

I Kissed Waiting Goodbye Pt. 4

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[0 : 0 0] My name is Becky. I am somebody who's been around the table for a long time, and I'm excited to be talking with you all tonight. We are midway through our series called I Kissed Waiting Goodbye, where we're really taking on sex and relationships and the erotic and also the damage that church has often done in those spaces when we've been talking about them. I just have to start off today by giving massive props to Antonio's prayer. I feel like he preached my sermon, and I'm done, so y'all have a couple more. Yeah, everybody's excited about that, and I really want to put a plug in for going back and revisiting other parts of this series, because we've been kind of building on a theme, talking and touching on certain things, and if you missed things, it's not sequential, but it's really helpful to get in and understand some of the things that we've been addressing and bringing up. Today, I've been titled my sermon

Singleness, Marriage, and a Lack of Imagination, because I get to come to you guys and talk about marriage and singleness, and I actually find this deeply ironic, deliciously ironic. I'm a single woman of a certain age who's never been in a serious relationship, and I have spent many years of my life in church being taught by married, cis-het white men who got married when they were in their 20s about how to be a good single woman, and I've been over that for a long time, and I find it very fun that I now get to talk about marriage, so this is going to be fun, but I digress. The other thing that I found really difficult in this moment was to figure out exactly what to encompass in this space, because there are so many things that we could talk about. We could really focus on how purity culture has messed us up, both in how we do marriage and live marriage and are sexual in marriage, and also how we are single and are sexual beings as single people. That's not what I'm going to talk about today, so I'm going to give you some recommendations. There are a couple great books that are going to come up on the screen really soon by Tina Shermer Sellers and Sheila Gregoire. If you want to go deeper into this, here are some good places to start. I'll also put a plug in for the book *Come As You Are*, which has some really good conversations about revs and breaks. It helps you understand your body, so anyway, I'm not going to talk about that today, but there are some resources for you. I also could talk about a number of different things. We could talk about the conflagration of white supremacy and colonialism with purity culture and how that reflects into marriage. It's also another conversation. Maybe not the conversation that I should be having with people, but I think it's really important to be having. We could also be having a conversation about what biblical marriage actually is. I mean, have you seriously read the Bible anytime soon? Because we have this theology about biblical marriage that's based on a book that says a lot of figures of faith were polygamists. There was a lot of conversation around marriage for land contracts and inheritance.

There was a number of people who got married to somebody and then got the use of the handmaiden, too, and that was really fun. Or we could be like King Solomon, who had 700 wives and 300 concubines. Is that biblical marriage? Or, you know, listen to the New Testament. We could talk about Paul's, look, if you burn with lust, then you should just get married and get it over with. Or we could talk about theologies around headship or metaphors for Christ and the church. I feel like if I would start to talk about all of these things, unpack them and get into them, we would be here for a week-long seminar. And none of you all signed up for that today. So I'm not going to talk about that either. So lucky you all. I'm going to instead talk about more of a framework, about how we perceive God and how that influences how we see marriage and singleness. I'm going to look and examine this sort of binary tradition and framework that we've been handed and how it damages ourselves and damages our lives together and think about how we can do a different kind of common life when we center our community around the liberation of Christ, the liberating body of Christ. So to get us started, I'm going to talk about my romance novel, *Consumption*. In 2019, as

you can see on a graph that's going to show up in a that year were ones in the romance genre. About 33 out of 139 books that I read. Now romance is a specific genre. I'm not talking about like a novel that has a happy romance story in it. I'm talking about the specific genre of romance where you know the predictableness of it. Like there's relationships, there's like weird things that are happening, there's attraction, and about act three there is conflict and you think, oh no, are they going to break up? Ah, they get back together happy days and end.

And it was about 23% of my reading pre-pandemic. But as you can see, in 2020, that started rising. [5 : 32] 41 novels out of 130, or about 32%, ended up being romance novels. And by 2021, a full 52% of my books were romance novels. And even this year, it still remains my number one category. I'm on track, having read 29 so far, and it is just the beginning of July.

Now I'm going to be honest, many of these books that I read, I roll my eyes out at. It like takes such a lot for me to give a thumbs up to a romance novel, despite the fact that I read so many.

My critiques can be anything from, oh my goodness, I was so out of character, to, that is a conflated situation that wouldn't really happen in real life. Or, honestly, the way I respond to most Colleen Hoover novels, no shade to you if you love them. But I'm like, step away from the hot person and get thee to a therapist. I often have a like, nobody is that horny. Or maybe that is deeply, deeply problematic in relationship actions. But often, I find myself really critiquing romance novels because of the lack of representation. I don't often see myself in a romance novel.

