

What is a Queer Christian?

Season 2, Episode 4 | 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, tonight you find me at home in a rainy, stormy evening that is the perfect time to snuggle up with a good book or to sit with a journal and write. And I'm reflecting on a recent trip that I had to United Lutheran Seminary. And while I was there, I got the chance to do one of my favorite things to do, which is to talk to Divinity School students and seminarians. And this particular time, one brave young scholar was willing to ask a question that makes a lot of people uncomfortable.

[02:27] She asked, what is a queer Christian anyway? So this love letter goes out to her and to all of those who were brave and curious enough to ask the uncomfortable questions at school or in church, maybe at Sunday school of faith leaders. For people for whom your wanting to know the truth was more powerful than the taboo of it being impolite to ask the real questions. So for those who might want to know what is a queer Christian and does that really exist?

[03:11] I want to spend some time on that question today. I think it's helpful to break that into two parts. One, I think we need to talk about what are the adjectives that we use to define who we are and the order they go in and how that actually matters for identity. And the second one is a concept of what is queerness in general. So maybe the first way to get at this when I'm trying to explain it is to talk about how when I was growing up, so many of the people in my world identified as Christian before whatever other job or identity they held.

[03:50] So I regularly heard things like, I am a Christian mother. I am a Christian teacher. I am a Christian soccer mom. I am a Christian nurse. And what that meant for those women, and I think what it meant for me when I used that phrase, was that Christianity was the most important and core identity and the way I saw the world. So I was a terrible athlete, but I was on a few athletic teams in high school, and I was a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

[04:33] Now, what that meant to me was that I wasn't just a volleyball player. I was a Christian athlete, which meant everything that I did in the world was a reflection of my faith, of my religion, of my faith community, and maybe a reflection of Jesus Christ directly. And because part of the missionization strategy is to evangelize to other people and get them to come to God, come to Jesus, come to the faith, then I needed to behave in a way that showed who Jesus was, who Christ was, what Christianity was all about in a way that would be attractive and would encourage others to follow a similar lifestyle.

[05:21] So Christian athlete was not only about my faith, it was about how one could expect me to move through the world, the way in which I viewed everything that I came into contact with, and everyone in every situation, I was bringing that lens of faith to the fore. And it played a role in everything, in every piece of my life. I think that's what's happening, or at least that's what I mean, when I use queer Christian now. I am saying that queerness for me is the central lens through which I view the world.

[06:02] It is the way that I look at faith, for example. As a queer Christian, I look at scripture, at the biblical text, at the Christian tradition, the history of the church. I look at all of that through a politicized lens around my gender and sexuality of queerness. Now, maybe that needs some more breaking down, right? Because what does that mean that I'm looking through a queer lens? Sometimes people will ask, isn't queerness just about who you're having sex with or who you're attracted to?

[06:41] And the answer, in my opinion, is no. There's an important distinction I think that we need to make here, at least it's important for me, which is that queer is not synonymous with gay or lesbian or bisexual, for example. It's the difference between what I would say is normal and wanting to fit into the world, the society, the status quo, and a politicized orientation that doesn't want to be a part of that system at all. So I hear a lot of people who say, I am a lawyer or I am a coach or I am a Christian who just happens to be attracted to people of the same sex.

[07:32] Or I just want to live my normal life with my normal house and my partner and be accepted just like any other person. People like that use phrases like, we put our pants on one leg at a time just like everybody else. So I would put people who identify as gay or lesbian or bisexual rather than queer as somebody who says the church is fine or society is fine. We may have things we need to work on to get equal rights or equality in the church, but we feel like we are part of everyday life.

[08:13] We are normal. We are just like everyone else. We just happen to have this one characteristic about us that is about our sexual attraction or who we build family with. And oftentimes I hear folks say, and that's nobody else's business what I do in my own bedroom. And that's an orientation that for me is very much aligned with the system, the society remaining as it is, maybe expanding its rights, expanding its understanding of equality and access. But generally it's about an orientation of wanting to be accepted and fit into the systems as they exist.

[08:52] Whereas I would say queerness, regardless of your gender identity or sexual orientation, is saying I actually don't want to be a part of that system at all. The system is broken. It's messed up and I'm not trying to conform to your system. I actually want a different, more livable way of being in the world and being in community. And in terms of Christianity, being in the faith. So it affects

everything of how we engage. Like, for example, how we understand family.

[09:33] Somebody with a Christian perspective might see a diversity of families in the Bible and might even include gay and lesbian couples as equals saying things like, well, Jesus had two dads and he turned out okay. Or, you know, it's just the same. Or single headed households. They're just alternative versions. This is, of course, a progressive Christianity kind of frame, but it's an orientation toward you're just like us and it's fine. Whereas for queer folks, when we think about family, because of our orientation in the world, both in terms of queerness and how we see relationships, we would point to places in the Bible, for example, Jesus and the disciples, where we have concepts like chosen family.

[10:31] And we would say as queer Christians that chosen family is biblical and that it comes from the idea that we make family through bonds and commitments of love and shared horizons and families rather than just through patrilineal or matrilineal bloodlines. So that's an example of a queer orientation to the world and to Christianity. Others might be things like sexuality in general or bodies, whereas good gay and lesbian couples might see the world in a way that says, yes, we should all be modest or we should all show very little physical affection in public because it's impolite.

[11:21] That's something for the private sphere. Whereas a queer orientation might say, Jesus came into a body that had all human functions, just like any other animal and creature. Why are we shaming the body? Why are we shaming sexuality when it's a normal part of being human and the human experience? And would question why do we have to be modest in certain ways? Why are women expected to be modest, but men are not? Why is sexuality something that is confined to the idea of procreation?

