

Sermon Series “The Bible is Queer and Genderful”
Sermon 2: “Between and Beyond”
Text: Genesis 1-2:2

We continue today in our summer sermon series The Bible is Queer and Genderful. In our sermon today we are going to shift from talking about sexual orientation as we did last week to a focus on gender, gender identity and the Bible. Gender identity is different from sexual orientation. It’s important that we understand this and are on the same page. Sexual orientation is about who you are sexually and romantically attracted to. We all have a sexual orientation. Being gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual or any other sexuality has to do with your relationship to others. Your gender identity is how you see yourself. It is about your internal sense of being male, female, both or neither. We all have a gender identity. And we all make choices about how we express our gender identity; choices about how we cut our hair on our head, or whether we cut the hair on our legs or our armpits, what clothes we wear, what body parts we reveal and so on and so forth. We all express our gender identity. So you see how these two things are not the same, though they can intersect. You can be a transgender woman attracted to men, which would mean you are transgender and straight. Or you can be a cisgender man attracted to men and that would make you cisgender and gay. It’s important to know that people don’t necessarily feel they fit into any of these categories and

language around identity is evolving. So it's important in all of this to respect how people want themselves to be identified.

Recently I learned about a type of fish called the bluehead wrasse. It is a fascinating fish that scientists explain have three distinct sexes. The young bluehead wrasse in their early stages of life are essentially sexless, but then as they mature, about one third of the fish become female, another third become male and the last third don't fit either of these categories. This last third, after their sexless state, matures into a female fish that bears eggs and then changes gametes and becomes a male, producing sperm and in this final stage turns a brilliant blue color and grows larger than any of the unchanged males. When the smaller unchanged males are living in patches of sea grass they can hide better and so tend to fertilize more eggs. But when living in the midst of a coral reef, where all the fish are out in the open, the changed males tend to fight off the unchanged males and win over the ability to father their own children. Scientists say that this diversity in sex among the bluehead wrasse means that they can live in different environments and essentially thrive wherever they live!

How fascinating! Do you think God might rejoice in something so beautiful, so creative, so diverse, so brilliant in color as the bluehead wrasse? I bet most of us who believe in God, would say, yes, how amazing! God must just be delighted.

I know that humans are not fish. And humans certainly do not have the capability or option to change the kinds of gametes their bodies produce.

But why is it that —especially in the Western world —we’ve struggled to imagine, much less rejoice or celebrate, such a thing as a human being not fitting into the gender binary system of being either male or female? *We seem to be okay with fish not fitting into the binary system. We’re not so sure about people.* The reasons for this are many, and we will touch on some of these reasons throughout the sermon series, because it’s important that as Christians, we continue to work on our own internalized homophobia and transphobia. And so we need to dig deep to think about where those fears come from, why do we have them, and how can we bring them into our conscious minds so we can work on dismantling them. Because homophobia and transphobia come from somewhere. I do not believe they come from God.

Perhaps a good place to start, when thinking about human being that do not conform to the binary system, is to remember that there are cultures, non-western cultures primarily, where a third gender or multiple genders are recognized. For example the *Two Spirit* people in many Native American tribes, or the *fa-afafine* of Samoa in Polynesia. Or the *Hijra* of India (they’ve recognized a third gender since antiquity) or the *sekrata* of Madagascar (island off east Africa) and the *muxes* (of the Zapotec cultures of Oaxaca) in Mexico. These cultures many of them since antiquity recognize more than two genders. **And** often people in these additional gender categories are highly esteemed and considered spiritually authoritative.

It's important for us to first of all be aware that the presence of a third gender beyond just male and female has been in existence in cultures since antiquity. And this includes the time during which the Hebrew Scriptures were written. For example, there are Mesopotamian texts written in 1600BCE that reference humans created with sex organs not immediately identifiable as male or female. And the Mishnah and the Talmud (Jewish compilation of oral law written between 200 CE- 500 CE) there are people referenced who do not fit the male and female categories in Jewish culture.

But since many of us in this room have grown up culturally influenced by our white western contexts, the gender binary system is all we know or grew up knowing. By **gender binary**, I mean “a social system in which it is assumed that people come in only two genders: male and female.” (A. Hartke)

This is the only system I grew up knowing about just as I grew up thinking that heterosexuality was the only option and the norm. But the gender binary system is not the norm in all cultures. It is the norm in white, Western contexts.

We would not say that people are “transgender” or “cisgender” in the Bible because that would be anachronistic - since the way we understand identity today was foreign to the Biblical context. **But for our purposes it is important to know that in the ancient world and in the Bible** - we do have references of people, stories of people who did not conform to the gender norms of their time and people

who lived lives in gender roles that did not match their assigned sex at birth. We'll be exploring some of these texts and stories in the weeks to come.

This morning we start at the beginning, with Genesis 1. I want to take a moment to lift up the voices of transgender folk who are helping us approach Genesis 1 - which is such an important and formative text for Jews and Christians.

