

*Profound Pronoun*

Reverend Cyndi Simpson

A Sermon given at the Second Unitarian Church of Omaha NE, March 18, 2018

Our monthly theme is “Welcome.” One of our Developmental Ministry goals. In your developmental ministry application, you said that , as a “caring community, we want to deepen and broaden your capacity” to welcome and engage a variety of people, including families, people with physical and neurological challenges, people of differing cultures, ethnicities and races and people of a variety of sexual orientations and gender identities.

There is so much involved in becoming even more welcoming than you already are. Certainly, a lot of it rests in how we treat those who come here, how we include them, how we are willing to be changed by them. And then there are some welcoming ways that aren’t so much about how we behave as people, but are about other kinds of choices. Things like signs, images, forms and how they appear in the building and in our social media.

Although it may seem like a small thing, what I’m speaking of today is large and important and vital in many ways.

Soon, we will be changing our congregational nametags for members. A main reason is because they are not easy to read for folks with any kind of vision troubles. My eyes are pretty good and I can’t read them from more than a foot away. We will be making the new nametags in house and they will need a different way to be stored for easy access.

And as we transition to new and larger nametags over the next few months, there is another opportunity to be more welcoming. And that is by having our personal gender pronouns on our nametags. I'm talking about words like "he," "she," "they," "per" and other forms. Also, the indirect and possessive forms: "theirs," "him," "hers," "pers," "them," "his," etc.

Referring to people in the way that they want to be referred to is so critical for us to be welcoming.

First I have to talk about the pronouns and why they matter. All of us have three very important ways to understand and identify ourselves. We have many more than that, but the three that relate to sex and gender are core and central to our identities. I'm talking about biological sex, sexual orientation and gender identity.

I don't want to take a lot of time to get into what all of these are. Just have some basic critical points to make. These three ways of understanding our identity are all completely different. The fact that you are biologically male says nothing about what your sexual orientation and gender identity are or will be. These three ways are not related automatically, but rather are **independent** ways of identifying ourselves.

- **Biological sex** is about your physical, genetic and hormonal structures that determine your biological sex: genitals, reproductive organs, the hormonal systems that affect these and also your chromosomes.

- **Sexual orientation** is about who you are attracted to sexually
- **Gender Identity** is about your own inner concept of yourself as being a woman, a man, a blend of both or neither.

There are TWO critical points to make about these three ways of understanding our identity:

- *None of these ways is simply BINARY.*

Not just “male” or “female.” There are at least 30 different and ***fairly common*** variations of genitals, reproductive organs and genetic sexual structures. Some of these combinations are apparent at birth. Some appear in adolescence. Only two of them are what we think of as typical “female” and typical “male.” Notice I don’t say “normal.” All 30 of these variations are “normal.”

Regarding sexual orientation, people are not just “gay” or “straight.” There are many ways people can be oriented regarding whom they are attracted to. Including people who are “asexual,” meaning that they do not experience much in the way of sexual attraction or desire at all.

Regarding gender identity – not just “feminine” or “masculine,” “woman” or “man.” Huge variation. Some people do not wish to be identified in one way at all. Perhaps they identify as both. And perhaps they do not want to identify as either. That is, they can be “agender” or “nongendered.” Perhaps they are fluid in their expression of gender – meaning they change how they present themselves. Non-binary. Genderqueer or Genderfluid.

The second critical point is:

- *Gender is a social construct.*

Gender identity is not biologically determined. There is no relationship between gender identity and biological sex. The way we perceive ourselves and present ourselves to the world as feminine or masculine or any combination or neither has nothing to do with our biological sex. It's not **determined** by our biological sex. Anthropologist Margaret Mead proved this long ago with her groundbreaking cross-cultural work in the 1920s and 1930s. As a society, we are still catching up!

