

Queering the Bible with a Hermeneutic of Foolishness

Introduction and situating myself within a tradition:

The early Anabaptist movement-considered the radical fringe of the Protestant Reformation in 16 century Europe - understood that a Christian calling was a call to live an alternative to the mainstream culture, an alternative which may indeed be threatening to the social order. For them, the Christian life meant living by rules other than those the world provided, a conviction which ultimately found expression in tightly knit, often sectarian communities distinguished by adult baptism, a refusal to swear oaths, and the rejection of the sword. Submission to worldly authorities was encouraged only insofar as it did not contradict obedience to God. Their vision was that of a visible church of committed disciples who took seriously their regeneration in Christ. In many ways, this put them outside of what was considered acceptable, and led to years of brutal persecution and martyrdom.

Even as their presence became tolerated by certain countries, they rarely assimilated into mainstream Christendom, and became known as the 'peculiar people' - a label they willingly accepted, and which certain Anabaptist groups such as the Amish still carry. However, being peculiar, or dare I say, 'queer', need not only be limited to those who are living sectarian lives, but may take many forms.

Contemporary Mennonites - one of the 'daughters' of the Anabaptist movement - have in many respects integrated into society, yet most continue to understand the Anabaptist vision as one which ultimately challenges the trappings of 'this world'. In both scholastic and general Mennonite sentiment, the idea of the church as an alternative society remains a regulative principle of Mennonite theology and identity.

This has not, in most cases, resulted in communities willing to challenge the mainstream addiction to hetero-normativity, but it does, I believe, provide a strong foundation on which to build a queer theology which continues to take the radical claims of the gospel seriously.

In the next 10 minutes, I hope to lead you through some of the ways I believe that the Bible itself calls all of us to be queer- how, by queering the Bible, the Bible in turn queers us.

To do so I will begin by looking at some key New Testament scripture which supports what I call a "hermeneutics of foolishness" - an interpretive lens which looks to the places of scandal and degradation as sites of God's revelation and presence, and

questions the ways human discourse define reality.

I will then look at what sorts of features a 'Queer Christianity' might embody, handing over the discussion to all of you at your tables to continue to consider.

The Scriptural basis for a hermeneutics of foolishness:

1 Cor 1:20-26 - "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but for those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength"

In this biblical passage, Paul sets up a contrast between God and the word of the cross on one hand, and the wisdom of the world on the other hand. That the cross - a place of political and religious degradation - appears to be an unlikely place for the power and wisdom of God to be revealed is only because God's wisdom in not of this world, but appears to be foolish to those who continue to live with the eyes of the old creation. In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he emphasizes that "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!" (2 Cor.5:17). As such, those living "in Christ" are part of that new creation, and are called to live with the knowledge that the powers defeated by God's act no longer rule the world. And one of these powers that is no longer to rule our lives is human wisdom – be it our expectations about God, communities, sexuality, etc.

So, from this perspective, the biblical text itself requires that we have, as Karen Williams described, a hermeneutics of passionate refusal. We can, in other words, use Paul "against Paul."

A hermeneutics of foolishness...

- **Looks to the places in the Christian gospel where worldly power and knowledge are put into constant crisis**

In the New Testament gospels, we read time and time again about demons who are the first ones to recognize Jesus and the Christ while the disciples walk around

confused. We listen to the teachings of a Rabbi who preaches about an upside-down kingdom where the first will be last and the last, first; who eats with outcasts and casts out the powerful; who redefines the transcendence of God by embodying God's immanence; and who ultimately questions humanities addiction to violence through a commitment to love and non-violence even unto a brutal death on a Roman cross.

All of these themes in scripture manifest this God whose power is manifest in weakness, and whose wisdom truly hidden in the foolish. As such, we might take the cue, and also look for God in the fools and the foolishness of this world. In those, like the gender transgressor, who call into question the solidity of identity and raise questions about cultural assumptions and assertions about the appropriate roles we must play.

