

"Moving Across: The Transgressing God Queer Theology Reveals"

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 June 2024

Preacher: Shae and Daniel

- [0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. My name is Daniel. I'm an elder here at the table, and we're going to do something special today. One of our values here at the table is that we value, not just value, we love the multiplicity of our community as a reflection of who God is.
- And so today, we're going to do a little co-preaching experiment where I'm going to share a few things that are on my heart about how I see God, especially this weekend, this Pride weekend.
- Let me invite up Shay, a fellow elder, to also speak about some of her insights and wisdom. So I grew up in an evangelical, missionary-focused context.
- My parents were missionaries. The church that I went to had the word missionary in its name. It was a context and environment very focused on preaching the gospel, saving people.
- And so it was pretty common for there to be various forms of asking people to be saved. It was a church that often practiced inviting Jesus into your heart.
- [1 : 16] It was a regular occurrence at every church service that at the end, they would be invited to be saved. Now, as a child, as a six-, seven-, eight-year-old, I often wondered, am I saved?
- And so I would go through this process of every few weeks wondering, am I really saved? Do I need to go back up there again and say this prayer a third, fourth, fifth time?
- And I seek to remember driving home from church one night with my parents, thinking to myself, how do I know if I'm saved? How do I know if these words are enough?
- That sort of questioning has also been much of my experience with my queerness. So I stand here as a non-binary person, as someone who doesn't really fit neatly into the categories of man or woman.
- I don't really fit into those. And much of my journey of queerness has been a kind of a question of, am I queer enough? What does it even mean?
- [2 : 32] What is my gender? What is my sexuality? What is my sexuality? What is my sexuality? Asking those questions that, for much of my life, I could never ask within my church, within my family. The first time that I, in a public setting, used a different set of pronouns than he or him, as folks might notice on most of our name tags, we have pronouns.
- Everybody uses pronouns. Some pronouns are just kind of more normalized in society than others. But if you're a human, you use pronouns. The pronouns I often use, and that feel right to me, are they or them pronouns.
- Although, he is okay. But the first time that I introduced myself in a setting using those pronouns was a gathering of community organizers here in D.C.
- It was just a very relational context. We were just having dinner together. We were meeting an organizer who came from out of town. And the words just sort of sprung out of me.

I didn't necessarily intend for that to be the moment where I used those pronouns publicly for the first time. I had used them internally for a while. I had been on a journey of kind of trying to understand my own gender for a while.

[3 : 53] But in that moment, those words kind of burst forth. And it felt like an expansive, widening, opening moment. Where the word non-binary doesn't quite fit for me in the sense of I don't really see my gender as not this or not that, but more of a more than, beyond, an expansiveness.

And that's what that moment felt like to me, was expansiveness, welcoming. At the same time, I had dinner with a friend shortly after that.

And this friend is very loving and affirming. And he just did not understand a word that I was saying about my relationship to gender. Everything I said, he was just like, I don't get this.

This makes no sense to me. And I felt frustrated after that conversation. A sense of, how do I describe who I am when I'm still trying to figure out who I am as well?

When I'm in the process of becoming. And so I want to just share a little bit from Scripture about how I have kind of wrestled that expansiveness, that joy of being welcomed for who I am with the frustration of, how do I put words to this experience in a world that is very much set up in binaries, a world that is very much set up in living a certain way?

[5 : 24] So we're going to go back to the very beginning. We're going to go to Genesis. If folks have seen *The Princess Bride*, there's an iconic line there of, to find your way, you have to go back to the beginning.

And so that's what we're going to do. We're going back to Genesis. So Genesis starts off with kind of a summary of the state of the world at that time. The very beginning of Genesis reads, in the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep.

Now, as a quick kind of biblical reading note, it's important that we don't read Genesis as a factual, scientific, literal account, but rather as a powerful, poetic story that's intended to teach a community something about who they are, about who their creator is.