Austin Hartke is a transgender Christian theologian and writer. He reflects on Genesis 1 by sharing how just like all of us, he grew up within a social system where the gender binary was the norm. And at first glance it seemed to him like Genesis 1 is all about binaries. Everything is broken up into pairs and opposites. Light as separated from darkness. Waters separated from the dry land. Earth below separated from the sky above. And then not surprisingly the pattern of separation continues as God creates male and female.

As Hartke grew older however, he began to understand that biologically “the world isn't separated distinctly into land or sea. What about marshes, estuaries, and coral reefs?” (What about fish like the bluehead wrasse!). And what he came to discover is that the writer of Genesis 1 is using a poetic device. And in this poetic device, though humans are broken up into two categories, Hartke says “that verse does not discredit other sexes or genders any more than the verse about the separation of day from night rejects the existence of dawn and dusk, or the separation of land from sea rejects the existence of marshes and estuaries.” Hartke says these binaries aren't meant to speak to all of reality. Of course not. **Rather**

these verses invite us into thinking about everything between and beyond. This expansion in our understanding of the world actually opens the door to a new reverence for God's creation. Think of it this way, could it be that by enforcing a binary system - forcing people to have to fit into one of two categories, that by doing that we are actually scorning God's creation, and that we are actually putting ourselves in the position of knowing more than God, because we try to fit people into categories and into a system that God did not intend?

Genesis 1 functions like poetry. Poetry after all is what humans for so long have used as a vehicle to capture in some words what we struggle to describe. Who among us can even begin to imagine, much less describe, how God created the world? Poetry seems to be the only appropriate genre.

What I find so powerful and moving is that queer and trans folks are helping to move Christians back to a more faithful reading and interpretation of Genesis 1. Genesis 1 has been used and weaponized against queer and transgender people saying. We hear it said, "Look it says it plain and simple: God created male and female. That's it. Period. Done. Male and Female only." And what queer and trans folks are saying is that this is actually a misuse of what this sacred scripture is trying to do. The text wants to do something to us - the text wants to instill in us an awe of God and all that God has made and see how even God in God's self rejoices in the goodness of it all: every living thing, of every kind, of every color, of everything between the earth and sky, of everything beyond the stars and moon and

sun, this is Gods and God has declared it good. This text was never meant to be used as a tool to push people into a binary system. When we do that, we are inhibiting people from living into the image of God.

Furthermore if we ponder the way that God is referred to in the text, we will see that God *also* resists the binary system. Have you noticed that the image of God in this text is an image of God as a communal God, a plural God? God says, “Let us make humankind in *our* image.” Queer and trans folks are reminding us that God is beyond gender, God is omnigender, God is genderful. On Trinity Sunday some weeks ago we talked about how queer and trans folks are pointing to the Trinity in Christian tradition and helping us see how our Scriptures witness to a God who troubles the binaries in Their very nature as God. God resists our boxes. God does this throughout all of Scripture- resists the boxes that people put God in.

The very first verse in Genesis 1 says “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...” If you have a study Bible, you might see a footnote that offers an alternative translation that goes like this: “In the beginning when God began to create the heavens and the earth...”

What’s the difference between saying “when God created” and saying “when God began to create”. I think there’s a difference. The former suggests past tense: God created in the past. The latter suggests what I think is more accurate because all of Genesis 1 points to it: *That God began to create and therefore continues to create even to this very day.* It’s not just passed tense. *God is still*

creating! In the UCC we love to say the phrase “God is still speaking” - meaning God is still revealing truth to us through one another, through our interpretations of Scripture, through creation, through a multitude of witnesses, ***God is still speaking.*** Well *Genesis 1* says, ***God is still creating.***

And I love what Asher O’Callaghan - a Christian minister who is also transgender says about this. Reflecting on Psalm 139, he says that God not only knit him together in his mother’s womb but continues to knit him together as he grows into adulthood. He takes this theological truth from Genesis 1 that God is still creating. God continue to create us, to knit us together, not just in the womb, but ongoing and through transitioning.

Creation continues. It’s not stagnant. All of creation wasn’t already made by the time Genesis 1 ended. No it was only beginning and furthermore God gives us as human beings the task of playing a part, giving us choices, giving us power to make choices about our bodies and about who we are becoming, living more fully into the image of God. **Creation has to do not just with beginnings but with the process of becoming.**

I think God rejoices in the bluehead wrasse. I think God delights in fruit bearing trees - how amazing it is when a seed grows into a tree and bears fruit and then within that fruit is another seed that has potential to create even more and bear more fruit. I think God rejoices in creation. And I think God rejoices when human beings can be their whole selves and live authentically as God is creating them to

live. I think God rejoices when God sees us participating in creating life within ourselves, within community and within our world.

And so let us celebrate the mystery and magnificence of being created so colorfully and brilliantly diverse. And let us work for a world where all people can be welcomed and celebrated as image bearers of God. For the God we worship is a truly genderful God, a truly awe-some God.

Amen?

Amen!