

From Straight Assumptions to Queer Freedom

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[0 : 00] A couple of weeks ago, we sang Make Room by Community Music, and the words to the bridge and chorus have been running through my head ever since.! Shake up the ground of all my tradition, break down the walls of all my religion. Your way is better, your way is better, and I will make room for you to do whatever you want to.

I keep reflecting on the meaning of these lyrics as we enter Pride Month. For most of my life, I lived inside a room constructed out of the rigid materials of my conservative religious tradition. This space did not contain room for anything but heterosexuality. Straight was the default, and queerness was a sin. I'm rarely straight outside of this room, and I hardly knew that anything existed outside of it.

So much of my faith journey has been about discovering what it looks like for God to shake up the ground of my tradition and break down the walls of my religion to make room for God's new way. Tonight, for Pride Sunday, I want to share my coming-out story, because I've never done it before. And my biggest hope for tonight is that we may consider how to make room in our hearts for God to lead us to our most authentic selves, and how our journeys encourage others to do the same.

[1 : 22] For the first 27 years of my life, I never questioned that I was straight. When I look back on all those years, I see how God was even then pushing against the boundaries of my heart and making room for the story that would follow.

In high school, my best friend Margo came out to me. No one had ever shared with me that they were queer before, and I didn't know how to respond out of love for my friend and love for my faith. I basically told her that I didn't endorse her lifestyle, but I still wanted to remain friends. It was a classic hate the sin, love the sinner mentality, and understandably, we soon drifted apart. And I wondered if I could have responded differently. God continued prodding at those boundaries in college. I was involved in the local branch of the Navigators, a collegiate ministry similar to Campus Crusade for Christ to enter varsity.

A couple of my close friends were wrestling with their sexuality and their faith. One friend confided in me and other members of the leadership team that she thought she was attracted to him. And none of us outright told her that she was, that these feelings were a sin, but we encouraged her to resist temptation and prioritize her faith.

[2 : 43] Being affirming was not on the table. Around the same time, a representative for Exodus International came to speak at my church. If you are not familiar, Exodus International was a religious organization that advocated for conversion therapy.

Thankfully, this organization no longer exists. I was intrigued by her story, though, where she shared that she had experienced same-sex attraction for many years, but later ended up marrying a man.

I shared this story with my Bible study, and one of the regular attenders was on the edge of his seat. And he visibly deflated when I talked about how she believed that people could stop being gay.

I mean, nothing of it at the time, but just a few months later, he came out. I look back on those moments with regret and a whole lot of cringe.

I thought that I was loving people, but in reality, I never saw them clearly. I wish that I could go back and change my behavior, but I am somewhat comforted by the words of 1 Corinthians 13, 12.

[3 : 54] But now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part. Then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

Back then, I was so confident in the messages I had been taught, and I only saw a dim reflection of a possible life beyond those walls. My relationship with these three friends planted the first seeds of

doubt in my mind that maybe there was something beyond what I knew.

Now that I've come to terms with my own queerness, I wonder if God placed those people in my life for a reason. To show me what authenticity and joy might look like beyond those rigid boundaries.

And I also think about how God has fully known me, and my journey has never been a surprise to God. God knew each step I would need to take along the way. In Psalm 139, verse 1 through 6, the psalmist declares, O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

[5 : 11] Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You head me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is so high that I cannot attain it. Even when I was trapped in the realm of my own straightness, unable to look beyond those walls, God already knew everything there was to know about me.

My queerness did not come as an aberration to God. Instead, God had searched me and known the depths of my heart long before I was ever consciously aware of it. In my heart, I've always longed to be fully loved and fully known.

And in the dark nights of my soul, I wonder if that is even possible. Psalm 139 reminds me that I have never been alone.

There is not a word that can escape my lips that God has not already known. For example, God knew that I would struggle to love my friends clearly in that moment, but their stories would plant the seeds that would lead me to an awareness of God's abounding grace-filled love for everyone.

[6 : 23] As Romans 8:38 declares, I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord, not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.

So many of us were taught that God's love is conditional. We needed to say the right things, do the right things, and behave in the right way.

My friends struggled with this terrible idea that God might not love them if they came out. But Paul assures us, nothing, and I mean nothing, can separate us from the love of God.

Not our queerness, not our questions, nothing. We are already fully loved and fully known. Learning to embrace this truth was my first step on this path of transformation.

And this path was not easy. It required stepping outside of the room that had been so comfortable and stepping into the unknown terrain of deconstruction. After I graduated from college, I started to work in my hometown, and I agreed to co-lead my sister in a husband's youth group.