And this story begins with a formless void, is the word that many translations use. Now, earlier this year, Pastor Toneta sent out a short devotional sharing about the Hebrew word used for formless void is *tohu wabuhu*.

And in this devotional, Pastor Toneta shared about how this word basically is about the raw material of creation that often feels chaotic and confounding.

[6 : 55] Now, in my imagination of the creation story, when I've read it in the past, I've often read formless void as an almost peaceful kind of nothingness, as an absence of creation.

But the story begins with latent potential, with something that's becoming, that's bursting at the seams, that feels chaotic, confounding, and uncertain.

Now, as God begins to create, we see in the creation story a very specific pattern. So if you read through Genesis 1, you see this pattern where God gives a command for something to be created, and then that's followed by God acting upon that command.

So God commands, God acts on the command, and then God evaluates what has been created. One example of this is very clearly in Genesis 1, 14 through 19, where God says, let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night.

God made the two great lights, so God commands, then God acts on it, and then God said that it was good. So if you read Genesis 1, you'll see this pattern.

[8 : 11] God speaks, God creates, then God calls their creation good. But if we read this story with a little eye to what's happening, we see that there are a couple of breaks in that pattern.

There are two notable breaks in the pattern. The first is on the third day, where God says, let the earth grow plant life, plants yielding seeds, and fruit trees bearing fruit with seeds inside, each according to its kind through the earth.

And that's what happened. The earth produced plant life, plants yielding seeds, each according to its kind, and trees bearing fruit with seeds inside, each according to its kind.

And God saw how good it was. So rather than the usual pattern of God spoke, God created, here in Genesis, in the third day, the earth is commanded to create life.

Based off the narrative structure, before that, we might expect this to say, God produced plant life, or God created vegetation, plants, trees, and seeds.

[9 : 26] But instead, we see God commands, and the earth responds. We also see this happen on the sixth day of creation, when humanity is created.

Yet again, God deviates from this pattern, where God gives a command, let us make humanity, in our image, according to our likeness. In this account, humans are made explicitly in the image of God.

Humans are given a blessing to be fruitful, to multiply, to care for the rest of creation, of which they are a part. And the plant life that was created on the third day, comes back, with God giving the rest of creation, to humans as a gift.

The earth also gives to humans. And so we begin to see a hint of a circle of giving, where God says to the earth, create.

And the earth creates. And God creates humanity, and says, humans, care for this earth, care for this creation. I'm giving it to you. And then says to creation, care for these humans, love them, nourish them, I'm giving them to you as well.

[10 : 46] And now after all of this, the creator looks at all that has been formed, and says, it's very good. For me, this kind of raises the question of, what is it that God is saying is very good?

I used to read Genesis 1, and I used to read that very good as being, about humanity. That's sort of how I read it, of all of creation is good, but humans are like, very good.

But I think that what God is declaring is very good, is that circle of relationships, between God, creation, and humanity, which is reciprocal, which is expansive, which is self-giving.

It's a beautiful picture, where we see the earth, is a co-creator, alongside God. And humans are invited, into that co-creation as well.

So this circular, interwoven nature, is what God calls, very good. So how does this connect, back to, queerness?

[11 : 54] How does this come back to, what it means, for me as a queer person, to practice my spirituality, to be a Christian? First, I want to just offer, a brief definition of, how I interpret, queerness.

It's a word that, has been used, in some different contexts, but for me, has some different definitions. Shay is going to share a definition. But for me, I kind of go to, Mihi Kim Kort, who is a, author, theologian, pastor, who says, queerness, is a radical expression, of desire, that goes beyond, traditional definitions, and categories, that invites us, into understanding, our humanity, in new ways.

And so, when I think about, to be queer, I think about my gender, and sexuality, yes. But I also think about, the world that I live in, and how I am creating, that reciprocal, self-giving circle, in ways that are, opposed often, to the world around me.

When I think of queerness, I think of people like, Nona. Nona, is a black, trans woman, here in Washington, D.C., who passed away in 2021, who loved God, and loved people, who advocated, for most of her life, for black, trans women in D.C., to have, better support, better housing, better care.

