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A Place to Belong, feat Brandon Beck
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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.

FS: Welcome back to the Queer Theology podcast. We are super excited to be doing another guest episode. We've got a great guest on for our podcast today and we're excited to be able to continue to be sharing these interviews and diving deeper with some of the people from our community. Thanks for being here today and Brian's going to introduce our guest, and we're going to get rolling.

B: Yeah, I'm super excited to be featuring another guest, and as we said recently, we're hoping to continue this trend of doing extended episodes and being able to bring on guests. That's why we are in the midst of a Patreon campaign, so if the podcast has been meaningful to you, if you could support us at patreon.com/queertheology that will be super helpful. Hopefully we can do more of these in the New Year. But today, we are joined by Brandon Beck who is a long time member of Sanctuary Collective. He teaches adult education in Central Texas.

Brandon, thank you so much for being on the podcast today.

Brandon Beck: Thank you for having me, Brian and Shay. I'm glad to be here.

B: Awesome! To just get started, we will keep it simple. Can you share with us your pronouns and some of the identities that are important to you.

BB: I use he/him pronouns although, I really am struggling with the idea of pronouns right now. So we will just go with he/him and leave it at that. Although that could be a much longer conversation as I'm sure you both know. I identify as a trans man and a queer person, and have affinities with poly communities although, I am celebrate right now.

B: Great! Thank you. Can you tell us a little bit about, I know this is a big question so it might require a little bit of editing, but tell us a little bit about your faith journey as a queer and trans person?

BB: I was raised by atheist parents, and so, clung very strongly to that atheist identity until well into my late 20s. In my late 20s, I came to religion as a salvation from drug and alcohol addiction. My drug and alcohol addiction stemmed from a mental illness that I have and I found that all of that wrapped up in my gender and sexuality, was just something that really wasn't separate from faith, and spirituality, and religion. That having not allowed myself and opportunity to explore those things as a younger person was something that I needed to forgive myself for and make amends for, and move on from. I got into religion in my late 20s through Celebrate

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Recovery which is a Christian-faith based 12-step recovery program and found after I had done a lot of healing through that, that there wasn't room in that program for me as a person with queer identity. So I took some time and developed my own ethic of care and my own theology around LGBT identity.

For a long time, thought that I wasn't going to find a place with other people to celebrate that theology. Found Sanctuary Collective, Queer Theology and am now an active lay leader in my Episcopal church here locally. I have come to realize that there are other people in the world who share my beliefs about God, and faith, and the spiritual journey that I've been on. I've come to recognize that there's a lot that the world of religion, spirituality, faith, shares with the LGBT experience, as I've lived it.

B: That's really cool. Thank you for sharing all that with us. For a lot of LGBTQ Christian folks that we encounter with Queer Theology, it's almost there are reverse experience that you had. Like growing up Christian, then coming into the queerness, and then sometimes leaving religion or shifting into something different. Whereas for you, you've started non-religious and then came into this Christian faith leader. How has that experience becoming a Christian leader in life as you've been working out gender-sexuality stuff shaped your experience as a queer Christian?

BB: I think that one of the main impacts that's had in my life is that opposite-ness for most people in my world. What I'm thinking about in that sense is that as I had already come out as queer and then became Christian, I found a lot of my queer friends pushing back against, and pushing me out because I was wanting to take on a Christian identity. I was embracing my Christian self. Then as I've progressed in my Christian faith, I've found different aspects and how to really work to see where my Christianity allows my queerness to be a full, integrated, authentic part of me. So that's been interesting to see how the two fit together and where I'm able to be authentically both, and.

FS: I love that. I think that's such an important journey that we hear about that we don't get to hear about very often, right? I think your narrative is really beautiful. I would love to hear from you, you talk about this piece of what places in your Christianity that your queerness can be in its fullness. I would love to hear you say more about that and what that means to you and what that looks like?

BB: One thing that is important to me is that I have a place with community whether they are cishet community, or queer community or both cishet and queer community, that I can worship the way I feel that worship is best for me. Right now, that is Sunday liturgical service and I have been to so many of those places where when I walk in the door the white cishet upper socio-economic privilege is so daunting that I can not find my own worship groove. I am fortunate to have now found a place where I can get in to my groove and know that it's okay for me to wear the gauges in my ears, and to wear an outfit where my tattoos are exposed, and to have my mohawk the way I want it. And to leave the worship service for coffee hour afterward, to talk about the latest queer politics or the queer fiction that I'm reading or to share a story about how during service, the scripture reminded me of an experience I had before transition and refer to that part of my life as "when I was a little girl" and not have anyone bat an eye.

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Really understand and embrace all of who I am. That's an important part of my experience. That's why I like where I am in this Christian space as a queer person. I also like that I am not the only queer person here.

FS: Yeah, that's huge.

