

Dirty Words, Holy Resistance

Season 2, Episode 3 | Rev. Alba Onofrio

[00:18] Oh beloved, hi! Welcome to the second season of Love Letters with me, Reverend Sex. I've been thinking about you so much recently, all the time, really. We may not have met in person, I may not be able to recognize your face or your name yet, but I can feel you here with me, in my spirit and in my bones. I've been praying for us, I pray for our people now more than ever. I'm obsessed with how we find each other, how we connect and heal, especially now, amidst the violent chaos and spiritual overwhelm in these hard and painful days, sins generations deep now surfacing.

[01:06] This series is part of the Shameless Theology Podcast channel brought to you by Soulforce. And Love Letters is a spirit space to laugh and grieve, to unlearn the bad theology we've been taught, and most importantly, a place for us to gather for just a few minutes each week to find each other and remember who we really are. I believe in our sacred resistance and I believe in us. These are my love letters to you and all of us who need them.

[01:40] Welcome. I'm so glad you're here. Beloveds, I come to you today with a heart that feels a little rebellious. And this is a love letter for those who swear like a sailor, especially for those who find it to be a faithful practice. I have a weekly phone date with somebody I adore who is a devoted Christian, progressive and open-minded in so many ways. But she has one thing that really ruffles her feathers, and that is profanity. And I've been thinking about that and a lot around her recently and many Christians for whom profane language feels both uncomfortable and immoral in many ways.

[02:39] When I'm around her, I try to curb my language, but I do curse like a sailor, swear like a sailor, which I have come to learn is about an intentional rejection of polite society. It feels like that for me too. So this love letters is part history lesson, part theological reflection. It will have profane language in it. So if that's something you feel sensitive about, this might be exactly the episode for you. Or it may be that you're not ready to have that conversation yet and you just want to skip this one.

[03:20] Regardless, I want to tell you a little bit more about my deep dive into the reasons that I have for insisting on profanity as part of my language. And I often get asked, how can you as a queer pastor, as a Christian, how can you use that kind of language, that potty mouth? How is that acceptable within your belief system? And there's many answers to that question. The first one always being that my primary community to which I minister is the activist community.

[03:58] It is people who are on the daily, putting their lives on the line, their name on the line, their safety and their security on the line to secure the liberation and the equality of other people and beings on this planet. And my experience in activist community and in queer and trans community is that we don't have time for the bullshit of what's polite and not polite. That we left what was appropriate and what was expected and a correct behavior and ways of being in the world long ago, as soon as we began this journey toward equal rights and demanding that our people be safe and

free and loved and that our earth be taken care of.

[04:45] So with folks who are putting it all on the line and real, like living in the real and with the realness in people's lives every day, there isn't a lot of space for polite society. And cursing or profanity is one way to get at that, to show that in a way that is we are in community and we're talking about real things and we're not going to get hung up on what polite language is. That doesn't mean that we use our words to harm or insult people, but it does mean that we are very relaxed in the ways that people engage in conversation.

[05:22] That's not true for all of us, of course, but that feels particularly true for me as someone who feels like my primary community of faith is one of folks living very close to the line around survival and around continuing struggles for wholeness and safety and wellness. But I was always told growing up that that kind of language was unbecoming of a lady. And that sentence has stuck in my mind for decades. What does it mean for something to be unbecoming of a lady?

[05:58] And it evokes all of the meaning that I want to communicate about why cussing is essential part of how I identify and how I move through the world. That idea of what is a lady or ladylike is deeply embedded in class struggle and class privilege, which is at the core of why some words are bad and some words are not bad. I was doing a deep dive into this recently and one of the things I learned was that during the medieval times when religiosity was at its height and at its fervor, that some of the most crass things that you could possibly say was on Jesus' bones or by Christ's blood, that was a way of swearing something that was connected with your soul.

