

Come out and say it

By [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#)

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It's National Coming Out Day, on which the LGBTQ community and its allies celebrate the courage of those who publicly claim their gender and sexual identities despite the risks involved.

To mark the occasion, the Spiritual Office at the University of Chicago hosted Jennifer Knapp for a series of programs. The singer-songwriter was a sensation in the Christian music industry until she went on hiatus and returned with a new album and an announcement: she's a lesbian in a committed relationship. Since then, she's been working on a project called "Inside/Out Faith" and speaking on spirituality and sexuality. It's been a wonderful gift to our campus to hear Knapp sing and watch her interact with students and share her stories. She's brave and gracious.

One personal highlight was hearing how Knapp explains her shifting understanding of faith to people from the conservative community to which she used to belong. People have asked her, "Don't you believe in the Bible?" Over time, she's come to embrace the Wesleyan quadrilateral: we understand God and the world through scripture, but also through tradition and reason and experience. Unlike the biblical hermeneutic of her past, the quadrilateral allows her to continue in her faith and her exploration of the Bible but in conversation with her experiences and in light of her need to be treated with dignity.

As a Methodist, I'm delighted anytime something Wesleyan pops up in unexpected places, and the quadrilateral is my go-to theological tool. But my delight is undermined by the fact that my denomination's official stance doesn't echo Knapp's. United Methodist clergy are prohibited from conducting or blessing same-sex marriages and civil unions, from allowing others to do so in our churches, or from being part of such a union ourselves.

There's good news, though, for LGBTQ Methodists and their allies. Clergy are increasingly willing to take the risk of publicly officiating same-sex unions. The stakes are high; clergy can lose their standing and their livelihood. But while we

used to speak of such risks with analogies to civil disobedience, the discourse has changed. The call is now to “biblical obedience.” [Reconciling Ministries](#) and others are at work reclaiming the biblical tradition as a call to wholeness and reconciliation—and the gospel as the promise of welcome and love for the marginalized.

I had lunch with a seminary student the other day, and we discussed preaching on controversial topics. In his teaching parish, it is well understood that one cannot be a Christian and advocate the exclusion of LGBTQ persons; he, however, grew up in a faithful, biblically literate congregation that did just that. How can he come out as an ally to those he loves from home?

I counseled him to consider two things. First: never preach anything you wouldn’t say to your gay friends. Even if you’re not going to come out as an ally right now, don’t actively hurt the people you love. Second: think about coming out in other ways first. Come out as someone with a less literal hermeneutic, as someone with a Christology that’s not just about atonement, as someone who believes humans are not entirely depraved and can do—and be—good.

My current ministry setting is not a UM church, and I’d run into more trouble here if I wasn’t an LGBT ally. We hosted Knapp. We’re beginning a yearlong celebration of gay composer Benjamin Britten. Coming out as an ally at the U. of C. is not a risky thing for me.

But there are other things that are risky to come out and say. This week, in a pulpit funded by modern history’s richest man, I’ll come out as a supporter of the Affordable Care Act and an angry opponent of the government shutdown hurting millions of low-income children. We’ll see how that goes over. As the Op-Ed Project [tweeted earlier this week](#): “If you say things of consequence, there may be consequences. The alternative is to be inconsequential.”

It doesn’t always feel wise or prudent to come out in support of things of consequence. It may feel like picking a fight. But I’m increasingly convinced that Jesus would rather we be foolishly brave than timidly refuse to speak the truth of the stories we’ve heard and the Gospel we’ve seen.