

Choosing Love When Fear Threatens to Divide Us

Season 2, Episode 10 | 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. On the ocean side in a very small island here in the more than 7,000 island archipelago called the Philippines. And I am reflecting on the work that we've been able to do while we've been here and I'm just feeling honored and blessed to sit with that. I often come to the ocean because she is the only body big enough that I feel like can help regulate all of the emotional turbulence and turmoil that I often carry in my body from spending so much time with our people who carry such heavy burdens of resistance and love, but also discrimination and harm.

[02:29] So you find me reflective tonight and I'm sending this love letter out to all of us who need a reminder to choose love over fear when the days get heavy and the emotions get chaotic and turbulent. This past week I had the honor and pleasure of doing a question and answer session with an amazing LGBTQ youth advocacy group in Manila they're called Pantai and that means equality in Tagalog. And we got the regular questions that I always get, which is like, what does the Bible say about queer people?

[03:14] And what is true about Sodom and Gomorrah? Can we talk about that? Is there a theology within Christianity that ever accepts us? Why is God so punitive? And if I choose to believe in a God who is loving and accepts me as I am, isn't that just me making God into my own image and isn't that idolatry? And what do I do when I've spent my life in a very particular religious setting and I don't want to believe those things anymore, but they are completely ingrained in how I see myself and how I see the world?

[03:55] All of those are amazing questions. And if you would like for me to go over any of those answers of my take on those questions, then drop us a note, either an email or on social media and let me know and it will get added to the queue. So we went through lots of those questions and there was beautiful musicians who were expressing their experiences of queerness and coming out and love in the closet through music and performance. And then there was this raw moment where

a mother of queer young people got really honest and emotional and through tears, she asked and reflected.

[04:44] You know, it's like one of those questions where it isn't quite a question. It's more of an expression of hurt or emotion, but it comes out in a way that's like, can we talk about this? And I was so grateful for it. And through her tears, she asked the really simple question of, why aren't there more of us? Why do people continue to choose hate over love? Why is it so hard to get people on our side? And why does it feel like religion is always the reason on the other side?

[05:21] It was an honest question. It felt like it came straight from her heart as the mother of people who are queer, who she loves in a community of people that she loves, but feels like is often on the outside. So I thought I would bring that here to our love letter and share a little bit about what I told them. I believe that it's not hate that they're choosing, but rather it's fear. I feel like most of us progressive folks have heard all about the cheap tactic of creating a common enemy like queer and trans people or feminism or immigrants or poor people in order to try to get folks to align, to align on your side a strategy of division and hate

[06:15] that we are currently just seeing all around us on full display. Fear of immigrants taking our jobs, which leads to hate through xenophobia, or women having autonomy over our bodies, which leads to hate in the form of misogyny, or fear around our own sexuality and gender that leads to transphobia and we talk about that a lot, how the right creates enemies through othering people, groups of people and labeling them as dangerous. I talk about it a lot, actually, in my book under the idea of spiritual terrorism.

[06:57] But what we don't talk about enough, I think, is how religion and Christianity in particular fit into that whole strategy of divide and create common enemies through fear of somebody stealing your jobs or ruining families or having the power to say yes or no about what happens to them. And I think in particular, all of this fits into religion in a particular way because of white Christian supremacy. Because the Bible could be used to talk about how we should love our neighbor and how we should welcome the immigrant.

[07:45] There are hundreds of references of how we should care for those who are most vulnerable, or how we should be on the side of equality for all and the leadership abilities of women. So it's not like there isn't a choice in the matter or that there isn't a case to be made for inclusion and justice from a biblical standpoint. So one of the things that I want to talk about is how we choose one side over the other, how we choose the messages of division and fear over those of love and inclusion.

[08:26] And one of the things I talk about often that I will continue to talk about because it's of great concern to me is about our teachings around love and particularly on our beliefs about love in relationship to fear. Even though the Bible uses the phrase fear not or don't be afraid dozens and dozens of times throughout the Bible, the Old and the New Testaments, we still learn that people of faith should quote-unquote fear God. Many know this to be a mistranslation.

[09:04] The word in terms of fear is actually respect. We should respect God. But we get this understanding from church and from religion that love and fear can go together in our relationship

with God, with this Heavenly Father, with this figure that is supposed to be our divine parent. And then we believe that about God, this God that is supposed to be our closest love relationship and our example of the most perfect love. That gets projected on what we believe about human love.

[09:45] So, consequently, all kinds of physical, emotional, and spiritual violence gets normalized in this process. We learn that it's okay to be scared of someone that we're in a relationship with, even someone who's supposed to love me. And even if they have a lot more power than I do, this certainly rings true in many parent-child relationship. I feel like I see this often on social media and other places where we think that we're supposed to be scared of our parents, or our parents make us feel like we are at their mercy, even when we're grown, whether it's through cultural expectations or through actual physical power or financial power.