And there's been a lot of strides on that over the last number of years, especially the last five to 10 years. There's been a rise of same-sex and genderqueer romances that's become much more mainstream.

And people with physical disabilities and neurodivergence and anything from chronic pain to degenerative diseases and a variety of body sizes are finding their way into being protagonists in romance novels. And all these underrepresented people who were often seen as not worthy of love and lust and affection and commitment are now getting to be the main characters in their romance story.

[7 : 34] I've even occasionally seen a ginger. So, woohoo for me. One of the things that I love about it is that some of the conflicts that come in those romances are less conflated and more about real situations, like navigating body image or navigating how to care for oneself and be independent, but also share in whatever the load is that you've got with somebody who cares about you.

And recently I've been reading a number of books by an author named Chloe Lise, who also herself is a nerd-overgent and she works really hard to put representation in her novels. And I read this quote that, like, I have not felt so seen by a romance novel until I read this.

And it was this. The protagonist said, I guess when I'm misunderstood or lonely, I remember that. At least I am true to who I am and I know who that is.

That, to me, is being free. That I am non-negotiable. I am myself. Sometimes I just wish that identity had a place among others.

I feel that in all kinds of ways. But in a real way, I feel that in church. Now, I'm going to frame that in my world so you kind of understand it a little bit better and don't get too worried about me. But while I did not grow up with, like, hardcore purity culture, like, you don't kiss anybody until you marry them, some of that, I did grow up in church movements that centered the idea that sex was for marriage, for your one.

[9 : 30] And I was deeply entrenched in this belief that God would bring around my perfect spouse if I just focused on my relationship with God. I was immersed in a church that was predominantly families.

And in terms of singles in our church, single women outstripped the men four to one. And that's not an unusual situation. I recognize the binary in that. Not all those single women or single men were really looking for someone of the opposite gender, but there we go.

I know this is not an unusual situation in most Western churches. They have a similar ratio, single men to single women. And it got to the point in the church circles that I were in, I was in. I didn't fit. I mean, what do you do with a loud and quirky and effervescent and intelligent and fat and talented, outspoken, creative woman who keeps aging and doesn't get married? You try and set her up with just whomever. You wonder secretly if she's gay, and then you put her in charge of the youth group and the worship team. I mean, that's at least what happened to me.

But the fact that I didn't fit in was deeply ironic. Because in many ways, I was the poster child for the very message that we were talking about, for the sexual purity and the marriage narrative that we preached. I lived. Sure, I, you know, I ruled at the Joshua Harris's and the Elizabeth Elliot extremes. But I wasn't dating outside of the faith. I wasn't stepping outside of the lines.

And I was celibate. And no one knew what to do with me. Because I wasn't married. And I had real repercussions in our church circles. Because I couldn't be an elder there without a spouse.

[11:21] And enough people were a little worried about what I'm ready to do with their husband as a single one. Right? And where did I fit in among family and children? I was actually in this meeting once, where we were talking about our growing young adult group that was there. We're trying to figure out what to do. And someone in the group says, you know, in the church that I grew up in, people just stayed in the youth group until they got married. I was 32 at the time. And I didn't have enough side eye for that comment. But what happens when your very definition of holiness has outliers?

Like the people who have done the right things, but don't get the promise and therefore don't fit the narrative. As one of our patron saints of deconstruction, Rob Bell once said, if the gospel isn't good news for everybody, it isn't good news for anybody. So you get the stage for where I'm like, hey, I wish who I was fit. But let me tell you, when I moved to DC, it wasn't a better. And it was different. Because I moved to DC about a decade ago and found myself in a progressive space. And I could really breathe easier in those communities and in this community. But yet again, I was faced with more liberal sexual ethics among my fellow believers. But I still didn't have a place that I fit well. Being the literal 40 year old virgin in the room, in an environment where sexual boundaries were less about purity and more about mutuality and consent and love and choice was also jarring. And what I owe the queer community here with the utmost gratitude is that you all gave me the tools to begin to confront what I and I suppose many of us had assumed were the holy and godly ideals of seeing ourselves within the binary of singleness and marriage.

And that's the first thing that I was trying to do. And I was able to acknowledge this grace. This grace helps us see that folks that fall outside of this binary, myself included, not as outliers, but as full, legitimate, intended participants in a community surrounded, centered around Jesus. The fully embodied, fully divine person and being.