I think of, my ancestors at Stonewall, whose act of, celebrating their queerness, involved direct opposition, to the world around them. I think of, my ancestry as an act up, who through acts, of direct care, and direct action, in the midst of a, AIDS epidemic, when, queer people, were misunderstood, when the government, was acting, that we will take care, of ourselves, and our community, we will keep, ourselves safe.

[13 : 58] Mihi Kim Court, talks about, how a queer spirituality, transgresses, the boundaries, of how we live, move, and breathe, throughout this world. It is truly embodied, and rooted, in flesh, and blood bodies, bodies that are surprising, and show up, as icons, and words.

It is also rooted, in the body of Christ, and God with us, in the continuous, blurring of transcendence, and eminence. And when I think of it that way, I see queerness, deeply in the story, of Jesus, who preached, an upside down kingdom, where the last are first, where the table, is always open, where Jesus, in his body, carried both divinity, and humanity.

And so I see that, upside down nature, that expansive love, that we see in Genesis 1, of self-giving, of reciprocity, of there always being room, for more at the table.

The moments, where I feel truly, at home with myself, my gender, my sexuality, feels like that, ever expansive circle, of creation, alongside God, alongside creation, alongside all of you.

As I invite Shay, to come up, and also speak, on Genesis 1, I want to end, with a quote, from one of my mentors, Terry LeBlanc, who is a, First Nations, elder, who, is fond of saying, that we are not problems, to be solved, but we are mysteries, to be explored.

[15 : 56] So I want to invite us, into that mystery, of creation, of queerness, to explore together. Okay.

Child. Child. My child, that I created, formed with my hands, filled lungs, with my own breath, sustain even now, holding ligaments together.

Joints, bones, marrow, soul, eye. I know. I know. I know you. You are mine, and I am thrilled about you.

Freedom is mine to give. Abundant life is the road I made. My life for you to live right now.

Do not be bound by anything. I, I know you. You are mine, and I am thrilled about you.

[17 : 08] Fellow queers, allied straights, happy pride, one more time. God is thrilled about us, and I don't know, uh, quite where I was, in my coming out journey, when I wrote that poem, or allowed it to kind of come through me, but I know I needed it.

Before coming out, I had spent so long, in this secret, battle with my identity, struggling with, guilt and shame, and suppression. I'd spent formative years, growing up, both in the black church, where in my experience, there was an altar call, uh, almost every Sunday, and the pastor definitely expected to see, most of the church down there, repenting, or confessing of something, um, or like, re, re, dedicating their life again, like Daniel, I got saved a lot, growing up.

And I also spent time, in the predominantly white, evangelical tradition, that interpreted scripture, through a very, conservative lens, so much so, that I didn't even realize, it was a lens, I just, thought it was the truth.

My church placed, a big emphasis, on the Bible, as our center of knowing, and on, believing the right things, almost above all else.

Above our own bodies, for sure, as our own internal knowing. But even above our own experience, with God, the living God, unless of course, those experiences, lined up, and matched with, what had been determined, to be the right interpretation, of scripture.

[18 : 45] And though, I'm grateful, that I never, heard anything, outwardly disparaging, about being LGBTQ, I certainly never, heard anything affirming.

I knew it wasn't, an option. And for my own study, growing up in the, early 90s, was my Youth Walk devotional Bible, with its hot topic section, on homosexuality, and other sin issues.

and all of it painted, a picture of a God, that was scary, and required perfection, and had strict rules, about who could be in, and what had to be sacrificed, in order to not be put out.

They said that God was big, but this belief system, actually made God quite small, and forced conformity, and assimilation.

What a sin. Every question, had an answer, it was all very black and white, and while thankfully, I internalized messages, about God's love, and was working to build, and discern my own connection, I couldn't help, but feel that over and over, I just wasn't measuring up.