- **Reveals the fluidity, the temporality, and the ultimate absurdity of the categories human wisdom creates to order our society**

Having a hermeneutics of foolishness as the lens with which we view the world challenges us to live in the knowledge that the powers that govern the world are not definitive. Institutions such as marriage; liberal doctrines of the true/inner self; discourses about what a true woman, a true man, or a good citizen is; cultural definitions of what it means to be successful, free, or powerful, all fall under the critical eye of a hermeneutics of foolishness which is necessarily critical of all human knowledge claims (including and perhaps especially those made about God).

In the very conceptual apparatus of a point of view there are implicit power dynamics at work. Regardless of what our human perspective is, our categories of male and female are non-categories in God's eyes. 'Hetero-sexuality' is revealed as yet another power relation of the old creation from which we are freed - not to become 'homosexuals', but to live lives for God regardless of what sort of human relational configurations are 'in power' or 'acceptable' at the time.

- **Does not look to the Bible for a template of human sexuality, but looks at how the scripture reveals ways in which the reign of God is ushered in through human relationships and situations which would be considered immoral, despicable, or 'queer' - either in their original historical context, or in our own.**

For example - the first patriarch and matriarch - Abraham and Sarah, engage in the common cultural practice of giving one of their servants, Hagar, to the husband so that a

son might be born into the family. The same sort of scenario takes place between Jacob and his two wives - Rachel and Leah, and two concubines. Although relationships our modern western culture would not seek to emulate. God uses these relationships to further God's work in the world.

Even in the New Testament we find reference to ways God works through relationships that society deems illegitimate. In Matthew's genealogy - which most people skip over when they read the gospel - you'll notice that in the list noting male ancestry (typical of a patriarchal culture), 4 women are nonetheless named - Tamar, a woman who seduced her father-in-law in order to get pregnant; Rahab, the prostitute; Ruth the foreigner; and Bathsheba - the wife of Uriah, who was caught in a web of adultery and murder with King David.

Already of interest is the fact that women are mentioned at all, even more profound is the fact that what is common to all these women is that they were each involved in extraordinary or irregular sexual unions, which were scandalous to outsiders. Could the point of Matthew be to point out to readers that in spite of Jesus' own scandalous birth to an unwed mother, God has worked before, and is working still, within relationships which society deems illegitimate? All of these families are a far cry from what conservative Christianity wants to call the 'traditional family', yet the concern of God is never to streamline such 'queerness' into some irreducible norm, but rather to work within all of the many fallible human attempts to live relationally in our world.

When modern questions of sexuality and gender are removed from our examination of biblical relational configurations, we find a vast array of situations in which God was present and active in places where a human, variable, and perishable morality found them unacceptable; we see a family which is mutable, which changes over time and place, and which, ultimately is at risk of becoming an idol should it usurp the place of Christ in our lives.

So what might a Queer Christianity look like?

A Queer Christianity....

- **Is one in which we are all "called to be Queer", to live as the 'odd ones', the 'peculiar people' - unafraid of being called foolish by the wisdom of our age.**
- **Does not seek to make the queer, "normal", but rather questions the category of 'normal' all together and invites people into the challenge of creating new ways of relating and new possibilities for community**

- **Follows Jesus the Fool, who flexes the rules, challenges the boundaries of a group, and refutes the categories which define, separate, and oppress people (in Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female)**
- **Does not merely echo the values and virtues of decent people, but calls them and us to rethink from scratch many basic assumptions about God and matters 'religious'.**
- **IS a threat to society in so far as society chooses death over life; cruelty, violence, and oppression over love, peace, and justice.**

Questions for discussion:

How might approaching the Bible with a hermeneutics of foolishness change the way you read scripture, or the questions you ask of it?

Read Matthew 25: 1-13 and discuss what insights are revealed when you approach the text with a hermeneutics of foolishness.

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Presented by: Anita Fast

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2. The Scriptural basis for a hermeneutics of foolishness

3. A hermeneutics of foolishness...

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