Jesus. So the problem with purity culture and indeed sort of Western church culture is that it defines and deifies marriage. It makes marriage as this system of holiness. It has become the ideal, the end goal, the unspoken proof of redemption and worthiness, this illustration of godliness. And we've centered our community, the boundaries around it. And singleness, unless, and again, I roll at the way we phrase this, unless it is a true calling, like see monks, nuns, etc. Singleness is meant to be a way station before marriage, a place to wait, be celibate, wait on God until you achieve that next level. And this can be remarkably confining and lonely.

And this system can be remarkably confining and lonely, not just for the single folks, but for those inside that confine and definition of marriage.

[15:18] So I spent the last few weeks listening to Brandy Miller's fantastic podcast, Reclaiming Our Theology. See on the screen here. Highly recommend you all check it out. Brandy has been spending her last season on purity culture and in the process, centering the experiences of women and people of color and queer folks as they go deep into the roots and expressions of purity culture in the church. Excuse me, I have hiccups now.

It's been so worthwhile for me. I rarely listen to things more than once in several of these episodes I've taken in multiple times. I hope you all got to check it out. I finished all the purity culture episodes so I decided to go back and revisit her ones on patriarchy, which is fun. And the first one was with a guest theologian and author and professor, Willie James Jennings.

And I listened to this episode and it was humbling to say the least, because Jennings essentially took all the things that I was going to be talking about in this sermon and summed it up really nicely and much more succinctly and with much more wisdom and nuance than I'm going to do today.

And I wish I could just make you all listen because that would be sermon sorted and I could just sit down, but that's not. But he talked about how centering faith around the holiness of marriage and family shows a lack of an imagination and a fantasy view of who God is.

And this is what he says. Our fantasy is that God is an all-powerful male that organizes and orders every minute thing in existence and has established that divine order from him as that man all the way down through the ant.

[17 : 13] And that order centers around men. For so many people, that fantasy of God hasn't met Jesus. Or when they meet Jesus, they try to map Jesus onto that very, onto Jesus, that very fantasy.

It's talked about how we are invested in this fantasy of an all-powerful male being structures the universe in his image, including turning Jesus into a very manly man, defending this divine order. This in turn for us lends itself to a belief that holiness and purpose come from leaning into those gender roles of who men are meant to be and who women are meant to be, especially within the bonds of marriage.

Jennings goes on to make the case that in the person of Jesus, folks were confronted with a bigger picture of who God really is.

And to see that the spirit was leading in a different way, away from that fantasy and towards a freedom and the tearing down of power structures and systems of oppression.

[18 : 29] That Jesus inaugurated this great overturning of what existed and is building a new kind of community. One where the fundamental belief of holiness does not reside in gender roles, systems of marriage and family, and the constricting binaries that are in.

So let's take a minute to visit a scripture and see that in action. I'm going to tell us the story of John 4, which is Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

And we're going to see how Jesus reacts in real time to see if Jesus is reinforcing the systems of belief and hierarchy and the expectation of conformity or if he's tearing things down and moving towards liberation.

So Jesus and his disciples were going from where a place they were, where the Pharisees were really getting mad with Jesus to go back to Galilee. And to get there, they went through this area called Samaria.

And Samaria is right next to Israel. And the reason that there are some issues there is because a long time ago, they had a big theological dispute about location and geography and the promises of God.

[19 : 52] And they separated out. And pretty much the Jews think Samaritans are like the hot mess, not OK. We are not going to talk to them, step cousins of the faith.

That's my characterization. You can see it for yourself. So they're coming through and it's the middle of the day and they come to this well in this town in Samaria.

Jesus sits down and the disciples go into the village to try and get some food. And then comes this Samaritan woman to get water from the well.

And Jesus asks her for water. And I want to point out first, middle of the day water gathering, not a normal thing. Most people would be there at the beginning and possibly the end of the day, middle of the day, not normal.

So she comes in and Jesus says, hey, could you get me something to drink? And immediately she sets up a boundary between her.

[20 : 56] So you are a Jew. I am a Samaritan. Y'all don't talk to me like this is not how we're supposed to be. You see me as less than. Jesus says, if you know who you are speaking it to, you would ask me to give you living water so you would never thirst again.

She kind of gets in a little bit of a theological conversation and things with him. And finally she says, look, if you can give me this water, please give it to me. So I never have to come back to this well again.

Jesus says to her, okay, go get your husband and come back and I'll give this to you. And she says, I don't have a husband. This is a really interesting pivot point.

If Jesus was reinforcing gender norms, reinforcing the marital and family laws of the day, reinforcing this binary, how would we expect him to respond?

