

Sermon Series: *The Bible is Queer and Genderful*

Sermon: “Beyond Apologetics”

Texts: Psalm 30 & Mark 5: 24b-34

Today we start our sermon series *The Bible is Queer and Genderful*. Throughout this series we’ll be paying attention to how the Bible itself bears witness to diverse gender expressions and sexualities. And we’ll be listening to how queer and transgender theologians and thinkers have been interpreting and wrestling with the Bible and how they’ve found hope and liberation in their journey of faith. Our hope is that through this series, we as a church can be challenged to live more faithfully and in discipleship to Jesus Christ, *because of the witness of queer and transgender folk*.

I wanted to begin this series close to home in terms of my own experience, in regard to the Bible and interpreting texts that have been used against me and others of same-sex orientation.

I began to study intensely what the Bible says about same-sex sexuality in my twenties, before I came out, but when I had some suspicions about being same-sex oriented but I hadn’t come to terms with it yet. And I learned quickly, as probably many of you in here already know, **that the Bible doesn’t actually say very much about same sex sexuality**. In fact, the concept of having a sexual “orientation” and “identity,” didn’t exist in the biblical world. The Bible only

speaks about same-sex acts, which in most instances when those acts are mentioned in the Bible they are in the context of abuse or exploitation and domination of someone. And therefore it's not surprising that in all of the 6 passages where same-sex acts are mentioned it is negative and it is always condemned.

Because it is always condemned and these are the only passages that mention same sex behavior, the situation is ripe for Christians to take the liberty to take these passages and use them to condemn queer and trans people. In fact these passages are sometimes referred to as the "clobber passages" because of the way they are used to clobber LGBTQ+ folk.

I received a facebook message just a few weeks ago from someone I hadn't spoken to for many years, saying that "I too could be made clean if I turn from my homosexual ways." And then I Cor. 6:9 was sighted, one of the clobber passages: *"Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, drunkards, revilers, robbers —none of these will inherit the kingdom of God."* I didn't respond because this was an instance where I decided it was not worth it for me to engage. I knew this person was not interested in conversation. And I was not going to spend my emotional and spiritual energy defending myself to this person. Most people who are queer and transgender are familiar with these passages,

unfortunately *because* they have been used as weapons against them. We've had to learn to defend ourselves against the weaponizing of Scripture.

And I think defending our faith is incredibly important. The only way I've survived as a Christian and a queer person is to learn from other Christian queer folks who have taught me and been a witness to me about how to stand up in your faith and how to engage with Scripture.

I remember one of those conversations with someone I loved very much, and I knew this person loved me very much and we could have a conversation. This person wanted to know how I was convinced that my relationship with Heather was not an *abomination* to God because that's what the Bible says it is. And I defended myself to say: Look, there are many things that are displeasing to God. Most of what those things are in the Bible are related to the oppression of people. Things that are displeasing to God that get the most consistent mention are things like poverty and the way we create conditions of poverty, things like greed and wealth disparity, things like discrimination of others based on race, ethnicity and gender, domination of others. These are the things that the Bible does speak about in not so uncertain terms. I had to tell this person that I love very much: *I am not an abomination. And these six passages are not speaking of relationships of love and mutuality, but rather relationships of lust and domination and abuse.* I had to

give this person a defense of my faith based on Scripture and based on new experiences of queer folk.

It was important for me as someone who took the Bible seriously to begin to articulate a defense. So another important part of this defense that I learned from many great scholars, one of my favorite being theologian Walter Wink. Walter Wink says: “There is no biblical sex ethic. Instead the Bible exhibits a variety of sexual mores, some of which changed over the thousand year span of biblical history. “Mores” are customs accepted by a given community. Many of the sexual mores that the Bible prohibits, we now allow - for example: intercourse during menstruation, celibacy, marriage with people who are not Jewish, naming sexual organs. And we allow this. And many of the practices that the Bible allows, we now condemn: like prostitution, polygamy, marrying teenage girls at ages 11-13, treatment of women as property. We condemn these practices today. Because these were the sexual mores - customs of the time. And so we ought not to look toward the Bible for some sex ethic that it does not offer. If we did that, we would be first of all very confused and second of all, pretty messed up.

BUT, the Bible does know *a love ethic*. And the love ethic is what is constantly brought to bear on whatever sexual practices are dominant in our time. And so, Walter Wink says, “We must critique the sexual mores of any given time by the love ethic exemplified by Jesus.” And this love ethic exemplified by Jesus is

an ethic that is non-exploitative, does not dominate, and it is responsible, mutual, and caring for the wellbeing of the other. And so the love ethic actually calls all of us to a pretty high standard because everything we do must be critiqued by the commandment of love. And surely we all agree that whether among people who are LGBTQ+ or heterosexual folk we all need to critique our sexual mores by the love ethic exemplified by Jesus. And all of us have work to do in that arena.