[07:02] And that was considered the most profane, the most crass and terrible language that you could use. At that time, for example, a word like cunt, which right now is something that's definitely considered a bad word, was just the word for vagina. It was just about an anatomical feature. It had no connotation of being something that was crass. It was just a neutral identifying word. So what happened and how do we get to where we are now? That's a very interesting conversation.

[07:40] And it goes back to something that is more than a thousand years old or about a thousand years old to a thing that very many of us know very little about called the Battle of Hastings in 1066. I won't go into the history lesson, but basically the summary is that the king of Britain died without an heir and there was an Anglo-Saxon man who claimed that he should have the throne and there was a French man who claimed that he should have the throne and they fought in this thing called the Battle of Hastings and the French guy won.

[08:15] And because of that brought all of the French language and customs to Britain alongside the feudal system, which continues to plague us even today with this idea of masters and lords and all of that mess. But what's important is that the English language is a mixture of many languages, but particularly two foundational ones, which is old English, which is the language that modern English and modern German come from. It's a Germanic language and old French, which is originating in Latin and where modern French comes from.

[08:54] And so this moment, the Battle of Hastings in the 11th century where the French won and now bring that language, culture, societal structure into the English speaking world. That is the moment where we get this division of a two tier society in the current form. And what the idea was,

was that the winners, the colonizers, the conquerors, that their language, the French, was sophisticated and cultured and elevated and educated. Whereas the old English, which are the losers, the ones who didn't win the fight is crass and common.

[09:46] In fact, vulgar, the word vulgar means lowbrow or common or of the people of the crowd. So there's this African proverb that I've heard a million times that says, until the lion learns to tail the tail, the story of the hunt will always favor the hunter, which basically means those who win are the ones who write history. And in this moment where we are seeing history being erased and rewritten before our very eyes and ears on our social media, in our school books, in our political sphere and in the world, that question of who gets to define what is true or not true, what is sophisticated and highbrow and cultured versus what is lowly and crass and of the people,

[10:41] is a conversation that is incredibly relevant in this moment. So almost all of our words in the English language that are common everyday words that you need to live and get by, almost all of those are from the old English, the Germanic roots of our language, like cow or pig. I'm talking about animals. But to show you the example of the counterbalance, the words that mean cow and pig in the old English Germanic were coming from the people who had direct contact and were working with the animals on a daily basis.

[11:24] The farmers, the shepherds, that's where cow and pig come from. Whereas the French origins, which were the elites at the time who didn't work with the animals, but rather only ate the meat of those animals that got served to their table. They used words like beef and pork. Those two things, cow and beef, used to mean the same thing. But when we created a two-tiered society in which the elite used the word beef, and the everyday workers and common folks and farmers used the word cow, they became separated, one to mean the meat of the animal, what the elite would be coming in contact with.

[12:08] As opposed to the animal itself, the living, breathing animal that needed caretakers, that was being worked by field hands and farmers, which is cow. So this is an example of what it means to dissect and ask questions about where our language comes from. There is a million of these examples about the Germanic form versus the Latin form, as in that which comes from the Old English or the losers in the Battle of Hastings, their language versus the French, Old French, which came from the winners of the Battle of Hastings.

[12:47] And I'm going to give you a whole list of them just so you can hear some of those differences. So, for example, a structure in which we live and dwell from the Old English is house, which could mean anything from a huge house to a small shack. It's about where we live. The word in French is mansion, which even today, though it means the same thing, the place where we live, it has this idea of being bigger, fancier. Even in language like words that Old English would call just the function of things, like to buy something or to want something, the French derivation of those buy is to purchase, which we would say, oh, that's a more sophisticated vocabulary.

[13:43] Instead of want, it's desire. In terms of profanity, we can look at this in a million different ways. But here are some that are connected with bodily functions, which are one of the central ways that we get profane words. Piss versus urinate. To shit versus to defecate. Cunt versus vagina. Dick versus penis. And ass versus derriere, which is what my family, for whatever reason, chose to call

one's butt or buttocks or backside or ass when I was growing up. But these words that all fit into the category of cuss words, piss, shit, cunt, dick, ass, all of those, those are all words that mean the exact same thing as the word that derived from the Old French.

