

“Hope Against Hope”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
June 11, 2023  
Pride Sunday  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Romans 4:13-25  
Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

I want to talk to you today about the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist. This is the God that Paul wrote to the Romans about. It is a queer thing to believe in, and trust in, a God like this.

For those of you who bristle about the word queer, let's break that down a little bit. *Queer* started out as a term that meant, simply, “strange and unusual.” It didn't have a negative value judgment per se. I remember as a child when I used to read the 1950's OG versions of the detective series *Nancy Drew* that were written a generation or so before me and stored in my grandparents' attic, when Nancy got a “queer feeling,” she was usually onto something.

For some reason, *queer* got redefined as a slur hurled against gay people. Children played games like smear the queer as an everyday playground activity. I will say that my first year living in Leonia, I heard among some middle school kids playing on the playground one child calling another gay. I marched right up to him and told him that I am gay, and when I hear him use that term as an insult against his friend, it is also an insult against me. I asked him if he meant to insult me in front of my 4 year old daughter while she was playing on the same playground as him. He stared at me and blinked a couple of times like a deer caught in headlights. But maybe he thought more carefully before tossing that word around in a negative way.

Language has power, and when language has been used to strip power away, an act of resistance is to reclaim and redefine. And so, we have taken the word “queer” and embraced it. Sometimes, it is important to name the alphabet soup of what we know as the LGBTQIA+ community. And other times, it is not only convenient, but also powerful, to simply say “queer.”

So I want to go back to speaking about having a queer faith in God. It is way less complicated to believe in a God of things we already know: a God who meets us in our comfort zone and never asks us to push outside of it. A God who speaks through the expected people, those with gravitas, whom the structures that ascribe power and prestige have already anointed. But that's not the God that we come to know in the bible.

It's been detrimental that the conversations around LGBTQIA people in the church have centered around whether or not queerness is a sin, and whether or not it fits into God's plan, and whether or not queer people should be included in Christian marriage, Christian ordination,

or Christian welcome and affirmation. Some churches want to “love the sinner, hate the sin”-- in other words, welcome queer people, but not their queerness.

All the while, the church has looked at people’s queerness and asked in angry confusion: “How *dare* they!” How dare they take an identity that dominant culture despises and hold it up and say, look here! This is beautiful! This is good! And they learn to say that not only of themselves, but for other oppressed people as well. See, the church has neglected to notice that Jesus’ vision *needs daring people*. Thank *God* that these people dared.

I would argue that the people mentioned in our scripture passages this morning had a queer faith-- in that they dared to have faith in a way that believed in the impossible and pushed across borders and found on the other side-- somewhere over that rainbow-- blessing. These borders were across culture and place; they were across gender; they were across religion; and they even had faith that broke the boundaries from death, into life.

A woman breaks through the taboos around sexuality and blood to demand healing for her vaginal bleeding that has gone on for 12 years. Here is a woman who knows what she needs for her medical care, and she reaches for it, and finds what she needs for her body’s care. There is no one to stop her from getting what she needs, and Jesus himself offers it to her freely, and then calls her a daughter. How many people out there today -- people whom Jesus would call daughter, or son, or simply “my child”-- are reaching for what they need for their healing, only to be told by their state legislators that it can no longer be made available for them? Jesus trusted the woman who reached out to him to know what she needed for her healing, and he gave it to her, without argument or judgment-- only admiration for her faith.

We don’t really think of Abraham and Sarah as queer-- more as our archetypical father and mother figures. And yet they follow God’s call to go out to an unknown land, and to follow an unknown God who promises them offspring as numerous as the stars, even when they are seemingly infertile and getting quite old-- Paul describes Abraham as “as good as dead” at about 100 years old, but that’s when the promise was just getting started. Paul describes Abraham as “*hoping against hope*” in the promises God was dangling before him. What a queer thing to do.

Do you have to be an LGBTQIA+ person in order to have a queer faith? Well, the people above did not have queer sexuality or gender identities, but they still had a queer kind of faith in that it was a faith that hoped against hope. You *don’t* have to be queer to have a queer faith, but being an ally certainly helps. Having dinner with today’s version of tax collectors and sinners might help too. Approaching people with generosity rather than judgment, curiosity rather than condemnation, empathy rather than animosity can teach more of what it means to have a queer faith.

