

## **What's in a Pronoun?**

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church  
in Fremont, California,  
on January 26, 2020, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.  
Scripture: Galatians 3:23-29 and Psalm 139:7-14  
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I'm not sure exactly when I became a feminist, but for a long time it bothered me deeply when people used male-gendered language to refer to both men and women. When I was a kid, it was still considered socially and grammatically appropriate to use male gendered language to refer to everybody, male and female. I was taught that "Peace on earth, goodwill toward men" meant goodwill towards both men and women, but as a woman, I never felt that way. I always felt excluded by male-gendered language, even if the intent was to include both genders. All my adult life, I have carefully and consciously used language that refers to everyone, not just one gender—unless I was only referring to one gender.

I was especially mindful of doing this as a teacher. Since I felt excluded by male-gendered language as a student, I wanted to make sure that my students felt included, and that they learned the ways that language can either be inclusive or exclusive.

As an English teacher, I was—as most English teachers are—a stickler for grammar. I wanted my students to learn to speak correctly. And one of the "mistakes" I found especially annoying was using the plural pronoun they to refer to a single person. For example, a speaker might say, "Everyone should bring their lunch." Not wanting to be sexist, the speaker is using the neutral-gendered they to refer to individuals that might be both male and female. The picky, grammatically-correct version would be, "Everyone should bring his or her lunch." Much better, right? Okay, maybe it's a little stuffy...

In the years since I left teaching, I've learned even more about the ways that our language privileges certain groups over others, and how making changes to the way we use our language can help people feel included instead of excluded—especially as it relates to gender.

This sermon is the third in a series of four about our Open and Affirming covenant—the commitment that we as a congregation to welcome all people into the full life and ministry of the church, regardless of their sexual orientation, sexual identity, or sexual expression. In the first sermon, Pastor Jeff delved into the history of the Open And Affirming movements in our two denominations and how being Open and Affirming is a reflection of our belief that we are called as Christians to see all people as siblings and as beloved children of God, lovingly created in God's image.

In last week's sermon, Pastor Jeff explored the "B," "T," "Q," and "+" parts of the LGBTQ+ alphabet soup and talked about his own journey to a deeper understanding of these aspects of gender and how, as an Open and Affirming church, we can create space for people of all gender expressions and identities to live more fully into wholeness and health.

Today, I want to talk about language, and how our Open and Affirming covenant is not only expressed in the acts of hospitality we offer, but also in the language we use to welcome people. And, as the title of my sermon suggests, I'm using pronouns to focus on how our language, which at times can be so precise and creative—I'm thinking about the word *pettifogger* used last week by Chief Justice John Roberts—remains inflexible when it comes to language about gender.

Although English doesn't randomly assign gender to nouns, like many other languages such as German, Spanish, and French do, our language does assume that gender is binary, and that people are either male or female. Our singular personal pronouns, *he* and *she*, are gendered, and, while the plural pronoun, *they*, is gender neutral, there is no singular gender-neutral pronoun. Our words for many jobs and professions use different words for male and female (waiter, waitress, actor, actress), and because of male bias, many gender-neutral words are often assumed to refer to men. CEO. Doctor. Senator. Reverend.

As we come to discover in recent years, human gender is **not** binary... but our language has not really caught up to this fact.

Before I go further, I want to review some terminology about gender identity and expression so we're all on the same page. Pastor Jeff talked about this a little bit last week, but here's a little glossary in case you missed it:

**Sex assigned at birth:** The sex (male or female) given to a child at birth, most often based on the child's external anatomy. This is also referred to as “assigned sex at birth.”

**Gender identity:** One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither – how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.

**Gender expression:** External appearance of one's gender identity, usually expressed through behavior, clothing, haircut or voice, and which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviors and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine.

**Gender-fluid:** A person who does not identify with a single fixed gender; of or relating to a person having or expressing a fluid or unfixed gender identity.

**Non-binary:** An adjective describing a person who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman. Non-binary people may identify as being both a man and a woman, somewhere in between, or as falling completely outside these categories. While many also identify as transgender, not all non-binary people do.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Campaign “Glossary of Terms,” <https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms> (accessed on November 19, 2019).