Defending our faith is important, especially because there is still such an barrage of hate and violence against queer and trans folk using the Bible as justification. So we must claim our belonging as children of God, and as authorized interpreters of Scripture to defend the faith. You don't have to have a degree to be an interpreter of Scripture. You do need to be a part of a community of faith though -so that we can test our interpretations and live them out together, paying close attention to how our interpretations effect others and ourselves; testing out our interpretations against the love ethic.

I have titled this first sermon "Beyond Apologetics". Apologetics means simply arguments in defense or justification of something. And the reason for this title is to both express the need for apologetics - the need to defend our faith, as I've just been speaking about, *but also the need to move beyond defense. Beyond apologetics.* For those of us who are LGBTQ+ folk - we have needed to do a lot of

defending. Defending our right to sit at the table. Defending our very self and who we are and our belonging in a place. Defending the compatibility of our Christian and queer or trans identities, defending our acceptance by God, defending our interpretations of the Bible. And on and on it goes. And as trans theologian Austen Hartke says, “this is all well and good as far as it goes, but the problem comes when LGBTQ+ Christians begin to feel as if their faith is made up of only apologetics and defense mechanisms”. We should be able to move “from survival practices, to a thriving faith.” (*Transforming*, pg. 144)

And for that to happen we need spaces, we need community, where we can put defenses down, where we don't have to explain ourselves or justify our belonging someplace. We need spaces where we our faith can flourish and we can also begin to heal from all the Bible-bashing we've experienced.

I believe that the woman in the gospel story today models for us, a way forward. This woman, whose name is known to God, but not to us - has been experiencing incredible suffering. She's been hemorrhaging for twelve years. Cheated out of money by doctors. Had spent everything she had, and was therefore poor and for all these reasons was labeled “unclean” by society and her religious community. She is effectively an outcast of her religious community.

Everything this woman does in the story is way beyond the bounds of acceptability within her religious tradition: Her “unclean” status made it totally unacceptable for her to be among the crowd in the first place. She would have been removed, segregated from the crowd. Not only that but she has the audacity to push her way through the crowd, in search of her own healing. She is on a mission for healing for herself. And she is able to touch the clothes of Jesus’ despite all the people pressing in.

This woman had a bold faith. It didn’t matter what her religious tradition had taught her, or the shaming and blaming she had received from folks in her tradition, she had internal authorization from the God of liberation and love, to seek her own healing. She knew she was worthy of healing, she was worthy of dignity, she was worthy of belonging, that she was worthy to sit at the table with God and in community with others. Her faith gave her that courage to claim those things despite all the religion based clobbering she had experienced.

We too are worthy. Queer and trans folk are worthy. And we need to find that internal authorization that has been given to us by God and by Jesus Christ, to boldly reach out in search for our liberation and healing. Jesus authorizes us to be agents in our own liberation, in our interpretations of Scripture. Don’t let the church steal that from you, don’t let the church or your religious tradition steal your faith, steal your joy, steal your Jesus, steal your God.

To queer and trans folk - if you have found a church that is a place of sanctuary for you, a place where you can move beyond apologetics, beyond just having to defend yourself, then that is a beautiful thing. I hope that Tabernacle is that place for us, I believe that we are becoming that place. We haven't arrived yet, but we are working on it.

But healing and liberation for some of us might also mean that must leave the church or the religious space that has wounded you too much, maybe even caused you trauma in such a way that it cannot be a place where you return. And if that is the case, remember you are worthy enough to leave that place, because you are worthy of healing, you are worthy of flourishing in your faith and in your life. Find community where you can find nurture and where you can nurture others in their faith, instead of having to always defend yourself.

Allow me one final word: If we watch carefully, Jesus tends to focus on people who are marginal. He centers his attention on those whom society would tend to ignore. He centers the experience of the marginalized, he centers their story, he centers their need for liberation and healing. And all else can wait as far as Jesus is concerned. Furthermore, Jesus is not afraid to engage in apologetics on behalf of people who are marginalized, because he knows how much religion-based bashing they've experienced. He knew the Scriptures could be used easily to beat people down. And so when Jesus engages in apologetics, he does that by

reminding everyone who has ears to hear - that the true God we serve is a God of liberation and love who sides with the marginalized and is always seeking to offer abundant life and healing to people who have been beaten down by bad religion.

And so we must allow Jesus' apologetics to be our guide (do we center the experience of the marginalized, do we center their story and their need for liberation?) and then we can also ask ourselves: Can we claim the bold faith of the woman in the story who despite all that was thrown against her and people like, persisted in her claim to liberation and healing? May we have faith like hers. Amen