We'd expect him to call her out, to shame her, to tell her to get herself right and to then come back. That's not what Jesus says.

[22 : 13] Jesus says, you're right. You've had five husbands and the current person you're living with is not your husband. You spoke the truth.

She's amazed. And why is this amazing? To me, I hear in this what Jesus is acknowledging. Because in that society, women don't really generally get the option to divorce.

They don't get the option. But a man can send a woman a son. So he says, you've been married five times. It's leaning really into five times.

You've been either abandoned or widowed. And now, the current person you're with does not see enough worse in you to actually marry you.

And you, who has no standing economically in the society and cannot support herself, has to be in this relationship in order to survive. And he doesn't then say, all right, lady, now go fix it.

[23 : 21] Bring the guy here and I will tell him to marry you. None of that. He says, you told me the truth. No shame. No blame. No expectation of conformity.

She said, you must be a prophet. He tells her what he has said in the scripture to no other person so far. I'm the Messiah.

She goes back to the community. Everybody that she's been avoiding, she goes and talks to and pulls him.

You've got to come see this man. He told me everything about myself. I think he's the Messiah. Jesus was confronting in this moment the standards of holiness and power that had been used against this woman in so many ways.

Shaming and treating her as less. And instead, he treats her as a person worthy of fully participating in the community that he and God were creating. Not after she cleans up her act.

[24 : 26] Not after she gets married. Not after she repents. As she is. Without condemnation. Without shame and conformity.

He's leading her into liberation and belonging. But unfortunately, even though we have so many examples of things like this, where the very model of God in the flesh is demonstrating the breaking down of these beliefs.

And the building of a new community that is challenging systems of power. After the first few hundred years, even the early church, and even during the first few hundred years, the early church found it difficult to live this challenge out.

And today we find ourselves more bound to this binary ideal and gendered fantasy of God than the possibility of the new.

Because of the power and the appearance of safety that it holds. We come by this honestly, as church for millennia has actually been the system of power and control.

[25 : 38] And one might argue like ever since it became synonymous with empire, the Roman Empire, the very empire that early church once confronted and was persecuted against.

We have been one of the first few hundred years.

And to imagine redemption and salvation within these same rigid structures. Jennings says, What does the saved life like?

It's tied to a certain vision of masculinity and gender and sexuality. And anything other than that doesn't feel like salvation or redemption. Our imagination fails.

So it makes sense to a lot of people to think of the very foundation of society as something called the family. And so that idea, propagated by us Christians, has done more to damage the vision of who God is than almost anything else we have experienced in recent decades.

[27 : 02] There are so many Christians that don't know to think life together. Apart from the utter glorification of something called the family and making that the very center of what redeemed life looks like.

Heterosexual relationship with 2.5 kids, dogs, lawn, a nice house. That this is the beginning of the saved life. Who we think God is.

Our fantasy or our ideal of God turns marriage and family into the map of redemption and holiness. And this is not healthy for any of us.

Married or not. But let's be real. This damage, the damage that this can cause hasn't stopped us from buying into this fantasy or inflicting it on others around us.

Foundational mythology puts us into really rigid frameworks. You can be one or the other, married or single. And it defines the roles we're meant to fulfill in community.

[28 : 11] It defines maturity levels. It defines purpose. Our roles of who and how men are meant to be. And who and how women are meant to be.

And the function of marriage. And the function of marriage as a reflection of Christ and the church. It affects purpose. You were either married or on the road to being married.

And there's an entire church industrial complex. Built up around how to be a good wife. Good husband. Find a godly spouse.

God knows I've spent a lot of money on that. Being godly parents. And yet this vision is so incomplete. About 17 or 18 years ago, I was at a church in the UK with my brother. It turned out it was Mothering Sunday, which is their equivalent of Mother's Day. And had I known that, would not have been there. But that's a whole other sermon. And in that, the unsurprisingly white, married, cis het man was teaching all of us on womanhood and motherhood.

[29 : 26] And he said this. He said that the number one calling on a woman's wife was to pastor her own children. Now, you can imagine me silently seething in my seat.

And looking back, like, this has been one of those things in my life that I deeply regret. I deeply regret not standing up and walking out.

I deeply regret not standing up and saying no and walking out. And this is because what he essentially was saying was, if I cannot have children, I cannot be my full self in God.

That if no one finds me attractive and wants to marry me, I cannot be my full self in God. And if for some reason I would choose not to have a family or choose not to get married or choose a different expression of that, I could not be my full self in God.

