

Queering the Church

Philippians 3:14-4:1

Luke 13:31-35

Rev. Dr. Chris S. Davies

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Anxiety makes folks do all sorts of things. It contorts their version of what they once knew; it invites bad behavior, group mentality, a leaning into the binary of good vs. bad, us vs. them, right vs. wrong. Anxiety can lump the belly into knots, telling the body that something terrible is wrong, stopping up the normal functions of flesh—or releasing them at undue moments. As the tension and energy gathers towards the anticipated end, or change, or date set aside, it is often noticeable the people can be more and more irrational. We act up and out. We get angry at those we love. We turn to automatic responses: fight, flight, flee, freeze, fixate. And often, our actions and actions have little impact on that which is causing us pain.

Anxiety builds around Jerusalem. It ramps up among the followers of Jesus, as he again and again predicts the walk into the city that will kill him out of anxiety. Those who witness the gathering of power around him, detracting from the message of the empire they would have at front and center (ROME FIRST, they might cry out) start to notice and worry.

They notice the challenge of his message of love and witness to oppression of the least of these and healthcare for all in direct opposition to the government's push to keep the people in power, in power: amass money through the guise of their religion; and maintain a social order that benefits the rich at the expense of the poor...they notice, they worry, they plan. They ready their weapons of torture and execution devices.

And alongside Jesus, his own followers start to feel anxious and like the work they are doing isn't mattering much, and his convoluted parables and stories are more and more obtuse. He's talking about things like the kingdom of God and the call of the Lord beyond this day, and the fall of the Roman Empire. The end of times as they knew it. They are heartbroken, anxious, and don't know what's next. They are exhausted.

I had, and fought, the impulse, a few weeks back, to post on Facebook, "how many times has the church broken your heart?" After a few heavy hitters came my way in a few short hours, I noticed most feedback revolved around the welcome of queer people in the church, leadership in the church, and in the queering of how we do church together moving forward.

I understand why I likely could have posted it, and maybe still will, but you know what? I was anxious of the fall out, vaugebooking, or assumptions that would take place if I did. I don't want to accidentally set up any of my queerpeers for failure. I didn't want to step into a conversation I couldn't journey all the way through, just yet. The church broke my heart and then made sure that I knew it, and couldn't do much about it at the time. Again.

I don't understand why my presence, and the presence of my queerfamily, causes such anxiety. I realize it to be true, and most of the time, I can do church together with whomever is in the room — in the midst of a system that is designed to be led by a certain age group, a certain racial identity, a certain gender, a certain way of leading, a certain language of decision making that is exclusive, rather than inclusive. I've spent a lot of time learning and leaning into this system, in order to keep finding places to widen it, shape it, encourage it, just a little bit further. To widen us, shape us, encourage us, just a little bit further.

But I'm tired. After the United Methodist Church broke open the hearts of my community and argued against their self-worth and dignity, I just sat there thinking — how are we, as Christians, still having this conversation? How is it that I can hold the reality of the people I know who are coming into ministry with brilliance and gifts and talents, and I know that the likelihood of them finding a call in the current system, let alone a church to belong with, is a challenge, because of who they are, how they love?

How is it that we can hold the real, valid, tension —that the church, bless us —we are doing the best we can with the tools we have, the leaders who are here, and the call and mission we let shimmer through our best intentions, is still catching up to a societal conversation that has surpassed us and ran laps around us?

How many times am I going to let the church break my heart? How many times does a church where the conversation revolves around "but we already welcome everyone" and "we had that conversation now, and we don't need to pick it up again," dictate the ability to which I am invited to be welcome...which is often directly correlated alongside my ability to conform to what they think welcome means for me? How many times do I have to reach in the wells of my faith to make excuses for a church that has reminded me over and over and over again that I should be grateful just for letting me be here? And as people who need grace and welcome go, for the most part, I'm pretty benign.