In this sense, the sense of being a social construct, gender is the same as race. **Race** has no biological or scientific reality. But to say that race and gender are social constructs is **not** to say they are unimportant or not powerful or not meaningful. They both have huge social power and meaning. They have huge **social reality**. Gender and race are not **JUST** social constructs.

And when gender is spoken of as a social construct, it means there are powerful norms in society about gender and how we are all supposed to present and express our gender – in terms of our appearance and our behavior. These norms are breaking down, to some extent. But still very powerful. And the general norm is **still** of a binary. You are either a man or a woman. And your behavior and your appearance is supposed to match that somehow.

So, what does all of this discussion of gender identity have to do with pronouns? Well, our personal pronouns are **gendered** in

everyday use. You are either **she** or **he**, **her** or **him**, and your stuff is **hers** or **his**. That's how we've done it in English for a long time.

For people whose identity does not conform to society's categories regarding their appearance and their *perceived* biological sex, it is painful to them and disrespectful to them **not** to be referred to as how they see themselves. This is called 'misgendering.'

How we are referred to is as much of our core identity as our name. Just as you would be uncomfortable if someone called you by a name that is not yours, you would be uncomfortable being called by the wrong personal pronoun.

Because I identify as a woman and my appearance mostly conforms to society's standards of "femininity," I have never been misgendered, even as a child. If someone started referring to me as "he" and "him," that would be both strange and terrible to me.

Now, we will hear from some people themselves what their pronouns mean to them.

Video link = <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9iKHjI5xAaA>

Using correct pronouns is all about RESPECT for people's inherent worth and dignity. It's about LOVE.

For us as a community, a religious community, this is about WELCOMING.

My hope is that when gender non-conforming or genderqueer or genderfluid or nonbinary people come in our door. If they see everyone's pronouns on their nametags, they will feel welcomed without our having to say a particular word.

They will see that we recognize that there are many ways to be human. They will understand that we have some knowledge about and appreciation for and respect for the true variety of gender in humans. This is an easy thing to do, to put a sticker on your nametag.

But the mental shift required to be truly welcoming in our language may not be so easy. If you struggle with this, please come talk to me. Putting your gender pronouns on your nametag will be a **choice**. And one that I hope most of you will make.

Here are some important ideas about this choice:

- It is important for those of us who appear to be gender-conforming to identify our correct pronouns, too. If only non-binary or genderqueer people have their pronouns on their nametags, then that is singling them out.
- It is best not to use the phrase 'preferred pronouns.' This implies the pronouns people use don't really belong to them, but are just 'preferred' to some other pronouns which are their REAL ones.

- The best way to do this – which might be a big change for most people, is when you meet someone, to ask “What pronouns do you use?” And state your own. A lot easier if they are on your nametag. You are not being asked to guess or assume. You are being asked to be proactive in your asking.

All our pronouns are ***profound***. Meaning they go to the depths of our being. And they have so much significance for us. They are critical to our sense of self and identity, just like our names.

When Hunter College Professor Courtney Martin was pregnant with her first child, she chose not to ask about her baby’s biological sex before birth. And after her child was born and named “Maya Martin Elizabeth Cary,” Martin wrote:

*I don’t want her gender to be the primary influence on her identity, especially not at such a young age. I want her curiosity, her innate attractions, her growing range of abilities and language, and her relationships to feel like the defining influences on who she is becoming. I want my arms to be so wide, my language so generous, that no way of her self-expression feels off-limits, either because it fits the stereotype or defies it.*

*I know I can’t build a wall between her and the world. The world is inside our family. The world is inside our house. It’s inside me. I can only hope that her gender feels like a creative force, not a constraint — like something to play with, rather than something to be restricted by. I want that for her, and I realize ***I want that for me.****

I hope that for each of us, our gender identities can be a source of creativity, of freedom, of liberation – not restriction or constraint. That we have no walls or boxes in our self-expression. And that we can see each other and know each other and name each other as we wish to be seen and known and named. Because that is what love and respect and care and community are all about.

So may it be. Blessed be.