[14:38] It's just that it was the language that was used by the laborers, by the servants, by the peasants, and therefore considered crass or lowbrow or less special. I use it because I identify with the working class, with the laborers, with the people who don't have time for bullshit and don't care about what fancy language you use if the way that you move through the world is not ethical and toward the freedom and dignity of all beings. It's a political position for me.

[15:15] And I read this thing that some spiritual faith leaders, in this case, it was a Roman Catholic priest who made this really interesting, distinguished words in this really interesting way that I think is how I want to look at it. He said, swearing is making an oath to God or on one's eternal, immortal soul. That's not something we want to do. Cursing literally means to call down the wrath of God onto someone or something. And that is a lack of hospitality or generosity.

[15:56] So we actually don't want to do, we don't want to be cursing people either. But cussing, he says, is transgressing decorum or what is considered polite. And that this group of words that mean very real and concrete things, but we're given this negative connotation because they come from those of the losing class, of the lower class, of those who were not the ones in power. That those words, cussing words, including all of the creative ways we find to use them, when we're not using them to denigrate someone else or to scorn or judge others, when we're using it as a way of speaking that moves through the world in impolite ways, the same way that we are called to move through societies that are unjust and in polite ways

[17:03] and touch the topics that are taboo and address the concerns that are sticky and dirty and icky that have to do with the body, that have to do with suffering. Those are the ways that we are called to be. So perhaps we should redefine what is profane or profanity to be that which causes harm and causes suffering. Maybe the profane is not a certain set of words used by a certain set of lowly people, but rather profanity is the harm that is done by so many in power and those with wealth and those who abuse the access to privilege and power that they have.

[17:50] Maybe that is what we could say is truly profane. Will you pray with me? Holy One, help us to recognize what is truly holy. Help us make our division of that which is sacred and that which is profane and not within the structures that we have been given without question, but rather let us align that which is sacred with that which creates and continues and perpetuates life and life abundant for all of beings in creation. Let profane be the things in our societies, in our structures of power and in our hearts that lead to harm and death.

[18:48] May that which is seen as taboo and unspeakable be the things that we feel empowered by Your Holy Spirit to call out and name as impure, as abominations to the life that You have promised us. Be with us in our community this week and always as we move through an unjust and chaotic world that we may be lightbearers to cut through the bullshit of all of the fake and the harmful and the threatening and the dangerous. May we insist that what is truly profane is that which does not give You glory, that which cuts off and limits life rather than expand it, which is Your holy intention.

[19:46] Surround us and go before us and go behind us. Be under our feet and above our heads. Give us strength, give us perseverance, and give us each other. Now and always we pray. Amen. Thank you for spending a little bit of your day with me and love letters from Reverend Sex. I'm your host, Reverend Alba Onofrio, a.k.a. Reverend Sex, and I'm the executive director and spiritual strategist here at Soulforce, the org that sponsors this podcast. I want to make sure you also know about our Monday show called Shameless Theology, where we talk to queer, trans, and feminist theologians, faith activists, and Christian clergy from a Latina lens.

[20:34] We talk about things like religion, family, sexuality, identity, and home. It's a space where we shamelessly tell the truth to both decolonize our own faith and also amplify the voices of some of the brilliant faith work happening for social justice. This season we're focusing on the concepts from our new book called Spiritual Violence, Religious Phenomena That Defile the Faith. So check out our weekly conversations on Shameless Theology podcast and download our new book on our website at soulforce.org. I hope you've enjoyed this episode of Love Letters from Reverend Sex.

[21:09] If someone you love came to mind during this episode, consider forwarding it as a love letter of your own. Until next time, may your heart be ablaze with purpose and love, and may your spirit forever know that you are precious and beautiful and fiercely loved. We'll talk again soon.