

The Weight of Authority & Releasing the Burden That Was Never Yours

Season 2, Episode 9 | 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. This afternoon is warm and windy. There's a typhoon, not close enough to be in danger, but close enough that we can feel the ripples of the ocean and the wind together. So I'm holding that today alongside a conversation that I want to have with you about authority. This love letter is for those who have been hurt by authority figures and for those who are in a position of authority over others. I have a kind of normal set of questions that I get asked in so many events that folks want to know.

[02:36] And I was asked again this past week in an event why I became a pastor. And my goodness, there's so many answers to that question. I had a lot of concerns and curiosities about what the Bible really said about queer and trans people. And I wanted to know if God really hates us or if it's really a matter of choice or willpower or our cross to bear. I wanted to understand the nature of suffering and if hell was real. There were so many things that I wanted to know, and I feel like seminaries and divinity schools are kind of disproportionately filled with queer and trans folks because so many of us are trying to pray the gay away or find answers to deep-seated questions about who we are and what God thinks of us

[03:42] and what we're supposed to do with the realities that we encounter as LGBT people. So I wanted to understand so much of that. I had so many questions, and all of that is real. But I was also interested in what the pastor or the priest knew that made him the expert. And of course, it's almost always a him. At least in my life, I hadn't known any female pastors before I went to divinity school. I wanted to understand why I should defer to his authority, to his political opinions and his rules about what I should or should not wear or about my sexual relationships and a million prohibitions about my own body.

[04:32] I wanted to know how they got to be the ones to speak on behalf of God. So when I was working with newly arrived immigrants, there were, of course, the vast majority of folks who came because they were escaping gang violence and war or who were displaced due to natural disasters. And so many come for better economic and educational opportunities for them and their children. But there were also a significant number of people who came primarily to have the opportunity to live out their gender or sexuality more freely and more safely.

[05:18] This country still doesn't offer an abundance of opportunities for trans folks. So for no small number of trans women in particular, they would dress in drag basically as a man and work in highway crews or on construction crews as men during the day. And then they would come home and clean up and transform into their more feminine expressions for the rest of the time. It was a beautiful time in the early 2000s in North Carolina. There was a thriving drag community that overlapped in these same social circles as well.

[06:01] And we would often have at the community center where I worked, either workshops or support groups or conversations after hours. And by that time I was young, but so were they. And I was the executive director, which often gave me a certain level of respect because of that position. But every time that I had conversations with people as a Christian and as a queer Christian in particular, the conversation was almost always the same. And it went something like this. They would say to me, I know God hates me and I'm a sinner and going to hell, but I still wish my mama would accept me.

[06:49] Or I wish I could find someone to share my life with. Or I wish I could marry my partner of however many years. And then of course I would say, well, first and foremost, God doesn't hate you. And second, you're not going to hell just because you're bisexual or trans or gay or whatever. And their answer, and it was almost universally the same. And it devastated me and infuriated me in equal measure. They would basically say a more polite version of who are you to speak for God?

[07:29] The logic went like this. And I have it almost memorized because I had this conversation so many times during those years. They would say something like my priest or pastor or youth minister or insert other, some faith leader here, said that I am unnatural or I'm living outside of God's will and I no longer have covering. Or I am excommunicated or I've been told that I'm demon possessed. And I know I should change, but I've tried and I've prayed and I can't change.

[08:10] So he says that I'm definitely going to burn in hell because I'm disobeying God's laws for nature. And I'm bringing shame to my family, which is almost worse. And then they would always say to me, and you are not a priest or a pastor, so you don't have any authority to speak about my sin or my soul. So fast forward to today, 20 years later, and a beautiful young trans person from Manila posted a video on social media. And they were in tears and I was in tears watching it.

[08:54] But they were talking about an event that we had this past weekend. We call it Culto Queer because it started in Latin America with our shameless theology team. But now it's traveled all over the place. And it's a drag centered experimental spiritual healing service for LGBTQIA plus people. Here they called it Manila Queer Mass. It was specifically for the deaf, queer and trans community here in the Philippines. It was a one of a kind and historic event for our community here.

[09:32] We had people who flew in from other islands and spent many hours in cars or on buses coming into the capital from the outside provinces. And as part of that service, we always do what I call a reverse altar call. So in that experience, normally pastors call people up to the altar to repent for their sins as sinners and to accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. And to say the prayer of confession and then receive baptism and membership into the congregation.