[10:41] But there's this idea that it's okay for us as parents, on the other side, to enforce what we want from our children through the fear of violence or the fear of rejection. We are sold this image in interpersonal relationships in general and in love relationships and romantic relationships in particular, that we have this image of God as a punitive, jealous, and rigid divinity who gets angry. And we conflate and are taught to conflate love and respect with fear. And that model then repeats itself in human relationships, not surprisingly.

[11:28] I feel like so many people come to Christianity not because they fall in love with God, the Christian God, or even the Christian teachings, but because they are scared of hell and they're scared of God and they're trying to avoid punishment. This is certainly true, I would say, for most children who make the decision to become a Christian and through conversion tactics around calling us sinners and saying that we deserve hell for all of eternity. And then that fear and trying to avoid punishment by the powers that be then gets repeated again and again in society.

[12:08] We're trying to avoid the wrath of those with power, whether it's our bosses at work or our government officials, the police, or religious leaders. In church, we tell people to listen rather than talk. Kids in Sunday school are chastised for asking too many questions. Doubts and concerns about the Bible and religious authority are labeled as rebellious or failures of faith or signs of a poor spiritual life. And so in this way, we quickly learn that obedience is the price we pay for belonging and compliance is the currency of safety.

[12:52] Then that gets mapped out onto the rest of our lives. It's easier not to question the authorities. It's easier to keep my head down and not resist the system. And it's okay for us to be scared of our law enforcement, of our elected officials, of our leaders, that it's normal to live in fear, in fear of punishment and consequences of being who we are. And practically speaking, it's just pragmatic for us to try to avoid all that. Fear is such a controlling force in all of our lives and all of our societies.

[13:40] One of the things that makes me love our LGBTQIA plus people so, so much that we as a people choose love over fear time and time and time again. In so many ways, it's easier to just go along rather than to resist, to let the tide carry us rather than to go against the flow. We have an entire community to comply with the current mandates around gender and sexuality. Even though fear is justified, it's so real and so strong, we as a people choose love and life, even though sometimes it really does feel like we're not sure we can actually survive it.

[14:33] But I came out because the desire to belong for who I truly am, to find my own people, and that desire to be in community, that for me was greater than my fear of all the bad things that could happen to me once I was out. And to me, that's a miracle. So many of us are isolated and yet we have a similar experience, that something deep, let's call it the spark of the divine or the Imago Dei, there's just something there that's so strong that it overpowers the fear.

[15:20] Our longing for authenticity and for love and for each other and for life, this force, it becomes more powerful than the fear of judgment or even of violence and rejection. We live in a society where it's so much easier to go along, to get along, and the threats of violence are constant for those who don't conform. It is incredibly brave and beautiful to choose love over fear day after day after day. And that's what our people do. It's like what Jesus taught us.

[16:07] Some things are difficult, particularly love and our own truth. I believe that Jesus knew full well that his message of equality and love could get him killed by the state. He had the opportunity to retract his claims, to take back his teachings in order to save his own life, and he didn't. He knew they wouldn't let him get away with love and power and empire. They gave him the opportunity to recant, to take back all of that stuff he said so that he could go on and have a nice, normal, comfortable life.

[16:54] And he said no. He resisted the hegemonic powers and principalities. I'm sure he was scared. I mean, how could he not be? But he chose love and it cost him greatly, and for us, choosing love over fear always comes with consequences. But it is my deep hope that when we are brave and choose love, that we can feel the lineage of Jesus and that kinship, that it is strong, that it is alive in us. And I wish for us that all of our love may be reciprocated back to us, so that we can also do the math of the cost-benefit analysis and conclude the same thing that he did, which is that love is always worth it in the end.

[17:52] Will you pray with me? Beloved one, the one who casts out fear, the one who teaches us to love, help us understand your love more clearly. Help us reject the notion that fear can ever be conflated with love and respect. Help us to understand your words. Help us to understand your actions. Help us to see the divine in each other. Give us fortitude and strength for the journey ahead. May we always be so brave in your example that we always choose love over fear.

[18:49] Cover us and protect us in our fight for freedom and equality. Protect those who are most exposed and most vulnerable. Give strength and courage to those who step out from the conflation of obedience as faith. May we be fortified and persevere. May we be recognized in community. May we receive the benefit of love and belonging, not in exchange for compliance and obedience, but rather in exchange for our own true selves, for the vulnerability of showing the world who we are. Bless this community and keep us always.

[19:42] In your holy and precious name 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. 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.

[20:21] 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 sexual 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.

[21:01] Until next time, may your heart be ablaze with love and be fiercely loved. We'll talk again soon.