

Imagining a Queer World
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I can't tell you what a privilege it is to be back here at LTS in Santee Chapel to celebrate with you during what I have always affectionately referred to as "Queer Week." It is good to be with you today, to be reacquainted with some familiar faces, to meet new ones, and to observe some of the progress that you've made together in the time since I was a student here. I want to thank the organizing group, the administration, and all of you for this opportunity. I am both honored and humbled to be able to share a few thoughts with you in this time of worship.

Would you pray with me?

Holy Spirit, Breath of Life, we pray that you would fall afresh on us during this time of reflection ... that your wisdom would open and guide our hearts and our minds. Inspire our sacred imaginations, we pray, with clarity of vision about the world you long to bring into being, as well as the role we might play in that co-creative process. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our liberation. Amen.

I have to share with you ... when I received the invitation to preach today, and Mil told me my topic should be "Imagining a Queer World," ... well, you could have knocked me over with a feather. I remember well the conversations that we had six years ago when I and two of my other classmates (Duane Romberger and Kurt Wieser) approached the administration about having a week long celebration of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons in ministry and in the church. Let's just say the answer wasn't an automatic "yes," and we spent quite a bit of time talking about whether or not the seminary was ready to do that ... and when the answer to that question became a hesitant "yes", a guarded "yes", a somewhat anxious "yes" ... well, then we spent time talking about how we could do so with appropriate sensitivity to the variety of emotions and opinions that existed among the faculty, the student body, the community of Lancaster, and the larger church about issues of sexuality and gender identity. One thing that was very clear at that time, however, was that the word "queer" was off limits. So, in the words of Queer Saint Holly Near, "Imagine My Surprise!" when I discovered your theme this year (on the home page of your website even) was "Imagining a Queer World." It made my heart glad.

Now, I assume from the insert explaining the use of the word queer that some controversy may still exist about its appropriateness or usefulness. I want to applaud the organizers of this week for their definitional work ... for articulating clearly the ways in which they are (re)claiming what has in our history been a pejorative slur and transforming it into an active word meant to creatively call into question or subvert heteronormative and other normative systems or assumptions. Queer is indeed a word that can be used to describe that which "deviates from the expected or normal; [that which] is odd or unconventional, eccentric or different." (I might add fabulous.) When used as a verb, queer can mean to spoil the illusion, or interrupt the notion, that any such stable category called "normal" even exists in the first place.

Well, there are so many queer things that we might say about the lectionary text from the book of Ruth (so many things!). Yet, as I learned in Preaching 101 right upstairs in this building, it is impossible to cover everything about a text in one sermon. So what I'd like to focus on today is the way in which the relationship between Ruth and Naomi positively changed the world in which they lived. (By imagining and creating a more queer world.)

For the moment, I'm not really interested in speculating about or questioning whether or not theirs was a sexual relationship. Because no matter what the answer to that question is, theirs was indisputably a queer relationship. It was a relationship that subverted normative expectations, transgressed established insider/outsider boundaries, and imagined new configurations of family, community, and commitment that were holy.

Ruth was a Moabite, a member of a group of people excluded from participation in Israel's community of faith. According to Deuteronomy (23:3), no Moabite was to be admitted to the assembly of God, even to the tenth generation. The mere mention of Moab would have been enough to raise a host of negative stereotypes in the minds of the faithful people of Bethlehem, enough to incite strong emotions perhaps. Already an outsider because of her ethnicity, Ruth was further marginalized by her audacious refusal to conform to societal norms and follow Naomi's advice. Every expectation of the culture in which they lived would have been for Ruth to return to her own people like Orpah and play the part of a good widow. But she wasn't having it. In fact, Ruth was a little feisty ... absolutely insistent about her love and her conviction. She assumed the closest physical position any two women in scripture have to one another ... she clung to Naomi ... and she made this amazing lifetime commitment to their relationship. "Don't you dare pressure me to leave you," she said, "or to turn back from following you. Wherever you go, I'll go; your house will be my house; your people, my people; your god, my god. Wherever you die, that's right where I'll die and be buried. May God do thus and so to me if even death parts me from you." Naomi then understood that Ruth's commitment was serious and tenacious ... and that she would not be dissuaded. So, off this alternative, non-traditional, queer family went ... back to Naomi's hometown.

Well, when they arrived, oh my goodness what a commotion they caused. The verse immediately following this section says, "When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred up because of them." In other words, you couldn't help but hear the roar as the proverbial grapevine began to vibrate with folks all over town saying to one another, "Can you believe it? There goes the neighborhood!"

That's a likely context of the world in which they lived when they returned to Bethlehem. A world scandalized by the unorthodox nature of their relationship. And yet (and this is the hopeful part), by the end of the story, that very world is transformed into something altogether different. As Ruth and Naomi went about living their queer lives authentically, which included incorporating Boaz into their family unit in one way or another, their community's understanding of them was radically altered. The people of Bethlehem moved beyond their initial prejudices; in fact, we might say their initial prejudices were queered (overturned, spoiled) by their actual experience of Ruth and Naomi, and the sacredness of their

commitment. By the time Ruth gave birth to her son, the child was presented to Naomi, and the community surrounding them unapologetically lauded the steadfast love that Ruth had for her. They lifted it up as exemplary. The very same women who were stirred up by their relationship in the beginning ... participated in the naming ritual for this child they understood to be the legitimate heir of Naomi, because she and Ruth were family.