You don’t have to be queer to have a queer faith, but because we rarely talk about them, I want to offer some examples of queer people in the bible, and lift up what *any* of us can learn from their hope against hope kind of faith.

- Our faith can teach us to be queer and daring like David: a scrappy boy who slays a giant with a rock, using none of the king's armor offered to him. David may have been bisexual- he was notorious for his relationship with Bathsheba. But if you read closely, you'll notice he also had an intimate relationship with Jonathan, who was Saul's son. Jonathan first noticed David as a young man, just after he killed Goliath, and it was like love at first sight: as scripture says, "the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.... Then Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing and gave it to David and his armor and even his sword and his bow and his belt." Later the bible describes the men as kissing, and after Jonathan's death, David sings of Jonathan in a song of lament, "greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women." The love Jonathan had for David caused Jonathan to stand up to his own father, the king, who felt threatened by David. The fact that Jonathan risked his own life to keep his father from killing David allowed God to establish David as king- and as an early ancestor to Jesus. You can read their full story in 1 and 2 Samuel.
- In that same neighborhood of the bible, you'll also find the story of Ruth and Naomi. Like Abraham and Sarah, these two women crossed borders, moving to the unknown in search of something unknown, but hopefully better. When Naomi was so grief-stricken after the death of her husband and sons that she sunk into depression and hopelessness, Ruth, her bereaved daughter-in-law, hoped against hope and supplied enough love and faith for the both of them. As Ruth pointed Naomi toward their new life together in Bethlehem, she spoke these words: "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God." These words of partnership often get chosen for weddings, and people sometimes don't realize these words were originally a testimony of love from one woman to another. Ruth's love for Naomi became the model of God's *hesed*- or steadfast love for God's people.
- In the very early church, when the apostles were left to spread the good news of the gospel after Jesus' ascension, Philip is driven by the Spirit to the chariot of an Ethiopian eunuch. Eunuchs were what we might call today gender-queer. Some by birth, some by choice, and some by enslavement, their sexual organs did not match what was expected of male bodies. This particular Ethiopian was reading the scroll from Isaiah. Philip asked him, "Do you understand what you're reading?" The Ethiopian said, "How can I, unless someone teaches me?" So Philip preached to him, and told him about Jesus. As they rode along, the Ethiopian saw some water on the side of the road and asked, "Look! There is water! What is to keep me from being baptized?" In response, Philip offered a great example not only of evangelism, but also of allyship: he pulled over and offered the sacrament of baptism to the Ethiopian. There, in Acts, is the story of the first non-Jewish convert to Christianity: a gender-queer Ethiopian. It set the stage for Paul bringing the message of Christ to Gentiles throughout all of Asia Minor.

We don't really know anything about the sexuality of Jesus. But it's a queer thing to look at bread and wine and think that this can become body and blood. I think of how the AIDS quilt in America formed: when people were dying in the early 80's, many without anyone to sit at their bedside or to pray over them and love them as they died, there were some who insisted that they get noticed, and remembered. And so piece by piece, activists began designing panels for a quilt: each panel representing a life, a person, a death. As the quilt grew and grew, it was no longer just cloth: these are our bodies, broken; inviting others to look and remember and on some level, take part in that experience of suffering and death but also to think of what resurrection can look like. When the quilt was spread out on the Washington Mall, the mainstream started to notice just how much the soul of America was dying. And soon, the tides of public opinion and governmental funding began to change in favor of compassion and care for the sick, and research so that HIV no longer would be a death sentence.

The man from the synagogue whose daughter had just died came to Jesus with a sense of urgency. "Come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." That's some queer hope right there. When Jesus comes to do just that, he comments that the girl is asleep, not dead— and took her hand and she got up.

Here's what Jesus came to show us: a vision for God's shalom, an understanding that goodness is stronger than evil; that love is stronger than hate; that there is room at the dinner table for anyone Jesus chooses to invite; and that God's love and power follows us even beyond the life we know, and into the life we do not yet know. That requires hope against hope, some queer kind of faith.