B: So many LGBTQ folks, especially Christian folks can relate to the experience of being in a faith community or faith setting where their queerness isn't fully accepted or affirmed or seen. You talking about this difference of being in those two different types of spaces reminds me of when I've been in really, really terrible jobs and then thought that it was normal, then left and got a new job. Then being like, I didn't realize how unhappy I was or how toxic that was until I was really in this new space. I think that I see lots of LGBTQ Christians, wanting to out of really great intentions, wanting to stay in these unaffirming spaces because of all the good that comes out of it even though it's mixed up with harm. I just wondered if you can share a little bit more about the emotional or spiritual freedom or breakthrough that came from being able to be in a space where you are able to have your tattoos, be able to talk about your transition, be able to talk about the queer fiction. What is that on a more visceral level? What does it mean to you? How do you experience that?

BB: One of the things that best answers that question is that I am never reluctant to come to this campus. We have educational buildings, a workspace, a community space, and the sanctuary itself. This is the first place in my life that I have not ever been reluctant to come except for maybe my high school band hall. The reason why I'm not reluctant to come here is because every time I set foot on this campus, I know that there will be someone here also here because they feel this good when they get here. Because no matter what is going on outside of here, when I get here, I can let it go and be whoever I am. Everywhere else I go in my town, some part of me has to be cautiously managed because of safety. Here I can let go of that cautiousness and just be.

I mentioned mental health earlier, even that mental health part, my mental illness, I can let go of having to wear that mask when I come here. And just let people know. Today I woke up and I can tell that it was a little bit more of a hypomanic kind of day and I wasn't going to be able to function around close intimate relationships as well as I normally do. Because when I'm hypomanic I'm a little bit irritable with those close personal relationships and at home, in the grocery store, with people I work with, I have to really put on a mask and use emotion regulation to manage that kind of stuff. But I come here and say to people, "Hey you know, it's one of those days!" and you all know that I have this condition and I'm just going to be who I am. And everybody here is okay with that. That's the same thing as with my queerness and it feels so good to not have to bind stuff together.

FS: Yeah, that's really awesome.

BB: I have been following Queer Theology forever it feels like...

B: Yeah! It feels like I've known you for a long time!

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BB: I'm not real good with temporal relationship, so I'm not sure how many years it has actually been. Someone told me to follow Queer Theology, I feel like it might have been my priests. He knew that Queer Theology was a passion of mine and he had heard you guys somewhere, or read an article that y'all had written, and suggested that I follow you guys. As soon as I did, I joined Sanctuary Collective. Initially, the interest for me was the writings that y'all had done, the Spit and Spirit. After that, it just became necessary because of the community and the leadership that you two provide. Having a sense of place to learn and grow in my inner section of queer identity and faith.

FS: I know we share from a lot of folks in Sanctuary Collective that this is the only space that they can have that type of experience that you're describing in your church. I would love to hear from you since you already have that in-person space, how does Sanctuary Collective and this online community space add into your spiritual life. What do you get out of Sanctuary Collective that maybe you are not getting in church or that is an added benefit if that makes sense?

BB: I love Sanctuary Collective because there are more people closer to my age in Sanctuary Collective that there are in my real world. While I love the people that I interact with in my real life, and I do get a lot of benefit out of these interactions in my real life, I still value some same-age relationships also. I got some very valuable ones in Sanctuary Collective and I also really value some of the routine that is setup by Sanctuary Collective. The monthly creative prompt, the weekly discussion, question, the regular release of the podcast. Routine is very important to me and getting that from Sanctuary Collective is huge.

B: Can you share a little bit about how your faith-life has grown and developed over the past few years, and how Queer Theology has been a part of that?

BB: One way that my faith-life has grown significantly is in my ability to embrace uncertainty and to accept that there's not just one way to look at things. And certainly that comes from the podcast and your takes on the lectionary readings. Also, that comes from the interaction with the different people on Sanctuary Collective. Somebody will present a story, or a problem, or a prayer requests and hearing all the different takes on what that might be like for someone else or what someone might do in that situation or what someone has done in that situation, has really changed the way I think about how we as queer Christians interact with the world. That's been a huge area of growth for me. My entrée into Christianity was in a fundamentalist tradition and with my mental illness, took very quickly to one way is the right way and it's taken me a while. But I'm really glad to say that especially with the help of Sanctuary Collective, have begun to expand and grow in the area of understanding that there are many ways and that our experiences, and our culture, and our traditions can help us gain different insights and find ways to support each other without saying "This is the way to do it!"

FS: Love that. Thanks for sharing that.

B: So Brandon, a few times, mentioned Sanctuary Collective and for those who don't know, Sanctuary Collective is our online community and collection of more in-depth resources and some online classes about How to Read the Bible, How to Build a Faith that Fits, working through sexuality, and shame, and bodies and creativity. There's all sorts of goodness in there.

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That comes as one of the perks for a Patreon. So if you're interested in not only supporting the podcast and all the free stuff that we do, but diving deeper into your own faith journey. You can learn more about that at patreon.com/queertheology.

FS: I think we're ready, maybe, to dive into our Bible passage. You picked a passage from Jonah that you wanted to talk about right?

BB: Yes, yes.

FS: Can you tell us a little bit about this passage and why it's important to you?

