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#300: LGBTQ Christian Progress

Matthew 7, Genesis 32:22-31

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PODCAST START:

Brian: Welcome to the Queer Theology podcast!

Fr. Shay: Where each episode, we take a queer look at the week's lectionary readings. We're the co-founders of QueerTheology.com and the hosts for this podcast. I'm Father Shay Kearns

B: And I'm Brian G. Murphy.

OMG, you guys, gals, and non-binary pals. This is episode 300 of Queer Theology Podcast.

FS: 300!

B: Episode 300. Shay, can you even believe it?

FS: Cannot believe it. This is wild. 300 episodes. It's been so much fun. It feels like we just started, and it also feels like we've been doing this forever.

BS: For our entire lives, yeah.

FS: Yes. It's wonderful all around. So happy 300 to you, Brian, and to all of our listeners. We're so grateful for all of your support over these many, many years. This is the sixth year of Queer Theology.

B: Happy episode 300 to you, as well. When we started this 300 episodes ago, you were like, let's start a weekly Bible podcast. And podcasts were not nearly as popular, and also people weren't doing seasons. So we just dove right into a weekly podcast, and it just kept on going and going and going.

We found out recently that this is the longest running LGBTQ Christian podcast, which is really cool and an honor. And so we're going to talk about the Bible in this episode, but also we want to take some time to reflect on the past six years.

So Shay, what is this past six years meant to you?

FS: Yeah, it's wild to think about what was happening in the LGBTQ Christian space six years ago.

B: Oh my God, I know.

FS: Right? Yeah, so six years, so 2013. And at that point when you and I came up with this idea to start this website and also the podcast: the podcast was one of the first things that we started along with the website, was this sense that there were only two things really happening. There was apologetics work, like looking at those seven clobber passages.

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B: Yeah, is it okay to be LGBT? Sort of always defending yourself against these, like you were saying, seven passages. That people have been doing for decades, right?

FS: Always, always, always. So there was that work. And then there was like queer theology work that was happening in academia that was amazing and life giving and totally inaccessible to anyone.

B: Very dry, very dense.

FS: Yeah. And so we wanted to step into this space of like we believe that we can set aside the "is it okay?" conversation, like we're done with that.

B: Spoiler alert.

FS: And we can create life-giving resources that are accessible to everyone. So when you look around now and you see all of these books, none of that existed six years ago. We were really the first people in that space to do this kind of accessible queer theology work. And it's been so beautiful to watch it grow and to watch people find life in it.

B: It was lonely in the beginning.

FS: It was so lonely.

B: A lot of people didn't get it, a lot of people thought that we were too far out there, that we needed to be more patient. There were no other sort of popular podcasts, or like you were saying, books or YouTube channels, and so we got a lot of flack for presenting this sort of bold, justice-oriented, queer and trans centered, body positive, sex positive, radically inclusive version of Christianity. And taking the text each week and giving it a queer take, and looking at the clobber passages, but from a completely different perspective, and finding our queerness in other parts of the Bible, like your sermon on Ezekiel and the dry bones, and your book on Doubting Thomas. It's been cool, also, to see other people sort of like catch the fire and step up and start sort of offering their own perspectives doing this work as well. So it's been really cool to watch this sort of the queer Christian space shift over, over time.

FS: Yeah, it's amazing, right? That I would say our first three years were a lot of people telling us that we were moving too fast, that we weren't being nice enough, that we really needed to have patience, and love, and concern for all of the people that were screaming that we were going to hell.

B: Yeah.

FS: And we were like, no, actually we've done that long enough. We're going to do something different. And to watch now that that tide has turned. And I really think that we were on the front edge of turning that tide. And so I feel really grateful for my own stubbornness, and for your stubbornness, and for being stubborn with you. I think the two of us together were able to prop each other up when it got really hard. And there's been a lot of really, really hard over

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the last six years in the midst of the really, really beautiful, right? It's not easy to do this work, and to have been, I think, often so far out ahead of the rest of the folks that are doing this work. And really being the first to pave a way requires more energy and effort. And there's been a cost, and it's been tough, but it's also been good. And now here we are at episode 300.

B: Oh my God, mind is blown. Yeah. But I'm like really proud of the past six years. I'm not sure that I've stuck with anything for six years other than my relationship with Peter. It's been beautiful. And I really loved and appreciated the folks that I have met along the way through this work. People that listen to the podcast and then write in or follow us on Twitter, and we get to know each other virtually, or have come to meetups, or we met at conferences, or have joined Sanctuary Collective and we get to go deeper together.