The irony is, when I turn and face outside the church and be aligned within my community, I am met with anxiety, suspicion, and trepidation, because I am a Christian pastor. And I don't blame them. The wounds and continuous religious trauma LGBTQ folk are subjected to every single day present a clear narrative of what Christianity is. Christianity in the world at large means something different than what many of us were taught in following Christ.

Here's how I know. See, when I was in high school, my school didn't have a support group for LGBTQ youth. And because the people at Silver Lake taught me that I was beloved as a young queer woman, and worthy, I thought others should have that blessed assurance, as well. So I started a GSA [Gay Straight Alliance.] At the same time, I was still in the Bible Club— because I love Jesus and wanted to learn more.

One meeting I was hearing about the struggle to live that my LGBTQ family was experiencing—homelessness, partnership without the privilege of marriage, access to healthcare... and the next meeting I was hearing about how God Loves Everyone, but love-the-sinner-hate-the-sin. One meeting I embraced the umbrella identity of the non-normative in "queer" because it felt

more akin to my own journey and self-understanding, and the next day the word was hollered at me in hatred as I walked home from school. (By the way, beloveds, yes—we can say that word now. It's got a complicated history, but when used as a verb, adverb, adjective, it's available to anyone. As a noun, it still functions as *inspeak*. Part of community reclamation of power, especially in the younger generations, is reclaiming the word.)

One meeting I was organizing the Day of Silence—we are silent for those who cannot speak for fear of death... and the next watching they, who called themselves my friends, organizing the Day of Truth... because someone needs to say the Biblical truth, (as they understood it.)

I'm disgusted, and even at times ashamed to be "Christian" when the Christian conversations in the public and political realm align with candidate for a socio-political system deeply aligned to one which Jesus poured a lifetime and a death into fighting against, one that preaches messages of killing people in the queer community and killing people who are different in how they look, pray, love, or where they were born. Many people who have been humiliated over and over again by the church, taught to live in shame, and told that our salvation was only in our living in a non-authentic way.

Our work, as Christians in the world, **MUST** be to present a different narrative. The work of proclaiming explicit welcome, regardless of whether or not the people who we are welcoming will show up, **WILL SAVE LIVES**. Reminding ourselves, and the people we love and neighbor beside, that Jesus is one who always, **ALWAYS** sided with those on the margins and those oppressed **WILL SAVE LIVES**. Loving people, even when you don't understand them, and when they will break your heart again and again and again, **WILL SAVE LIVES**. Oh, beloveds, and of course there is a cost to this. It makes us anxious.

When shepherding in the kingdom of God, there is, and will be, anxiety. Especially when we speak a theological truth that is outside of the norm. Especially when we welcome the people that others have intentionally pushed away. Especially when we call for a different understanding of who God is for us, and who God is for the world.

There is a cost to loving people who don't love you back...like being a queer femme pastor in a world where I can't assume that a Christian person won't deny my very being. Or like being the only church or pastor speaking for the access to bathrooms and healthcare for the transgender community at community meetings. Or like being the denomination willing to own white privilege and move with intention towards a fully realized multi-racial multi-cultural church, even against the normative understandings. There is suffering. But more than that, the measurement isn't in the suffering, the anxiety, but the hope and possibilities that are created. It's in transforming the shame and humiliation that people were made to experience into the body of God's Glory.

The message I preach to queer community is about the beauty and worth and dignity of their being. Divine siblings, you were created as you are. You were given the tools of love and communication, held in your bodies and recognized in your relationships, however creative they may be! Your gift of sexuality has given you a unique lens of transformation in the world, you

wonderqueers. A lifetime of living in the tension between the normative and the authentic has made you uniquely positioned to lead and be, paving possibility for those who do not yet know themselves.

It's clear to me that I couldn't have been a safe and healthy kid growing up and coming out in a church, if not for the people that have created this reality for me. Those who came before in their declaration of love, and those communities who made it possible for me to imagine a place for me, if I wanted it.

If not for those who boldly declared themselves open to ALL people, regardless of sexuality or gender identity. If not for those who pushed on the language we use so that I saw the possibility of ministry for ME, and not just for others out there who were straight men. If not for those who saw leadership in me, even as much as I pushed on the institution to be the kind of church that I know Christ is calling us to be. Blessed are they who come in the name of the lord, even and especially speaking against the empire, the normative.