BB: I picked a passage from Jonah 2 and certainly the context from Jonah 2:1-7, even all the way through 9 helps set the stage for this. This is Jonah's prayer while he's inside the fish. Helps us really see why and where from Jonah is saying this prayer. But I have really been meditating on verses 5-7. Those passages for me has been speaking to this experience of being oppressed, self oppression, the LGBT experience as I've lived it, of not knowing how to get out of the way the world sees me as opposed to the way God sees me, and the way I want to be seen. Also, mental health and so that's why I wanted to look at this passage.

B: Great! So I will read it for us now, it is Jonah 2:5-7. I'm going to be reading from the Common English Bible. Here we go.

Waters have grasped me to the point of death;
the deep surrounds me.
Seaweed is wrapped around my head
at the base of the undersea mountains.
I have sunk down to the underworld;
its bars held me with no end in sight.
But you brought me out of the pit.'
When my endurance was weakening,
I remembered the Lord,
and my prayer came to you,
to your holy temple.

Okay, Brandon! Can you give us a queer good word about this text and what it means to you?

BB: Yes. Like I said I'm thinking about the way oppressed people, especially the LGBT people, for me in my trans experience, and then also for me with my mental illness. I have this sunk down feeling and I think especially about my experience of being depressed before I transitioned and then also my depression with my mental illness and how this passage gives this sense to me that no matter what is holding me down that is worldly. That I am the one who can lift me up as long as I am doing it with God in mind. For so much of my life, I tried to do everything all on my own. I always ran my head up against the wall doing that. But when I combine my own strength with my faith journey, that's when I began to be able to make

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changes. That's where I'm going with this is saying yes, there is this dark depression that is clinical, that has held me down. But I have been able to through prayer, through a prayerful decision to take my medication, through a prayerful decision to stay in community with people who know and care, I have been able to mostly make progress and stay in a healthy place. Because before I transitioned, I had the same dark sinking feeling that nothing was going to go my way because no one saw who I truly was. But because I was able to take that and turn it, God was able to bring me out that pit of despair. I was able to say, "Listen, I really need this. How do I do it?" And then the right people came in to my life to show me what transition is, where the holy temple is, where the transition to body is. And that for me is a very nice message from this about how we, with God, whatever that looks like for us, can turn our lives from despair from joy.

B: I can relate to a lot of what you're saying and a lot of what this passage is offering as well. It reminds me that for a lot of LGBTQ people, we are worried that our sexuality or our gender or both, puts us on the opposite side of God. That God is going to judge us and punish us or send us to hell. What I love about this passage and what I hear you saying is that God is not on the other side, but God is on our side. God is coming alongside of us and helping us. It's God who is saving us and not God who is condemning us. So I thought that it was a beautiful thing to pull out of this passage.

BB: I love that take on that Brian.

FS: I also love your thoughts on prayerfully taking your medication, right? I think that so often we get sold this message of, or at least I know I did growing up, if you're just right with God you'll be happy and not depressed. Sometimes the reality is being right with God is taking your medication, and being healthy and whole, and doing the things that are right for your mental health and your body. Which can also mean transitioning or doing those things. That's health and wholeness, too. That is right relationship and I think that's really beautiful.

BB: Yes, yes. Thank you for saying that Shay. I think that that's such an important thing. I agree, we don't hear it enough and we certainly weren't told it growing up.

B: This is a little bit, not exactly about this passage, but you mentioned having some experience in the more fundamentalist type of Christianity and I know that folks listening have all sorts of different experiences with the Bible and how they relate to it. Can you share with us how your relationship to and experience of the Bible has shifted over the past many years that you've been on this journey?

BB: When I first read the Bible in my, well, I mean I had experiences with the Bible even when I was an atheist, at that point I experienced the Bible as literature. Then I came to know the Bible as the inerrant word of God and as a literal text of things that had happened and will happen. Now, I understand the Bible as a collection of stories told and written by people in ancient times that are myths and metaphors that guide us in the way that we can live better lives closer to God today.

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B: Cool! Thank you for that. Thank you for being a part of the Queer Theology family and for being on this podcast in general. It's been a real pleasure having you.

FS: Yeah, it's lovely everytime to see you in Sanctuary Collective. To be able to interact and to hang out. I'm so glad that we got to introduce more of your story and your goodness to the rest of the Queer Theology family. So thanks for taking the time to do this.

BB: Thank you so much, Brian and Shay.

B: For the few at home listening, if this podcast and the work of Queer Theology has been meaningful to you in your life, we would treasure your support on Patreon. You can go to patreon.com/queertheology and pledge a monthly support for as little as \$2. It all goes towards helping make the podcast each week, and the transcripts, and the articles, and the videos, and all of this support that goes along with that. We've been talking a lot about Sanctuary Collective and that is our online community and collection of deeper resources and courses. That is available if you're a Patreon supporter at the \$19 level a month or up. All that again is at QueerTheology.com/patreon.

Thank you so much for your support and for listening, and your comments, and reviews and emails to us. It's a pleasure having you join us every week and we will see you next week with another interview.

[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, Tumblr, Twitter, and Instagram.

B: We'll see you next week.

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