It's been really cool.

And some some folks are only with Queer Theology for a season, and they find their health and healing and hope, and they move on to other parts of their lives. And some folks have been with us and supporting us and a part of this community online for all six years, and so some amazing relationships have come out of it as well. And everyday we're sort of meeting new folks and that's been really cool. So yeah, I'm just really proud of the past six years and hopeful for the future.

FS: Yeah. Yeah, well I mean, this is a Bible podcast, so let's dive into some Bible work today. We're going to kind of take a break from the lectionary and instead each of us are going to share our favorite Bible passages. I'm going to try and think of one that is not Doubting Thomas, because I feel like I talk about that one all the time. So I'm going to pick a second favorite Bible passage.

But what about you, Brian? If you had to pick a favorite Bible passage, what is it and why?

B: I have so many. As you all might know and one that I'm going to talk about in depth is one that I've talked about before. I don't know about on this podcast, but I made a video about it, so you all might have heard about it. But quickly first, one of my other favorites is from 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

"Test everything, hold fast to that which is good."

As sort of what is resonating with me evolves over time, I like to really hold onto and remember this one. Because I remember being this queer closeted, high school teenager and trying to figure it out if it was okay to be queer, and where my place in the world and the church was, and somehow finding this Bible passage and being like, "Oh yeah, the questions are okay, the questions are good, the questions are biblical." And whatever is good and right and true can stand up to that examination, and I don't have to be afraid of that, and truth is on the other side. And so that has sort of guided me from coming out, to having sex, to being an activist, to doing this work. So that's like one of my touchstones.

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But the one that I want to share today is Matthew 7:15-20. And this is Jesus speaking, and I'm going to be reading from the Common English Bible.

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you dressed like sheep, but inside they are vicious wolves. You will know them by their fruit. Do people get bunches of grapes from thorny weeds, or do they get figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit, and every rotten tree produces bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, and a rotten tree can't produce good fruit. Every tree that doesn't produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. Therefore you will know them by their fruit."

And I just love this passage because it cuts through so much of the bullshit that often surrounds discussions of queerness or sexuality, and Christianity and the Bible. And it's like Jesus giving us this really clear rubric that is like: look at the results. What happens as the result? And I think that the results of non-affirming theology, their fruit is clear. It's bad. It's bad fruit pulled from thorny weeds, right? There's like death, depression, suicidal ideation, attempted suicide, completed suicide, fracturing of families, loss of faith, just like really shitty stuff. And the fruits of affirming theology, I have said this before, testify to it's like rightness, right? That flourishing comes, a return to wholeness comes, restoring of communities and families come, thriving of faith life.

And that also, it's not just about is it okay to be LGBT? We can't stop there. And I think that's the work that we're constantly trying to do is to keep the conversation moving, and that this rubric of looking at the fruits can also be applied to sort of any of the other theological work that we're doing. So when we're talking about transitioning, or trans bodies or the theology around that, or polyamory, when we say here's where we find God, and we can see that goodness is there, then we can just know without having to, say, write a 25 page academic dissertation to prove why gay sex is good, or why polyamory is okay, or why transitioning is holy. Right? We can just look at our lives, and see, and know that God is there and that it's holy. So I just love, love, love this passage.

What about you Shay?

FS: Yeah, I think a passage that I keep coming back to just over and over and over again is the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel in Genesis. And what I love so much about this passage is that it's really grown with me throughout my own growing faith.

When I was in college and I was closeted and I was in a fundamentalist school and I was really starting to question my faith for the first time, this story of Jacob wrestling with the angel resonated with me, right? Because it was a sense of: it's okay to question, it's okay to wrestle. It's okay to grapple.

B: Yeah, totally.

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FS: And I think that I needed to hear that message at that time. And then as I've grown, I think what continues to resonate with me about that passage is still the wrestling and the grappling is still a thing. Right? I think we always continue to wrestle and grapple.

B: Oh, for sure.

FS: But also this sense of Jacob refusing to let go until the angel blesses him, I think it's a really beautiful thing. And I think as someone who, like I mentioned before, can be a little stubborn.

B: Just a little bit.

FS: There's a sense, though, of acknowledgement that sometimes we have to just hold on and demand the blessing. And I think as someone who has been in, is still in, a family who doesn't accept me, has had to fight for a place in the church, has had to really fight for a place in theology in the Christian world, this sense of, no, this is my space too, and I'm going to hold on for the blessing, and I'm going to refuse to let go. I think that piece of that story continues to resonate.