How many times will I let the church break my heart? Again and again and again and again. It's my job to love people who don't always love me back. And it is our job as Christians to do the same, facing outwards. They may not even ever step foot in our sanctuaries or give money to our mission or acknowledge that something has even happened. But I tell you this: living your values aloud WILL save lives.

Sisters and Brothers and Siblings in Christ, now is the time for us to be explicit about our welcome and proclaim something different into the abyss of religious trauma that is actively forcing violence on my community. To begin to live into the call of the Gospel. We, who can sit comfortably in our progressive theology, are desperately needed to call attention to the violence of a theological understanding that puts lives at risk, especially queer lives and black and brown lives and immigrant and refugee lives, and disabled lives, and lives of people living with chronic illness and pain, and lives for folks who pray differently than we do. Explicitly.

Because, when under the rouse of Christianity, we can take away access to life-saving healthcare, because of the way in which our bodies were fearfully and wonderfully made, we have work to do. Did Jesus not heal pre-existing conditions?

When under the rouse of Christianity we target certain people to get them off the street and into prisons to get our streets "safe" ...while ignoring the same kind of misdemeanors in other "safer" neighborhoods, we have work to do. Didn't Christ pick the petty offenders and sex workers and tax collectors and people on the margins as his closest?

When under the rouse of Christianity and widely disproved Biblical understandings, there are those that deny the hard-fought rights of LGBT citizens to survive, teach, have families of their own, thrive, we have work to do. Was not the first non-Jewish convert to Christianity a gender outlaw?

When under the rouse of Christianity we contort gender into two neat little categories to ease a society discomfort with difference, and do so at the expense of those who are somewhere in the middle and gender nonconforming, and just need to pee, we have work to do. Did you know God created more folks who aren't clearly biologically male or female than there are redheads in the world?

The following of Christ needs to be above the comfort of church. Because as we see the way church changes all around us— and the traditional ways that we have always done it no longer serve the way we designed them to, decades ago, it is up to us, as individuals and leaders, to lean into the purpose of Christ in the 21st century.

At First Church of West Hartford, UCC, it's time to imagine this important work from your legacy. You are needed. You have had an Open and Affirming Covenant, and there are lives at stake in the midst of how you choose to update it and live into it. Now, even more than before, your voice of what it is to be a follower of Christ in this world is needed. To lean into the call of the Gospel in 2019 is to listen and learn with innovative, creative pastors like incredible team you have here. It's time to push through the discomfort of learning to think a new way, or engaging the white privilege in this place, or changing a bathroom sign so that it's clear that this is a welcoming place for all people. It is through the discomfort that there is an opportunity for God to break in.

It is our job, as followers of the Way, to shepherd in a Just World for All. Where this not a way, we do the hard work of creating the conditions of possibility so that for our grandchildren; the path, while rocky, is still clearer than if not for our work. So that the pastures of hope and justice are populated not by the words of violence, but by the abundance of our welcome, the earnestness of our commitment, and the grace of our persistence for justice.

You are the United Church of Christ. It is in moments like these and places like this where I know in my bones that the church is still a path by which the work of God is accomplished, and that the church can be a mechanism of great hope for the people who need it most.

How many times will I let the church break my heart? Again and again and again and again. Breathe through the anxiety and move forward anyway. It's my job to love people who don't always love me back. Encourage us into our best selves and create space for all. And, it is our job as Christians to do the same, facing outwards. They may not even ever step foot in our sanctuaries or give money to our mission or acknowledge that something has even happened when we proclaim the love of God.

But I tell you this: living your values aloud WILL save lives. Offer the language of transformation from shame and humiliation into the Glory of God, by affirming the beauty of all of us, created in God's own image, sheltered in her love.

And, it is because of the love of God, who knows the intricacies of what it is to be a human in the world, we are able to love more fully, even in the midst of anxiety and pain. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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