

Courage and Solidarity: Stories From the Global South

Season 2, Episode 6 | 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.

[01:39] Welcome. I'm so glad you're here. Tonight, beloveds, you will find me in my home state of North Carolina. I'm out in the country in eastern North Carolina and I'm listening to the katydids and the crickets. I am under a big night sky and thinking of you. I know that so many of us could use a little extra boost of courage right now. There are so many places and spaces and times that need us to be courageous in our words and actions to interrupt white Christian supremacy and courage may feel like it's in short supply right now.

[02:28] So I thought that I would share this love letter for those of us who need a little boost of courage from a place that always fortifies my spirit and gives me strength. I am in Durham, North Carolina, where so many of my loved ones are and have lived and the history of Black power here, of independence, of struggle and resistance. This place is just always going to be a heart home for me and I hope that the energy of this space, of this place, that is filled with so much courage and beauty and boldness can offer you a little bit of space during our love letters today of support in your courageous actions and your bold thoughts and your moves toward helping us create the world that we all deserve.

[03:31] So welcome to love letters. I want to tell you a little bit about courage as I find it in the world and particularly I'll start with the story of this week. We have historically at Soulforce done seed grants for local communities who ask for our theological resources. So our free spirit resource library is available online and it talks about things like the truth about Sodom and Gomorrah or breaking open the story of Mary and the right to choose one's own motherhood.

[04:17] We talk about gender diversity in the Bible and the gender of God. So we have these few very accessible resources that are liberatory approaches to the sacred text and we often find that human rights defenders in other places in the world are spending their time fighting for justice and

for equality and for access to basic human rights and dignity and theological education is incredibly important but it's something that most folks don't have access to in the same ways that we do.

[04:55] So these resources are created specifically for our community members, church groups, social justice organizations, book clubs, those kind of things and we have a program where folks in local communities, activists can ask for support in getting these resources translated into their local languages so that they can use them on the ground to help support the liberation of all people and particularly the equal rights and dignity of LGBTQ plus people. So this happens now we have resources in seven languages and one of those languages, one of those places, I won't tell you where because it is not safe to do so but a couple of years ago when things are getting really intense in this particular country in the global south,

[05:53] local organizers that we were in community with asked us if we could translate the text and so we work with local organizers, local translators, local printers to get some copies on the ground for folks who need it and in this particular case, we did this a couple of years ago and I'm going to take a little side detour to tell you another story that's related. So this particular language in which this theological resource is in, we got feedback recently that some of the language that's used needs correcting or there's other options or better options to refer to some of the words in this local language and the side story is that this is a conversation that comes up all the time

[06:52] and you may already know this but for those of you who don't, for folks in queer and trans community, particularly in languages that don't have a lot of vocabulary for queer and trans folks, we always have this tension and this push and pull because if we're writing a resource about Sodom and Gomorrah, we want to make sure that local folks understand what it is that we're talking about. We need to say things like homosexuality in certain ways that help folks know the context of what we're even speaking of.

[07:34] On the other hand, oftentimes in our local languages, there is no respectful way to talk about homosexuality, bisexuality, queerness, transness, etc. The only words that people in community on the ground know, particularly those of our community who are not within the LGBT community but other folks, the folks we're trying to change hearts and minds, we're trying to engage with particularly around human rights, the words that they know for our people and our community are all derogatory. So we're always in this conversation with translators, with local activists around which words do we use so that people will understand what we're talking about and which words we use that lean toward how we can be the most respectful of our community and not reify harm by using language that is hurtful.

[08:34] I know that's true even in our context in the U.S. where for a lot of folks, the word queer is something that is still painful and still harmful because it's something that has been used against them throughout their lives. We had a conversation a few years ago on Teología sin Vergüenza on our shameless podcast in Spanish where a wonderful trans woman pastor was telling us about how she will never use the word queer, she will never wear a t-shirt because that is the word that people use when they harm her on a regular basis, when she has to run from people in the streets, when she as a working class person doesn't have the privilege of being able to just escape life

[09:25] in the working class world where it's really hostile. So that little side story is a little bit about the complexities that we're always faced with when we're trying to get resources and the conversation into local languages that only have derogatory words to talk about our community members. Recently someone came back and was like, hey there's this word, this might work better in this context and one of our beloved staff members reached out to the person that we were coordinating with in this country and she wrote back and said, let me see if the designer still has that digital copy of the design work because every country has its own design specifications and even paper sizes and things that they need for their own printers so they're almost always designed in local communities

[10:22] and she got back to us a few days later and said, I'm sorry the designer no longer has the file and then she put this little phrase, she said, because you know it's a little illegal here to have these kinds of files and it made me smile and giggle a little bit because what a gentle way to remind us in the global north that we have at least for now the privilege of having files on our computer, books on our shelves, conversations in real time, in real life and on the internet where we can just freely talk about our opinions about many things and that reminded me of this same human who I love and adore, she's phenomenal but I want to tell you the story about how our people are brave particularly in the global south