Telling me that what I produce, not who I am, not my character, define my fullness. And pardon me, but that is utter horseshit.

[30 : 44] But I didn't get up. And I didn't say anything. Because I was knee-deep in the rigid framework of beliefs. Around marriage.

Roles. Who I was meant to be. Many of us, whether partnered or single or queer or cis het, have been bludgeoned by this rigid belief structure.

And cherry-picked and often very poorly translated or interpreted scriptures, such as our favorite Ephesians 5 that talks about headship and submission. And the Bible has been used to beat any square or triangle or oval or star-shaped pegs into that perfectly round hole of our defining, defined. Anyone who is outside this, single, queer, gender non-conforming, we don't, we somehow seem to be outside of God's plan for us.

Is that divine order? Is that God's plan? I don't think so. Let me say that again. No, it is not.

[31 : 59] But at its core, it shows a fundamental lack of imagination and understanding. Not only is it a failure to see a God beyond and encompassing all gender expression, it is a failure to see how a creative and present God's interaction with humanity consistently leads away from shame and conformity into grace and freedom and liberation.

Just like we saw in the story with the Samaritan woman.

And this freedom and grace and liberation needs to get rooted in our community together. Instead of envisioning a community centered around, instead we want to be envisioning a community that's together centered around the body and person of Jesus.

But often modern church is structured around families and how to support families, often to the sometimes intentional and sometimes inadvertent exclusion of me and people like me.

The single, the childless, the queer, the divorced, the partnered, the ace, the widowed, the transgender or gender nonconforming, the kaleidoscope of beauty that exists outside of the binary of, for this reason, a man will leave his parents and cleave to his wife.

[33 : 45] One of the things that has been uniquely lovely about growing and becoming in this community of faith is that I've seen us learn to make room for many of these things that have been excluded.

Sometimes we've learned the hard way and are still learning how to make this a deep reality. But for me, it has been so freeing to be a part of a church that has allowed me to be my full self.

Allowed me to speak and lead as I'm becoming as a single woman that doesn't sometimes fit in the traditional church binaries. I think one of our growth edges is to lean into how we retain that space, still holding it sacred, and make space for those who are families among us.

In some ways, I can acknowledge that this is challenging since stepping into this space and who it has allowed me to become is a precious thing that I don't want to lose.

Especially if losing it possibly looks like I'd lose it to the institution that had power over me for so long. I am working to stay rooted in the redemptive and liberating presence of Jesus that is embodied at this table here and made incarnate, made flesh and blood through each of us.

[35 : 17] And while marriage isn't the gold standard of holiness, the fullness and realness of what God is doing is made present in the varied and beautiful multis of our community.

God is visible in the unique beauty of each of us and made more fully present through our communion together. God is visible in the imaginative possibility of us. The imaginative possibility of us celebrating each of us becoming our full selves in a community embracing the embodiment of Jesus is echoed in what we see the early church trying to become in many ways.

The picture of salvation and holiness that has been traditionally tied to gender roles in marriage. Sorry, let me say that again.

In many ways, the picture of salvation and holiness that we've traditionally tied to gender roles in marriage is actually present when we do life together, living grace, speaking truth to power, practicing justice, confronting shame, control, and choosing liberation.

[36 : 32] So I want to end this sermon with a question in a church. My question is this. Are there places that you have felt controlled or stifled and excluded or shamed by the way the church has talked about marriage or singleness?

And here's an invitation. As we prepare for communion, take a moment to invite God, the big, full, rich, much more than we could ask or imagine God into those spaces.

And explore how a more imaginative view of God can speak to you regarding your worse and value outside of that. Here's my challenge.

We start talking to one another about who we want to become together and what we value. To seek perspectives outside of our closer community and ask each other about who we are as a church and how we can actively work to create spaces, all of the beautiful representations of God's imaginative creation that call this community.

God, as we come to this table, remind us again of the work that your son, who is the embodiment of you, did.

[38 : 01] To blow open the doors and change the minds and confront the status quo. This time lead us fuller into who you have called us to be.

Fuller version of ourselves. A fuller version of a community that reflects you every way you look. We are your kaleidoscope. We are your kaleidoscope. A neue I fordi recommends you every way that you simply Cantana remembers you.

But mind wants you all. Let us rejoice in who you've made us. Let me pray. B collaborative. B nay, B afternoon happened.

German, nous Cry makeente. German, am I giving myself a blessing? German, siquiera. German, am I giving myself a blessing? B tem when I come, you through my business. ■yscze asking us peopleiper, Christmasbe, li OM Aí, usurp presentations.