The authenticity of their relationship, a queer relationship in so many ways, literally helped transform the world in which they lived.

Now, I don't know about you, but I long for such a transformation in our world today. Truly. I long for some of the normative systems and expectations in our society and world to be queered — turned upside down — so that new life and creative sacred inspiration can flow in. For example (because they're fresh in my mind) I'd like to imagine a world in which ballot initiatives to amend constitutions to discriminate against non-heteronormative persons and families become a laughable thing of the past. I'd like to imagine a world in which not one more person has to have an experience like Rev. Ted Haggard because they are taught to hate themselves in the name of God and faith because of who they are or whom they love. I'd like to imagine a world in which there are no more hate crimes perpetrated against transgender or intersex persons, and in which there isn't a nation anywhere that can continue to legally execute gay and lesbian people because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation. I'd like to imagine that sort of queer world.

Yet imagining a queer world is about much more than such issues of sexuality or gender identity. This is where our expansion of the term queer is so essential. Imagining a queer world involves being suspicious of the status quo, it means moving against the normalizing tendency of existing power structures and standing in solidarity with all of the marginalized. For example, I'd like to imagine a world in which the connections between LGBTQ justice issues and poverty, racism, and classism are made evident; and in which marginalized people are actively involved beyond their own narrow self-interest in working for justice for all who are excluded and oppressed. I'd like to imagine a world in which war is not the first (or 2nd or 3rd) solution sought to solve the inevitable conflicts that will surface between people of diverse experiences and understandings. I'd like to imagine a world in which capitalism no longer masquerades as an appropriate economic system for equitably meeting the needs of a global people.

These are just some of the ways in which I think we are called to imagine a queer world. And I believe that act of imagination, to which you have invited us this week, is a powerful avenue for bringing such a world into being. You see, I don't believe that imagination is a simple matter of fancy or a fun way to pass the time ... but rather the first step in actual, practical, transformation in our own lives and in the world.

You know, the first and only other time I have preached from this pulpit was during GLBT week my final year here. Just to give you a sense of how much things have changed since then, I'd like to tell you about an aspect of that experience. That chilly November morning, one of my classmates came to

chapel as an act of protest. He wore a long white robe and a sign on his chest that I believe quoted Leviticus (you can guess the chapter and verse) or (my memory being a bit fuzzy) it may have mentioned holiness in some way (which, for the record, I'm very much in favor of). And he sat very near the front of the chapel so that I and everyone else present would see his objection to the open affirmation and inclusion of queer people in ministry. In case you haven't experienced preaching in an atmosphere that protests your very existence ... well, I hope you never have to. But I remember well the feelings I had in that moment five years ago ... and (and this is the hopeful part) how very different those feelings were from the feelings I had in my kitchen recently as I read LTS' recent Leadership Newsletter, which included a statement of non-exclusion and non-discrimination explicitly mentioning sexual orientation. That's progress, if I can say so. And it's one small example that proves to me that the power of queer imagination is not merely an academic endeavor with no real application in the world. What we did then to imagine a church, a seminary, a world that would practice a radical form of inclusion bringing in those currently excluded from community ... [that act of imagination] in some way prepared the way for that to happen here – for that to become an even more inclusive place. What you're doing now to imagine a queer world ... I have to believe that will likewise prepare the way for tangible change, for further progress ... I have to believe that it will help bring a queerer, more just and more loving world into being.

That process works best, I think, as each one of us allows our queerest imaginations to shape our embodied actions ... in our relationships, in our classrooms, in our churches, in our cities, and in our broader world. Sometimes believing that our small actions can make a real difference on a global scale can seem to be an illusion of grandeur ... but it's not really. There is no other way that God changes the world except through God's people. I doubt Ruth set out to be a queer spiritual activist. She was probably just trying to make it ... to find her place in the family of things by listening to the leading of her own heart and committing her life to the steadfast love she had experienced with Naomi. She sort of just fell into being queer by living authentically, refusing to conform to the normative structures of the world when they did not fit her, and telling the truth about her experience even when the whole town was initially up in arms about it. That's really all she did to help the world around her experience transformation through a courageous blurring of the too-rigid-boundaries of race and ethnicity, faith tradition, gender expectations, and family configurations.

I believe the same sacred queering of the world can happen through our lives ...

If we will invest in our imaginations of a world without oppression and discrimination, where every person is loved as their truest self ...

If we will courageously commit ourselves to disturbing the status quo so that there is more room at the table, even if we face initial resistance or risk ...

If we will be audacious in living our lives authentically and out loud for the cause of justice and love and peace not only for ourselves, but for all people ...

If we, regardless of our sexual orientation or gender identity, will fall into being queer spiritual activists ... with a tenacious passion for the gospel of liberation.

May it be so for us.

Amen.