[10:16] But in this version, I, as an ordained Christian pastor with institutional standing and spiritual authority because of that, stand before a room full of LGBTQIA plus people and offer them a symbolic apology on behalf of the religious institutions that have caused so much spiritual violence and harm. And led to incredible shame and stigma for our people. Whenever possible, I also have local LGBT pastors join me at the altar for that confession of sin on behalf of the church. You know, it doesn't change what has happened to people and it doesn't mean that bad things and discrimination won't continue to happen in the name of God.

[11:11] And it doesn't instantly heal everything, but it can be the beginning of a healing journey. And for that, it's really important to have participation and action. So the way that I ritualize that part of the service is that as people come in, we give out small white stones and we just tell folks to hold onto them for later. And then when it becomes this time for the reverse altar call, we talk about how these small white stones represent the weight of purity culture and of the Christian teachings that have taught us that we are the problem, that our gender and sexuality are sinful and that our bodies are suspect and our love and communities are evil.

[12:06] All those words and actions done in the name of God that hurt us, they are heavy and they carry the weight of shame and they get compounded with all of the different identities and experiences that we have. I then explain how that burden should never have been yours to carry. That sin is not yours. It's not yours to hold, and it should never have been given to you. And then I invite folks to bring that stone, that burden, to the altar, to bring it back where it belongs, which is with the institutional church, not with the queer and trans community.

[12:54] And as they come to leave their rock, I take fresh flowers from the altar, a bouquet as diverse as the congregation, usually that I have gone the day before to the local flower market and collected, kind of like a bee from station to station, from booth to booth, to gather together for the altar and for this particular ritual. And then we offer each person a flower in exchange for their stone, a blessing instead of a burden. It's always a transformational experience every time we do it for all of us.

[13:35] And this beautiful young person was just sharing how hard it was to believe in that moment that this was happening, that there was this faith leader, this queer person who was a real pastor, who was saying they were sorry to the community, that many people had been waiting a really long time for that apology. And how healing it was as they reflected on it here in this past week. I tell you this story, one, because it is the thing that most touched my heart today.

[14:12] And also just to tell you a little bit, or maybe to show you what I mean when I talk about authority. I truly believe that all of us have the power to do theology all the time on our own. And I don't believe that people need a pastor to give them permission to be who they are or to love who they love. But as long as we do have certain people set apart as official faith leaders, and as long as

people are speaking on God's behalf, I do believe that there is a place and a role for those of us who have institutional authority.

[14:54] And that it's our responsibility to help undo the harm that has been done in the name of God, as we promise to serve Creator and dedicate our lives to healing. So, if you are a faith leader or have access to institutional power within the church or your religious community, I invite you into the trenches of contending with the consequences of religion-based violence. And to be a part of the solution, to be a part of the honesty of telling what has happened in the name of God and faith.

[15:34] And to be a part of healing, because our community needs it. And if you are someone who needs to bring a burden of shame to the altar, I invite you also to come, to leave the weight of sin that should never have been yours to hold. Come, leave it here. Trust that it will be handled, transformed, transmuted into something else. Composted into something that can be helpful. Something from which good things can grow. Won't you pray with me? Humble God. Crucified God. The one with scars. The one with history.

[16:46] Thank you for showing us the way toward justice. Thank you for naming what is sin and what is harm. Help us to better align those definitions of sin with that which causes harm and that which destroys life. Rather than putting the burden of purity culture and of sin on the shoulders and bodies of your beloved vulnerable children. Help us to know that we are not a sin just by existing. That the burden of shame should lie with those who cause harm and not those who choose love.

[17:40] Surround our community during these turbulent times. Help us know that we are forever anchored in you because your love transcends all identities and expands beyond all regulations and has always resisted the status quo imposed by powers and principalities. Help us know that your love is a gift and that our identities are an expression of your love for us, for creation, for diversity, and for the world. May we be able to set that great burden of shame down and in its place pick up the blessing of love of ourselves, of others, of our community, and our world that all may be healed and all may be well. Amen.

[18:45] 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. 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.

[19:15] 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. If someone you love came to mind during this episode, consider forwarding it as a love letter of your own.

[19:51] 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.