[7 : 43] I struggled to reconcile the character of Jesus with the way that Christians were responding after the 2016 election. I felt lost and utterly alone because no one in my faith community seemed to truly see me, know me, or understand what I was going through.

I was groping through the darkness with some sliver of light, some proof that following Jesus after all this time was still worth it. As I wrestled with other questions of my faith, I also took a second look at the conservative ways about homosexuality that I had taken for granted.

I also wanted answers to the common arguments against homosexuality, like the seemingly clear Plagga passages of Leviticus 18:22 and Romans 2.

I began to read books like *Torn* by Justin Lee and *God and the Gay Christian* by Matthew Bynes. These books transformed my perspective on homosexuality and made me realize that these passages had been taken out of context.

I also realized that non-affirming theology can cause so much harm over the years. If you are in the process of questioning or deconstructing this issue, I would highly recommend those books as a starting out point.

[8 : 56] And I would also be more than willing to have a conversation with anyone at any time. But during this process, I realized that God was leading me away from the traditions of my childhood faith, and charting a new path.

The journey of the psalmist in Psalm 139, 7-12 resonates with my own experience. Where could I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed and chill, you are there. If I take the winds of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

If I say, surely the darkness shall cover me, and night wraps itself around me, even the darkness is not dark to you. The night is as bright as the day, but darkness is as light to you.

The transformation of my faith took place in stages. But it began with this realization that there was no place I could travel where God was not already present.

[10:06] I needed to rely more on God's presence than ever, because the rest of my faith seemed like sinking sand. Sometimes, my faith in Jesus seemed like the only true thing that I could rely on.

As I began to question, I ran headlong into the dangers of leaving the safety of my childhood traditions. One day, my sister and her husband called every youth group leader together to sign a leadership agreement.

It was basically a statement of belief where, among other things, we needed to agree that homosexuality was a sin. I refused to sign. And my sister drove me home from that meeting, and we got into a huge argument.

I told her what I had been reading, and how that had led me to believe that homosexuality was no longer a sin. My sister said that I was falling away from the faith, that I only was believing what I wanted to believe.

She later reached out to me to tell me that I was still welcome to attend the youth group, but I could no longer participate in mentoring or leading discussions, and I made the decision to step back from the youth group entirely.

[11:14] And this hurt. My sister was the one person that I felt I could truly rely on, the one person I could compete in, that would be there for me regardless.

And the cracks formed in that relationship in that moment have yet to heal. So, I know firsthand that choosing a different path can seem like stepping into darkness.

But, like the psalmist said, if I could fly on the wings of the morning, or via airplane, God would bring me to a place where the darkness would fade into light.

Shortly after, I made the decision to move to D.C. And I had no idea that this would be the place where God would make room for me to finally embrace my authentic self.

A week after I arrived in D.C., I came across a sign for the table, and I decided to stop by. The table was the very first church that I attended in D.C., and it was also the first time that I saw queer individuals serving in every position of leadership in a church.

[12:20] I grew up thinking that there was one way to be a Christian, and I struggled with the idea that Christians needed to fit a certain mold. The community at the table taught me that nothing could be further from the truth.

One of my favorite Christian thinkers, Rachel Hale Evans, wrote, I've been convinced that LGBT Christians have a special role to play in teaching the church how to be Christian.

At the table, I saw the truth of this quote in action. Religious institutions have spent countless lifetimes telling queer Christians that there is no room for them at church.

I thought the same way once. Being at the table opened my eyes. I saw that queer Christians loved Jesus so much, and they were so drawn to his measures of love and inclusion, they would not give him up for anything.

They had counted the cost, and they decided Jesus was still worth following. The family of God suddenly seemed awash in every color of the rainbow, and I thought, maybe I belong here too.

[13:26] It still took four years of being in such an affirming space before I was brave enough to ask questions about my own sexuality.

And I probably never would have asked those questions if not from the table. Predictably, I started asking these questions after reading a book. If you know me, what else could it be?

On June 1st, exactly three years ago, I decided to pick up *What Asexuality Reveals About Desire in Society and the Meaning of Sex* by Angela Chen.

In this book, Chen explores the concept of asexuality, which is defined as a lack of sexual attraction. Asexuality exists on a spectrum, from people who never experience sexual attraction to people who experience it only when certain conditions are met, like in a deep emotional connection with someone, to people who experience it only rarely.

I had never read a book that so accurately captured my fears of being behind in relationships, because I didn't seem to view romance or sex the way other people did.

[14:34] After reading this book, I wrote down the words that would crack open my life in ways I didn't think were possible. I think I might be asexual. The short sentence felt odd, like a pair of

shoes I had not broken in yet.