[20 : 04] And that who I was, was a disappointment, was unacceptable, was outside of the bounds, of God's way, according to what others, had decided, was the truth. And so for a long time, I was closeted, sometimes not even aware of it, because I was working so hard, to distance myself from myself, and other times, actively wrestling, with trying to understand, who I really was, and what that meant, for my relationship with God.

From there, I would thankfully, one day, go on to have, what I can only describe, as a divine encounter, with God, in which I knew, that I was affirmed, to live my best queer life.

But because, of the Christian community, that I had grown up in, it was still very important, for me to understand, things scripturally. And so came the Googles, and the books, and the conversations, ultimately connecting me, with theologies, rooted in liberation, including queer theology.

And what I found, was a God, not just, of black and white, but of all color, rainbow colors.

Not a God, looking to build walls, to keep people out, but one, who had made themselves, a bridge, so that more, could be let in. A God, turning things, upside down, and inside out, to find us, and show us, what love truly is.

[21 : 40] A God, always working, to subvert, the status quo, and inspire us, to imagine, a more liberative way. A God, who created, not just night, and day, but dawn, and dusk.

Created, not just man, and woman, but trans, and non-binary, and gender queer, and gender fluid, and, and, and. Who made, the seahorse.

Did y'all know, that the male, incubates the egg, and, and, and, gives birth to the brood, or the bottlenose dolphin, many who have been found, to be bisexual, and sometimes, exclusively homo.

Who made, the clown fish, which can change sex, based on hierarchy, and so much more. All this queerness, right here, in creation, in the natural world, including us.

Genesis 1, 31, and God saw all that God had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the sixth day.

[22 : 56] God is thrilled about us. Queer theology, it can be disorienting, yes. And to me, that's a good thing, because I think it actually, um, gets us closer, to imagining, who God really is.

God has always been big, has always been alive, has always been creating things, beyond what we can fully grasp, and even when asked, who God is, the response is, I am.

And yet, doing everything, to get to us, to show us themselves, to be known, and also so that we can see ourselves, and each other, more clearly.

Would you look around, at each other for a moment, just really look, just look, turn your heads, look at each other. Here is God, big, expansive, beyond containment, and yet, just as close, as our breath.

Look inside. Would you close your eyes, for a moment, and just, put your hand on your heart, or some part of your body. Here is God, breathing, in each of us, shaping our beings, holding and healing our hearts.

[24 : 21] Breathe in with me, and out. And open your eyes, when you're ready. And so, what does this mean, for us?

For me, it means, we must remind ourselves, to not limit, who God is. What mechanisms, what questions, what relationships, do we need, that can support us, in seeing the expansiveness, of God?

What might God, be showing us, about themselves, through queer community? Through alternative modes, of making family, and being in relationship?

What do babies, and animals, and nature, reveal, about God, when we take the time, to look, to wonder, to approach, with curiosity, and with love?

It also means, we must honor, each other. For we have all, been created, in the image, of the divine. Yes, God is thrilled, about us, and I believe, also grieved, by the harm, the mistreatment, the oppression, the grabs, for power, and domination.

[25 : 44] Nobody's free, until everybody's free. Fannie Lou Hamer. So what does it mean, to lean into shalom, to work towards peace, with ourselves, each other, the natural world, and with God?

To be co-creators, of care, and justice, instead of, grasping for control, and to oppress? To not just be an ally, but to be in solidarity with?

To not just be in solidarity with, but to count ourselves, as co-conspirators, for each other's liberation? It also means, that we, have to let the fullness, of who we are, shine bright, in this world, whatever that means, for you.

In the work I do, I often talk about, this, societal current, that has been flowing, one way, for a long time. The current benefits some, the dominant groups, at the expense of others, those on the margins.

And we often don't even realize, we're in this current, because it's been flowing, the same way for so long, this is the status quo. And the status quo, requires us, to bury who we are, to conform, to what has been determined, as the acceptable way of being.

[27 : 05] It includes things like, how to dress, how to talk, what to do, and not do, to be considered, moral, civilized, professional, traditional.