And then obviously the fact that Jacob walks away with a new name resonates with me as a trans person, and as someone who has been deeply changed by my experience with God, and by my experience of this wrestling. And has also been wounded by it, right? That sense of Jacob walking away with a limp, that resonates. And to me, I think we've talked a lot on this podcast about what we love about doing it as being forced to re-encounter texts that we've heard all of our lives. And so what I love about this Jacob text is that it's a text that continues to grow, and my understanding of it continues to change as I continue to grow and change.

And to me that's so indicative of when you put in the work to really read scripture well, it grows and shifts and changes with you, and continues to hold meaning. That there isn't just, this is what it means for all of time and for eternity. It's like, this is what it means now, this is what it might mean in a couple of years. And I think that that's beautiful and that's heartening and it's a good reminder to stay with the work and to continue to do it.

B: Yeah, for sure. I know sometimes folks write in and they'll say, well, why didn't you talk about this, or why didn't you talk about that? And a certain type of Christianity says that there's only one correct understanding or interpretation of any given passage, and once you've got it, you've got it, and that's all you need. And what I love about this work and our understanding of faith, which I think is a historically very faithful way of approaching the text, is to say, no, we have to pick this apart and put it back together, and it's going to say different things to different people in different times because our contexts are different, and that's so beautiful.

And also, from the very beginning we've said there is so much more to Christianity and being an LGBTQ Christian than always defending ourselves against that which we are not. Like this passage in Genesis with Jacob is about trans people just as much as any other passage is about trans people. And it can also be about other types of people too. You can understand the text and in so, understand your community and the divine so much more fully when you bring

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your full queer or trans self to your faith. And I think that straight folks and cis folks have their lives and faith enriched by the presence and experience and wisdom of LGBTQ folks, right? Like queer theology isn't only for queer people. It's a blessing to the whole wide world.

So to our queer listeners out there: bring yourself.

FS: Yeah. I think as we've talked about what the past six years has meant, I think both you and I have this sense of we're just getting started, right?

B: Yeah!

FS: There's still so much work to be done. There's still so much good news of queer theology to be spread to straight and cisgender folks, to churches all over the world. There's still so much that resonates in these stories, and there's still so much to unpack. And I love the fact that we get to continue to do this work, that because of our training and our experience, and frankly, the decades, even before the six years that we've been doing this work.

B: I feel so old, yeah.

FS: That we have a lot to bring to this, and that we continue to bring it. And I'm so excited about kind of building into the future. We have all of these amazing ideas to carry us forward, to change up the podcast, to continue to make this work more accessible to more people, and to continue to dive deeper. Right?

This has never been about getting people past the "it's okay to be gay" hump and then leaving them there. It's been about, all right, now that you know that it's okay to be queer, or trans, or bi, ace, or whatever it is, how do your identities continue to inform? And not only inform, but deepen and enrich your faith, and make your relationship with God and your spiritual life even stronger and deeper and more profound? That's the work that we want to continue doing with people.

B: Yeah, amen. "Is it okay?" Has always, in my mind, been the starting line of the conversation or the work and not the finish line.

So it's been six years and we've been doing all this work. Why or in what ways is this work still needed in the world, and what does the future hold for you, do you think?

FS: Yeah. I mean, I think about that Walking Toward Resurrection ebook that I wrote about transness and the passion narrative, and how I wrote that thing 10 years ago, and now it's still speaking to people and resonating today. And I think that there is even more work to be done, particularly around trans bodies and trans spirituality. I think that we have just scratched the surface on that, and I'm excited to dive into that work. And I think that the visibility that trans folks are receiving right now in some circles means that there's a lot of work to be done, and especially a lot of work to be done with churches about how to make spaces not just affirming, but welcoming and inclusive and comfortable for trans and non-binary folks. And I think that we

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have a lot to add to that conversation, and there's a lot of work and resources that churches need in order to do that work well.

B: Yeah. All of your work around trans spirituality, trans issues, trans theology, I just am so in awe of you. I remember before we started working together when I had just met you, you were more of an acquaintance, I was kind of a little bit of a fanboy over your trans theology. So it's just been awesome. Now I get to work with you. It was a little intimidating at first. Because it's just so brilliant, and I know that there's so much more in you to share, and so I'm excited about that.