But Angela Chen reminded me that labels are meant to serve us, not the other way around. And it might resonate with me now, if not later. She encouraged me to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty and continue to ask those questions.

So, over the next several months, I questioned what this term exceptorality might mean for my own life. At first, I thought it only meant that I placed more of an emphasis on a romantic rather than a sexual connection.

And I didn't speak to anyone about this for months. I finally shared this with one of my friends over margaritas, and he asked me if that meant that I could see myself in a relationship with a woman as well as a man.

At first, I thought, definitely not. I had only ever thought about being with a man. Slowly but surely, these questions kept creeping up. I got more familiar with the idea that maybe, just maybe, I was interested in women too.

[15:51] I have always longed for a partner. Someone who would be there for me in the good times and bad. Someone to take care of and someone who would take care of me. Someone to build a light with.

And I wondered if the gender of that person actually had little to do with it at all. Being interested in women suddenly seemed more like a possibility.

It still took a full year to change my dating apps from interested in men to interested in men and women. And taking that plunge was probably one of the most terrifying things I've done in my life. At the same time, I couldn't deny that it felt right. All of a sudden, my reservations about dating seemed less important somehow, and I wanted to give it a try.

I remember that exhilaration when I first started to date women. It was like a puzzle piece of my identity slotted neatly into place. And after a specific date, I basically declared to anyone who would listen, I am definitely not strange.

[16:59] Discovering this aspect of my identity did not feel like shame. It felt like freedom. It felt like I was realizing who God had created me to be from the very start.

As the psalmist says in Psalm 139, verses 13 through 18. For it was you who formed my inward parts. You knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works. That I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. How wading to me are your thoughts, O God!

How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them. They are more than the sand. I come to the end. I am still with you.

[18:00] My journey led me to realize that this part of my identity had been present all along. My sexuality had never been hidden from God, and nothing about my identity could ever separate me from God's love toward me.

Realizing my attraction to women felt like leaving behind my old self, the patterns, ideas, and perspectives that no longer served me to take on my new self, where I more fully embody who God has created me to be.

It felt like a fulfillment of 2 Corinthians 5.17. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.

Everything old has passed away. Look, new things have come into being.

And the most beautiful part of this entire journey is that this community has made space for me through all of it. The table church was the safest place in the world for me to come out.

It wasn't some big revelation. I shared that I had gone on a couple of dates with women, and my friends didn't even bat an eye. No one looked at me any differently. I did not need some big coming out moment where I gathered everyone together and talked about my sexuality.

[19:12] And I never once feared that people in this church would look down on me with judgment or impose shame on me. In some ways, this is by far the greatest gift the church has ever given me.

And I know all too well that this is not the case for other queer folks. It is my dearest hope that as a queer female Christian pastor, I can have to create a world where every room, every church, is the safest place in the world for other people to come out.

And as a church, I hope that we can become a bright light, welcoming people into the truth that everyone belongs, everyone is seen, everyone is known, and everyone is loved.

Standing here today, I can say that my journey is not yet finished. I am still not entirely sure where I stand on the asexuality spectrum, if I am even still on it at all.

When I am asked about my sexuality, I typically just say, I'm queer. But there may come a day when I identify more as a lesbian. What ran is more than the labels, though?

[20 : 19] It's about that there is finally room to explore those questions, to allow God to break down the barriers that keep me from understanding my true self. So this Pride Month, I invite you to consider your own journey.

Each of you has probably experienced at one point in your life this feeling of being confined to a room that prevents us from exploring who we truly are. What might it look like to leave those boundaries behind and explore your true and authentic selves?

Each of us are on different stages of this journey. No matter where we are in our life or in our faith, God is present in our transformation. And discovering your true self is not a sprint, but a marathon. And there is no path we can travel where God is not present, backing us toward abundant life. What might it look like for you to fully celebrate who you are and give yourself and each other the space to continue growing?

And we also have the perfect opportunity to raise up queer folks during Pride. None of us are strangers to the fact that queer rights are under attack and Ketlin's anti-LGBTQ plus bills are being advanced on both state and federal levels.

[21 : 31] In this moment, I hope that we can each find the time to learn from the stories of our queer kin. Uplift them, celebrate them, shout them from the rooftops. And next weekend, you can join us as we proclaim this truth on the streets of DC.

Yes! We will be marching in the Pride parade and tabling at the festival. It is not too late to join us, or we would love to have you. Every year, Pride is a testament to how God's love welcomes everyone and invites us all to make room for authentic selves.

Bathe an image for God.