Certainly it includes, what it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman, and who we should, and shouldn't love. And as a mode of survival, those of us, outside of these norms, which I would say, to some degree, would be all of us, at least at some point, in our life.

We learn to assimilate. We dim our lights. We lower our standards. We deny who God, created us to be, in response to, so much oppression, targeting, discrimination, and harm.

I was terrified, to come out. I didn't want anyone, to judge, or assume things, about who I was, or about my relationship, with God, and how much I loved God.

I was scared, of what and who, I would lose. But in that divine encounter, it was also impressed upon me, how much I was already losing, by not being my authentic self.

[28 : 21] The abundant life, I was forgoing. I've learned, I've learned, that it is critical, to recognize, for ourselves, the differences, between being, in a womb space, and being, in a tomb space.

One is connected, to life, and growth, and development. The other, death, and atrophy, and stagnation. And this is not just, about coming out, in the queer community, but can apply to, all of us, in our own context.

But for me, in this divine, encounter moment, I realized, I was more, in a tomb space, and I needed to get out. The light I needed to grow, wasn't getting in.

I needed to be able to, be who God, created me to be. I wanted to be part, of reflecting, who God was, to creation. And though, the losses, from doing that, are still painful, what I have gained, is so much more.

There's a prominent, LGBTQ, Christian organization, that recently, wrote about, why they reject, queer theology, and see it in conflict, with the work that they do, to make churches, affirming and inclusive.

[29 : 45] The article says, that queer theology, theology may spell disaster, for gays and lesbians, who just want, to be included at church. It goes on to say, we don't need, to queer the Bible, we just need, to interpret it, more accurately, and faithfully.

We don't need, to queer the church, we just need, the church, to foster, greater inclusion, love, embrace, and acceptance, of LGBTQ people. But is it, actually true acceptance, or is it another form, of assimilation, that's being, fostered?

Patrick Chang, is a queer theologian, and says, that queer, is used to describe, an action, that turns upside down, inside out, that which is seen, as normative.

To queer something, is to engage, with a methodology, that challenges, and disrupts, the status quo. That sounds like, Jesus to me.

If we're seeking, acceptance, through trying, to prove, that we're just, really the same, as everyone else, is that actually, acceptance? What's really, being affirmed, except for, the status quo?

[31 : 00] I believe, in a God, who made us, different, from each other, on purpose, so that we might, see more, of who God is. And we miss out, when we conform, and force others, to do the same, instead of being, our incredible, full, beautiful, brilliant, made in the image, of God's selves.

And I know, it's not easy. I struggle with, so much fear, actually, in this area. But my community, makes me brave. When I look around, and I see us, living out loud, it expands, how I understand, God to be, and calls to something, deep within myself, about who I am.

And I know, there are varying, levels of risk, right? Based off of, the power we've been afforded, or the lack thereof, there is much work, to be done, to create safety, for all of us, to be able to show up, in authentic, full ways.

But may it be so, as together, we lean into, the bigness of God, the transgressive, nature of God, the God that turns, inside, out, and upside down, disrupting, the status quo, toward more love, and liberation.

Would you pray, with me? Amen. Amen. A prayer, from Cole Arthur Riley, of Black Liberations.

[32 : 41] Queer God, we know, who we are. We are grateful, for a self-knowledge, that is at once, terrifying, and liberating.

We have done, what we must, to survive, spaces threatened, by our liberation. Alleviate, any guilt, we may carry, for what has had, to remain hidden.

Remind us, that our dignity, cannot be extinguished, by alienation, nor hatred. Just as you, contain multitudes, teach us, to honor, our particularities, that which, subverts, and disrupts, the status quo, that which, expands, our apprehension, of beauty, and a world, prone, to the bland flavor, of sameness.

And may we, welcome those, who are still hidden, within our sacred number. May we shelter them, tend to them, and wait for them, as we continue the path, toward the truth of us.

Amen.