attendees acted on instinct.

Now, I've been trying to learn about improvisation to get to this sermon. And the first thing I found was this poem by Jared Carters talking mostly about musical improvisation. I know there's so many versions of improvisation in the arts, but this poem by Jared Carter says this, I'm going to read it to you because it's beautiful. "To improvise, first let your fingers stray across the keys like travelers in snow. Each time you start, expect to lose your way. You'll find no staff to lean on, none to play among the drifts the winds has left in rows. To improvise first let your fingers stray beyond the path. Give up the need to say which way is right or what the dark stones show, they will show nothing till you lose your way, and what the stillness keeps do not betray."

"The one who listens is the one who knows. To improvise, let your fingers stray out over emptiness is where things weigh the least. Go there. Believe a current flows each time you start expect to lose your way. Risk is the pilgrimage that cannot stay. The keys grow silent in their smooth repose. To improvise, first let your fingers stray each time you start expect to lose your way."

When I told people I was going to improvise parts of this sermon, they were like, "What? You're going to lose your way. Oh my God, don't do that to us." But what I know about getting lost is that it often leads to new ideas and new horizons. William Faulkner, one of my favorite authors said, "You cannot swim for new horizons until you have courage to lose sight of the shore." Carter, in that poem says, "To lose your way is the beginning of finding your way." Right? There's probably a biblical passage about that, that I don't know it.

You cannot swim for new horizons until you have courage to lose sight of the shore. In some ways, this might make a few of you fairly nervous, those of you who need to know where you are at all times and all moments, but all of us know something about being lost, whether it was when your mother left you in the cookie aisle while you were looking at the Oreos and she wandered off and you felt lost in the supermarket. And that happened to anybody. It happened to me a lot because I liked getting lost in the supermarket, much to this dismay of my mother, but being lost is also something that happens to us in life.

In the first service, there was someone sitting right in the middle whose husband just died and I know I was speaking to her when I said, "I understand the feeling of being lost." When you lose someone or you lose something, you feel as if you are out of sight of the shore, and the temptation is to run fast back to what is comfortable, to hide from the open sea, to gain the comfort of feet on land. I understand that, but I'm also an adventurer and I love to be out in the middle of nowhere where I don't know anything about the people or where I'm going because I like the feeling of being present.

I learn a lot about myself when I'm out beyond the shore with no land in sight. I don't know if some of you are on Instagram. I'm sure some of you are, but I've been following this young woman who is rowing her boat from California to Hawaii all alone solo. She's way out in the middle of the ocean. She's been out for 30 days or something. It's not like a rowboat like you think it's a big boat. It's got a lot of communication devices and such, but just that feeling of being out in the middle of the sea without seeing the land to me probably feels a little nerve-wracking to some of you. It's that out beyond the shore. I watch these little videos she makes each day and she talks some about the dolphins that go by and the flying fish that smack her in the middle of the night while she's rowing and the beautiful sunrises and sunsets.

But what I think she's saying that's most important is that in those moments of being out in the middle of nowhere alone are the places where she's learning the most about herself. She's reflecting about who she is and what's important to her because the world isn't comfortable. She's not surrounded by all the things that keep her in comfort. So she's forced in some ways while she's rowing through the Pacific Ocean, which is vast and deep and sometimes terrifying, especially terrifying to me when she jumps out and goes for a swim and 3,000 feet below her and nothing, but she talks in these videos about what she's learning about herself and that's what I think this is about in part.

She's also improvising because when we get beyond the shore, when we get past the sight of comfort, we have to start to improvise. I learned something about improvisation as a young person in New York City when I would escape my New Jersey home and go and listen to jazz. I took the bus. I'd go over to New York City. I'd be wandering around in this fairly dangerous city back in the '70s and '80s and I'd go to the sanctuaries of jazz clubs because what was happening in those jazz clubs was improvisation. In each piece of jazz, there is a structure, but there is also the freedom to leave the music.

I remember one time I was listening to this big band who was called Gil Evans Monday Night Orchestra. You can go look that up, Gil. Gil was a pianist and a producer and he had this crazy big band that played Jimmy Hendrix songs and all kinds of things. I digress. But I remember sitting there just enjoying this and at one moment the soloist who was on a trombone or something stopped and looked at the crowd and then picked up a piece of paper and the band had replaced his music with a big question mark. And then he went on to improvise this beautiful, beautiful piece because built into jazz is this notion of improvisation. Miles Davis was the master of these things. There's a story that once he was about to record an album, which back then was not just recording on digital, it was actually like reel to real tape.

So you didn't want to use too much tape up fooling around. You had time limits, all kinds of things. Miles Davis was about to record a album with his quintet and the producer came up and he said, "What are you going to call this?" And Miles Davis in his passive-aggressive and sometimes very aggressive way said to the producer, "I'll let you know all about it when it's done." Because he didn't know what the music was. They had no music in the room and this album became relaxing with Miles Davis Quintet because he chose the freedom of the open sea over the comfort of the land.