I am excited about, and I know this will probably not come as a surprise to anyone, but to continue diving into faithful sexuality and healthy relationships and exploring what that looks like for LGBTQ Christians and even straight cis Christians sort of in the modern millennia. We've been talking about Christianity and sex for literally years before it was cool, when it was even more dangerous. And I've got some more in me. I shared on Instagram a few days ago about I was back at my college for homecoming, and near the place that I had gay sex for the first time, and shared a little bit about that on our Instagram story. And then was remembering that I wrote a prayer for him and for that experience, a few years ago at this point, and so shared that as well. So it's been cool to bring a faithful approach to sexuality, and I'm excited to do even more of that. I know I am constantly working up stuff in my head, in my journals, and I'm looking forward to sharing all of that with you all.

And also it's the end of the year approaching, and it's our 300th episode, and we're at a little bit of a crossroads, and for the past six years have really just tried to make it work because we believe in this work so much. In the beginning, we were paying it for ourselves. We've got just the tiniest little bit of funding coming in that basically keeps the lights on and not much more than that. And so we need your help to keep this work going, and to keep the podcast up, and the articles on social media, and all of that. So we are relaunching or launching a campaign to raise some significant money on Patreon each month to keep this work going and to make it sustainable. And so Shay, can you share a little bit more about why we're doing that and what all that is entailed?

FS: Yeah. Like you said, we've been doing this work for six years. Basically we figured out we were making like \$2 an hour.

B: I think less than \$2 an hour.

FS: Right. Less than \$2 an hour just really cranking out new resources. And we want to be able to do more, but we also know that it's important, both for our own mental health and sanity and lives, that this work be sustainable, but also in order to do all of the resources, the new stuff that we want to do, this work has to be sustainable. And so we have dreams about doing podcast mini series, about doing tons more interviews, about making the podcast longer, better quality, all of those things, about redesigning the website to make sure that all of the things that we've already created, you can actually find, and find when you need them. Because right now we understand that it's a little bit wonky.

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B: There's just been so much and we keep adding to it.

FS: There's been so much. We want to do live events, we want to meet you in person, we want to continue to create the resources that we know people are asking for. And so this ask for us, it's a hard ask. I don't think either of us like asking for money, or admitting that we need help. But the reality is that we do, that we can't continue on like we have been for another six years, that we're already feeling close to our limit and we want to be able to lean into this next six years filled with joy, and health, and from a really solid grounding. And so we're launching a Patreon that will allow you all to step up and support this work, and we'll create a base from which we can create new resources.

So you can check that out at patreon.com/queertheology. You can read more about why we're doing this now, what we're asking for, what our dreams are for the future. But we hope that you will join in with us to make sure that we can produce another 300 episodes of the podcast.

B: Yeah. I'm just really excited about this sort of moment in the evolution of Queer Theology and the LGBTQ Christian space. And you know, I think we both try and, I think, make this work look easy because we're proud of it, and we're excited to be a part of it, and we are happy to do it. It feels like a spiritual calling in alignment with our skills and our experience. And we don't ever, I'm at least very self conscious about like I don't want to ever complain or take things for granted, and also it takes an incredible amount of time and energy. I think we're probably each working at least 20 hours, if not 40 hours a week, just on Queer Theology in addition to our other jobs to keep the lights on and pay the bills in our own lives.

And so we want to keep doing this work, and do it well, and do it more. And like you were saying, Shay, to include more of you all, to do interviews with you, to feature other voices, and these series to come in person to do stuff. And so I would be so thankful for your support in this.

If the podcast or the videos or the emails have have made an impact in your life, I would really just feel so good about that support. And if you can't give, or in addition to giving, sharing our Patreon, sharing our work with your friends, maybe even asking the straight folks in your life to donate in your honor, or sharing it with your church.

Get creative.

Anything that you can do would really, really be helpful. We would love to go into the new year feeling we've got a strong base to do this work from. So again, that's patreon.com/queertheology.

There's a few levels of perks, but mostly we were trying to keep the focus on the work and on engaging with you. We would love to chat more with you, so connect with us on Patreon. And happy 300 episodes!

FS: Happy 300 episodes. And here's to the next 300.

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Thank you all for supporting us and for continuing to be our community. We just feel really lucky to get to do this work, and really honored for the trust that you've placed in us. And we want to be worthy of that trust and continue to create resources that help all of us live healthy and whole spiritual lives.

B: And we'll talk to you next week.

[outro music plays]

B: The Queer Theology podcast is just one of many things that we do at QueerTheology.com which provides resources, community, and inspiration for LGBTQ Christians and straight cisgender supporters.

FS: To dive into more of the action, visit us at QueerTheology.com. You can also connect with us online: on Facebook, Tumbler, Twitter, and Instagram.

B: We'll see you next week.

PODCAST END