

*Speaking About...*

## Engaging with LGBTQIA+

Emily came to my office one afternoon, knocking lightly on the door and asking if I had a few minutes. I was one of her professors. She was attending the Lutheran university where I taught theology. She had grown up in a faithful Lutheran family and she knew what the church taught. In a way, her question was surprising, since she should have known the answer.

The conversation began with a few comments about life, studies, and a recent topic we covered in one of my courses. Finally, Emily hesitantly broached the subject she came to talk about. Despite having dated boys in the past, she preferred girls. In fact, she was in an ongoing relationship with another girl. Her big question was, "What does God think of me?"

### Discerning Law and Gospel in Conversation with Gender and Sexual Minority People

It's not difficult to imagine two ways to respond to Emily's question. In what often amounts to a knee-jerk reaction, one response would be to quickly point out the sinfulness of homosexuality. Emily must hear the Law. God is most certainly not pleased with her.

The other response would be to emphasize the Gospel in spite of the obvious sin that prompted her visit. Despite our sins and enmity, God loves us and has revealed his perspective toward us in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of His Son, Jesus. Having been raised in a faithful Lutheran family, Emily probably knew both of these answers. Discerning how to respond will require more than just the data of the circumstances. Knowing that homosexuality is sinful is only part of the data. Knowing that those who trust in Jesus are blessed by God's redemptive love is also only part of the data. The rest comes from the concrete relationship that you have with the person you're talking to.

For example, you might be aware of the person's struggles with his or her feelings, desires, and actions. Or you might know the individual is openly pushing back against God's good order. The extra data that we have in such moments comes from our ongoing relationships with the people God brings to us and calls us to care for.

I had gotten to know Emily as a student in a series of my courses over several semesters. In my office that day, she was not her usual self. Her countenance was low. She was quiet, hesitant, almost reluctant to be there. When she finally asked the big question, it was clear that she was taking a real risk. Perhaps she wondered if I might yell at her, tell her God hates her, kick her out of my office, or some other terrible response. She came as someone who

was vulnerable. This relational experience with her helped me discern how to respond.

### Do They Meet Jesus in Us?

Gender and sexual minority people face a challenge when interacting with the church. They often carry around the burden of the Law for every waking moment of their lives. Most of them know the church teaches heterosexual monogamy within the bounds of marriage and that there are only two genders, determined by biological factors. They know their desires and life choices (some of which, like all sins of the flesh, are not easily controllable) are wrong in the eyes of God and the church.

Gender and sexual minority people also suffer in relation to the church. They often must endure the fact that we homogenize them as a unique group of people, assuming that all of them want the same thing from God and the church—freedom to do what they want. Homogenizing groups of people is common human behavior. "All Lutherans think..." "All Hispanics are Catholic." "All LGBTQIA+ people..." While it might be common to speak of people in terms of elements shared by the group, it is also an abstracting strategy that misses the fact that such groups are constituted by concrete human beings, each with a story that needs to be heard before we know how each person thinks, what he or she believes, and how we might respond to him or her with care.

Each time we encounter someone who is same-sex attracted, in a relationship with a member of the same sex, considers oneself to be a different gender than his or her biological markers, or identifies outside of the traditional binary, it is also an abstraction to immediately think:

- Homosexuality is a sin.
- Transgenderism is a denial of God's good creation.
- Someone who calls himself or herself non-binary violates the created order.

Each of these things is indeed true and theologically defensible. But they never exist as bare facts. They characterize and shape the lives of real people with whom we might be in a relationship and for whom Jesus Christ shed His own blood to redeem. So again, the critical nature of a relationship with someone whose life is characterized by any one of these factors will undoubtedly play a role in how we minister to him or her.

And isn't that the point for those of us who are called to be ministers of the Gospel? As members of the priesthood of all believers—the church—it is our primary calling to be the kind of community in whom people meet Jesus. This might happen through evangelism, but it's more likely to happen in everyday interactions, whether through works of mercy, compassion, kindness, listening, or working together on common projects. In those moments, people encounter Christ in Christians.