[12:01] What does that mean for people who are not having children, whether by choice, by family setup and dynamic, by being single, et cetera? So it's about this deeper questioning and suspicion around what is the power analysis behind things? I feel like queer folks are always looking at what is the structure of power and who benefits for things being the way they are, rather than accepting them like patriarchy, for example, or using God in strictly male pronouns or male metaphors and images.

[12:37] Why do we have that when the Bible and Christian history has many examples of feminine kinds of references for God or plural, expansive references for God? Why is it that we have this structure this way and who does that benefit? Of course, when male pronouns and masculinity are equated with God, then that places men at a higher position of power within the social hierarchy. So who benefits from masculine narratives around God? Well, generally in society, men do, and a particular kind of masculinity that is virile and Zeus-like.

[13:18] So that's the kind of way that I would talk about what it means to be a queer Christian. It means that the lens through which we're seeing the world is one of queerness, and queerness teaches us to question authority. It teaches us to dig under the way things have supposedly always been, to find new ways, new pathways of understanding about what is true and why are things the way that they are. For example, when talking about biblical authority, a queer lens would say, who made the books of the Bible be the canon, the biblical canon?

[13:59] Oh, it was a group of men who had power, who all came together under the authority of a Roman emperor, and they voted and had politicking happening. If you vote for my book, I'll vote for yours kind of things. Okay, if that was who decided who got to be in and who got to be out in terms of the biblical text, then what does that say about how we should read it, for example? So that's a way of moving through the world that doesn't just trust without questioning.

[14:30] It's willing to be brave and ask the deeper questions about how we got to the way that things are. It's a way of looking at Jesus that sees him as someone like us. So if you've ever heard folks say, Jesus was trans. Maybe I should do an entire other love letters on that one now that I say that out loud, because I get asked that question all the time. How was Jesus trans? But you hear folks say, Jesus was trans, or Jesus was against systems of power.

[15:04] Jesus didn't follow the rules. He generally questioned why things were the way that they were. His behavior was very much counterculture, the way he engaged with women, the way he moved through the world as an itinerant minister, the way that he claimed and proclaimed equality and goodness and equal access of all people, regardless of status and money. He, for those of us who identify as queer Christians, most of us see Jesus as someone who was anti-imperialist, or at the very least was preaching for a kingdom of God that was based on peace and equality, rather than the Pax Romana or the Roman Empire of his day that was occupying his people's lands and had them under systems of oppression.

[16:04] We would say that Jesus was murdered through capital punishment by the state, by the Roman Empire, that he was an example of how imperial powers use human bodies as ways to wage war in the political sphere, that he was a tool of suppression, as well as an example of revolution in an oppressed system. I think we also take the idea of being rebels in the sense of rebelling against things that are unjust around big, big systems with long histories and powerful weapons, and we live closer to what Paul says in Romans, when he talks about not being conformed to the pattern of this world.

[17:07] Being a queer Christian for me means living in an orientation that is in and of itself countercultural, that for me my faith calls me to have hope even when it feels hopeless around me. It calls me to believe in life after death, that death doesn't have the final word because there is something greater behind it. It calls me to be a voice of justice and equality and unrelenting belief in what is possible through the power of the living word and the Holy Spirit as it moves and breathes in this day, even in the midst of overwhelming evidence that we should despair, that we are in an apocalypse, that our ability to continue forward is limited and that people as a whole are evil or at the very least

[18:05] apathetic in real life and death kind of situations. So that question of what does it mean to be a queer Christian is such a powerful one to me because instead of saying I'm a Christian queer, I am saying it is because of the blessing of my spirituality that I was raised with combined with the blessing of being queer, of being part of the LGBTQIA plus community that I have had experiences and been able to ask questions and been willing to go into the difficult, uncomfortable, sometimes taboo topics to find the truth.

[18:50] And what happened for me on the other side was coming out of that in a faith that it feels so much more rooted in truth and power and my own possibility for liberation and our people's hope for a new kingdom, a new kin-dom where we are equal, where there isn't empire and monarchy, where there isn't one above another, but rather where we live together in harmony in ways that support and affirm all creation, not just humans. So that's what I'm thinking about.

[19:31] And I think what I wanted to say to that brave student who was willing to ask the uncomfortable question of me, a queer pastor who claims to be a queer Christian. Will you pray with me? God of expansiveness, God of creation in its most creative and diverse forms, help us be the holy troublemakers. Sit in the hard and difficult questions for us. Be there with us as we are brave to ask about what things mean and ask people to speak plainly when they claim your word and your name.

[20:32] Surround the holy, sacred questions of being and help the lenses of our lived experiences be something that opens our minds, that expands our horizons, that makes us more loving, more willing to listen, more understanding of the difference with others. May our lenses be our strengths. May our differences be what helps us to find our footing in a very chaotic and uncertain world. Be with us in the questions and be with us in community as we question together and bless all of the brave souls who want to know you more and are willing to tread through dangerous waters of questions unknown, of truths unseen to find what is possible on the other side.

[21:31] May that be a faith that is strong and a life that is abundant in you and your holy and precious and holy troublemaker kind of ways we have come to call you in the moments of questioning and in the moments of certainty 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, aka Reverend Sex, and I'm the executive director and spiritual strategist here at Soulforce, the org that sponsors this podcast.

[22:18] 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. 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.

[22:50] 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. 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.