A person who understands their gender identity or expression as non-binary or gender-fluid may prefer to use neither of the gender-specific pronouns, *he* or *she*. Because English doesn't have a gender-neutral singular pronoun and only has a gender-neutral plural pronoun (*they*), people who do not identify as binary—as either only male or only female—do not have an English pronoun that perfectly captures their identities. Consequently, people who identify as non-binary or gender-fluid must make do with using the neutral pronoun *they*, even though it's plural, and not exactly grammatically correct. By the way, not all languages are like this. Chinese, Estonian, Finnish, and Hungarian, to name a few, have gender-neutral pronouns, both singular and plural, making it much easier for non-binary speakers.

I've always identified as a "she," as a woman—the sex I was assigned at birth based on my external anatomy. Most of the friends I have and people I meet also have binary gender expressions and identities, so I find it difficult to imagine any other way of feeling or being in relation to gender. Because of this, it's taken me a while to understand that our very binary English language isn't flexible enough to be inclusive of all gender expressions... and I really want to be inclusive and respectful in the way I use language.

I recently met someone who, if I'd had to take a guess at the person's gender based on appearance, I would have chosen male, and used the male pronouns *he*, *him*, or *his*. But I would have been wrong. My new acquaintance identifies as non-binary, and prefers the pronouns *they*, *them*, or *theirs*. Even though it feels **very** awkward for this former English teacher to use the plural pronoun *they* to refer to a single person, I use it with my new friend because it shows them that I respect them and care about their humanity.

I believe that our language, even with its gender limitations, **is** flexible enough to allow us to willingly break the rules creatively and craft new meanings for old words. Last year, Merriam Webster has added this definition to the word *they* in the dictionary: "used to refer to a single person whose gender identity is nonbinary."

In fact, Merriam Webster chose the word "they" as their word of the year for 2019, based on the huge numbers of people who came to the website to look up the word's meaning and usage (the runner up? *Impeachment*).

Some trans and non-binary folk are beginning to use the new words *ze* and *hir* or *ze* and *zir* as non-binary singular pronouns. Some are also using the title *Mx.* instead of having to choose between the binary "Mr." or "Mrs./Miss/Ms." It may take a while, but we **will** be able to incorporate new usage and new words into our language. Consider the following words, widely used in our lexicon today, which did not exist 20 or 30 years ago: *selfie*; *ringtone*; *robocall*; *blog*; *podcast*; *carjacking*; *flash mob*; *barista*; *facepalm*.

Being willing to use new language is one way we can live more fully into our Open and Affirming covenant. Instead of making assumptions about the pronouns that people prefer based on their appearance, we can reach out in love as we meet people and ask them what pronouns they use to convey their gender identity and expression.

Our texts this morning remind us that scripture affirms our practice of hospitality and welcome. Psalm 139 reminds us that God created us, knit us together in utero and knew our innermost identities before we even drew breath. We are fearfully and wonderfully made, in all our diversity. There is no place we can go that is removed from God's steadfast love and care.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul affirms that our individual differences are not a barrier to being part of the body of Christ. It's not that our individual differences and separate identities don't matter—they do—but that there is no hierarchy of identities within the community of the church. "Christ's promise is abundant and available to all people, and [...] those divisions and prejudices that have historically kept groups of people apart or given some power to some over others have no place in Christ's community."<sup>2</sup> In the body of Christ, everybody belongs, and everybody is important.

You may have noticed that our green sheet has been revised a little to ask people what their preferred pronouns are. I've added my pronouns to my nametag, and I believe that having more of us do so shows people who come for the first time that we get gender identity—or at least that we're learning and trying to get it.

At Niles Discovery Church, we are rightly proud of our Open and Affirming identity; we really do strive to welcome and include all people without regard to gender identity or expression. One way we can widen our welcome is to become more mindful of our use of language and become willing to adapt English to our changing understandings of gender. Using the pronouns that people claim—even if it seems uncomfortable or awkward—is part of this mindfulness, and it helps us to create a place where there is no longer East or West, North or South, Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female... but one joyous, true community of love. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Layton E, Williams, "10 Bible Passages That Teach a Christian Perspective on Homosexuality," *Sojourners*, June 8, 2017. <https://sojo.net/articles/10-bible-passages-teach-christian-perspective-homosexuality> (accessed January 24, 2020).