Despite knowing this to be our calling, encounters with gender and sexual minority people register as unique, as if, when we come to know their secrets (e.g., in a homosexual relationship, identify as a different gender than one's biological sex), we suddenly feel a kind of pressure, almost an imperative, that we have to relate to them differently, or perhaps avoid relating with them at all.

This is not the way of Jesus. From Zaccheus the tax collector to the Samaritan woman at the well (and subsequently her fellow townsfolk), from the Roman centurions to Pontius Pilate, even to the stubborn and arrogant religious leaders, Jesus came with arms wide open seeking to save all who were lost. To be lost is to be a slave to sin, cut off from God. Jesus came as God enfleshed to renew a relationship that we, mired in our sin, could not repair. And He comes to gender and sexual minority people in the same way. He does so primarily through us, the church, the ones that Dietrich Bonhoeffer helpfully describes as "Christ existing as community."

Perhaps encounters with gender and sexual minority people set off a feeling of wariness in us because, as the church sometimes says, their sins are public. Without deploying a hierarchy, the church nevertheless often acts as if public sins are worse kinds of sins. Hence that pressure to relate to them differently.

Yet we must ask, if God chose not to hold our enmity against us and came down from heaven for the sake of renewing a relationship with us, and if each of us came to know Jesus through another disciple who introduced us to Him, then how are gender and sexual minority people going to meet Jesus other than through us?

Jesus's approach to engaging sinners is the only approach there is. He was always driven by God's love and mission to save humanity. If the Law was necessary, it was only for the sake of stirring up repentance, so that the Gospel could be applied as a salve. Any of us may have the privilege of maintaining and enjoying an ongoing relationship with someone who identifies as homosexual, transgender, nonbinary, is a cross-dresser, a drag queen, or an advocate for the rights of gender and sexual minority people to live as they want. Such individuals may be friends, family members, colleagues, or neighbors. In relationship with them, if we discern the need to speak the Law, we do so only for the sake of finally arriving at the Gospel. If we discern that they are carrying around the weight of the Law on their shoulders, struggling to be sure of God's love for them, then the Law is not necessary in that moment, only the Gospel—we are to join them in bearing their burdens.

### **A Better Way?**

A friend of mine listens regularly to a podcast by a Roman Catholic priest called, "The Bible in a Year." Despite whatever serious quibbles we may have with Roman Catholic theology, there is much we share with them. The priest is as gentle, engaging,

and knowledgeable as the best pastors I've ever met. What's most fascinating to me is how the host ends every episode of the podcast. He says, "I'm praying for you. Please pray for me. I'm Father Mike and I cannot wait to see you tomorrow. God bless."

What would it mean to members of the gender and sexual minority community if they experienced such an invitational approach from the church? "I cannot wait to see you next time."

What they tend to experience is a church that treats them as a group of humans that are easily pushed away. Even getting the church to talk about how to best relate to and care for them is difficult to do. The topic is often quickly shut down. The church often acts as if they wish "those people" didn't exist, as if somehow it would be easier if we didn't have to deal with "them."

Yet, put yourself in the shoes of any sinner who carries the weight of his sinfulness so heavily that he is convinced that he can't cross the threshold of a church, that any Christian he meets will reject him if she finds out his deepest secrets, that God will never accept him. Can you imagine how such an invitational approach as Father Mike's would affect him? It would be an incredible surprise. Really? Me?

What's fascinating is that this invitational approach might not seem like much. And in fact, it isn't. For most other sinners we engage with, it's easily done as part of our normal practice. Yet, it is the way of Jesus for everyone. Come and see, He would say to the timid. Come and follow Me, to those who were ready. Come as you are, but I won't let you stay the same. My way is not a way of sin and behavior management, but of dying to self and rising to new life for the sake of the world. Come join Me on this mission of reconciling sinners to God, that many more would be found in the Father's house.

To this we are called. The Jesus way is a better way. May the Holy Spirit empower us in such a way that every sinner meets Jesus in us! For the Emily's of this world, and everyone else.



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