[11:32] particularly in some of the most hostile contexts on the planet so this is the story of how I was humbled and deeply honored and incredibly convicted to do the work that we do in Soulfence so in this country where we were getting these resources, just a handful of them translated into local languages for local activists to work with local communities, it is punishable by up to 20 years in prison for quote promoting homosexuality and for me that would be enough to dissuade me from doing most anything and yet our local LGBT community, particularly our queer women, they decided that in the face of that kind of law that what they needed was actually more theological education rather than less so rather than slow down they wanted to make theological education from a liberatory inclusive frame their primary work

[12:49] so it was with this context and with this group of people that we worked with local folks to get these resources translated and I understood intellectually what it meant to have the threat of 20 years in prison for promoting homosexuality but it really hit me in a different way when learning about it on the ground so in this particular country the people who were doing the translating couldn't receive money from Soulfence because it could be flagged by the government and we are on a pro LGBT and promoting homosexuality list so in order to keep the translators safe and the printers one brave woman received the money from us directly and then she connected with the different translators and printers who were helping on the project completely incognito and underground

[13:58] and she was the official contact for them so that if something happened it would only trace back to her and it would not get the printer or the translator into trouble so that was the first step the second step was that people had to be brave enough to do the work to use their skills as translators, designers, printers to print these resources and we got told the story in a very gentle and humble way but the reality was that in order to print these books in that country they had to print them in the dead of night when the print shop was closed and all the employees had gone

home and they printed the pages out of order they printed them in such a way so that if a copy were left on the printer of a page or if the file didn't get fully deleted and somebody came across it

[15:00] that it wasn't something that someone could recognize quickly because all the pages were jumbled around and then she told us about how in order to compile the resources now that they had been printed in this random order to keep them from being super decipherable that she and the printer went to her apartment in the dead of night after printing these resources and hand assembled them in order to create these little booklets that in and of itself was enough to humble me to make me reflective in a different way of what this group of folks were willing to risk in order to get information out about inclusive theologies and liberating theologies but not only that once the resources were printed they got stored in small batches under different people's beds or mattresses or closets all throughout the city where they were working

[16:07] because any one group of people needed to be able to have access to them while they didn't want all the resources in one place and that way they shared some of the burden and some of the risk and sometimes it's really difficult for folks to recognize how intense it is in other parts of the world or in other communities because we don't often confront it so directly that's certainly true for me even with all of my travel so I tell you this story to remind you that there are so many people of courage who believe in the work of liberating our spirits as well as our minds of doing the education work that help people understand what is possible and what is true

[16:59] this wound that comes from the idea that God hates us or that God will send us to eternal punishment that kind of harm is able to be healed, it is able to be defied, it is able to be contested and for me I don't know what's true for you but for me when I hear stories like these of so many people not just one person but a handful of people, a dozen people willing to put their safety on the line in order to get the word out that is indeed good news, it is a model of strength and courage and conviction that I aspire to live into every day so when I'm feeling not so brave or wondering if I should or shouldn't do something to interrupt white Christian supremacy

[18:00] I think about our community in that country, I think about these brave women and how much they were willing to risk and continue to risk to talk about the possibilities of the freedom of loving who we love and having that being blessed and accepted by the divine so I hope that these words about our people, real true stories of folks around us in the world who feel connected to us and who are part of our struggle even if we don't know them by name it is my deep hope that it gives you a little boost of courage, of fortification to know that you are not alone and they are not alone and if we each do our own part, what is within our reach to do with bravery and with conviction

[18:55] that so much is possible and we truly are undefeatable will you pray with me? God of justice, have mercy on us thank you for the grace that is so abundantly offered for us help us to respond to your mercy and your grace with courage, with boldness help us feel the siblings that we have all over the world and particularly in the global south may we be willing to risk just a little in order to support those who give so much who fight every day for life and breath, for basic dignity and basic human needs may you find us each worthy of the solidarity of these beautiful souls may we find ways to plug in and to be a part of the resistance to anything that does not have your name

on it

[20:09] to anything that is not filled with your love, for anything that does not just speak of you of all of the life and all of the love and all of the possibility that you put all around us all the time may we sound more like the divine, the source of life and love and breath help us to not be fearful, you tell us in scripture over and over again, be not afraid help us to know that it's okay to feel afraid and yet we do the work anyway we be a part of the answers anyway, we be a part of new creation anyway please guide us to find what path is ours and what work is for us to do specifically

[21:01] may we all come together and be together and fight together and love together and create something new together in all of the names we come to call you in times of fear and of courage we pray, amen 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 so check out our weekly conversations on shameless theology podcast

[22:23] 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