In jazz and in spiritual life, I think there's a lesson. In jazz, it means embracing improvisation. It means active listening. It means being okay with the unknown rather than following rigid scripts and spirituality also this is true. Spirituality or your spiritual life is a dynamic conversation where you play your own notes while staying attuned to the rhythms of the universe around you and it doesn't always require resolution just like in theology. The author Donald Miller noted in his exploration of jazz and theology that God like jazz doesn't always tie up into a neat predictable conclusion. "Embracing the mystery is a part of faith," he said. "Resisting the toxic urge for absolute certainty," he said, arguing for vulnerability, arguing to let go of the exact expectations are critical to spiritual liberation, as they are in jazz in the music.

And it's this uncertainty where I like to live with us as a church because I think in part you're here because in some sense of your uncertainty. These quotes gain a little traction around this idea and I like the Marcus Aurelius quote. Aurelius was a Roman emperor in I believe the second century and he was a stoic. He said, "Maturity of mind is the capacity to endure uncertainty." You see, the stoics were people who cultivated resilience as a practice, as a spiritual and philosophical practice. They believed in the importance of acting for the benefit of community, but maybe more importantly here, they believed in the focusing on the present. Aurelius said that anxiety is in the future, lives in the future.

So being present to uncertainty, one might say is a Unitarian practice. Why? Because we left the concretized notions like God is a certain thing that is looking over us and holding our hands and saving us and all these things. That block of certainty that so many religions rest upon. One could argue that this is just a theological discussion about whether there's a reality in God or whether there is an unreality in God. The danger is I think a lot of Unitarians kind of go all the way over here and say, "There is no God. This is the atheistic position versus the theistic position." To me, both are the same argument. If you're arguing that there is a God, you know there is a God. I don't know how you know, but okay, you know. The same can be true about you don't know or you're saying there is no God.

Saying there is no God is almost the same argument as saying there is God. So to me, to live in the middle is the most reasonable position, to live with the uncertainty. One might call this a more agnostic position, although I lean a little one foot in the theo-spiritual side preferring to say it doesn't matter if there is a concretized God up there watching me. What matters is that I orient my spirit toward what that God might want, but I live with the uncertainty that that's even a real thing, rather than living with the certainty that God doesn't exist, which for me might make me very suspicious of those people over there, unloving, and also provide me with the kind of certainty that to me isn't real like this isn't real.

Living in that uncertain open position is where this church lives because it opens us up. It allows us to leave the shore and adventure into the open sea. It allows us to evolve and learn and not have to pin today's hopes on one idea when tomorrow we might have a different idea. Am I saying something true to you? Yeah. And that's why I believe in this. Sophia Faz was one of our educators and theologians. She lived in the 40s and 50s and 60s. She said, "Each of us must find our own way. The search for truth is a lifetime pilgrimage." She's articulating a Unitarian value here because it's also asking us to live in that uncertainty and in some sense to improvise and find the freedom that comes with that improvisation.

You get what I'm saying? These are spiritual lessons that I'm trying to get to in my exploration of improvisation while I improvise and embody that all for you. Now, one of the problems I had today was all of my processes were messed up because my computer, I usually print all these things out and he's like, "Great." And I typed up this quote from this book and then I couldn't get the printer to work and all those things. But one of the things I do in my spiritual practice is I get here really early before any of you have had coffee and I sit down in my office with Reverend Dr. Howard Thurman, who's my minister. He's dead and he's long gone, but his words last.

And I open this book randomly to a page and I read it and meditate on it every Sunday. I don't believe God made me do this. I don't believe that God didn't make me do this. I believe maybe some connectivity and something's happening because here's what I open to this morning. Sometimes much energy is spent in a vain attempt to protect oneself. We try to harden our fiber to render ourselves safe from exposure. We refuse to love anyone because we cannot risk being hurt. We withdraw from participation in the struggles of our fellows because we must not get caught in the communal agony of those around us. We take no stand where fateful issues are at stake because we

dare not run the risk of exposure to attack, but all this at long last is of no avail. The attack from without is missed and we escape only to find that the life we have protected has slowly and quietly sickened deep within because it was cut off from the nourishment of the great exposure.

Uncertainty is the great exposure for sure, where certainty may feel good for a while, but it cuts at the heart of our ability to grow. And so friends, whether it's Stonewall or jazz or life or living in uncertain times, we know we can live through this time, we know that we can do it. But how? Trying to control it like an angry president in an interview, or open to change like the flowing, clean water in a reflective pool. I choose the latter even when it feels like I'm out to sea.

I'm going to close, but I want to say to you a little explanation of something. When I give my benediction at the end of worship each Sunday I say, "Walk softly on your path." I don't necessarily mean without a fight, but I mean in part without the need of gripping the certainties of the path so tightly. What I mean is allowing yourself to pass through the days without the pain of certainty or the need to control. I know that's hard for some. Maybe I'm just talking to myself here, but I hope not. I hope you can take that with you today. So be it. Amen.