

Connecting Church and Community: Gender

Acts 8:26-40

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My name is Rev. Nancy Lynn, and my pronouns are she/her. I think it was in early high school when my child, whom you have known as Emily, shared with me that they were exploring their gender. At first, I had a hard time understanding or accepting that. Yet, as we talked, two things became very clear to me. One - I had a lot to learn because what we know about gender and how we talk about it has changed dramatically in the last two decades. My child was growing up with a much more complex and nuanced awareness of gender than I ever had. And two - I love my child more than I can ever express in words, we have always been very close, and I have been their greatest source of love, support, and encouragement for their whole life. If I didn't support them through this, I could very easily lose them.

It wasn't an ungrounded fear. A new study reported by the New York Times earlier this week revealed that approximately 1.4% of teens in the United States identify as transgender. Of those, approximately half attempt suicide and as many as 82% have suicidal thoughts they don't act on.

I can't prove this, but anecdotal evidence suggests to me that in Ann Arbor, the number of our teens who are exploring gender is quite a bit higher than 1.4%. This is a very real part of our life together in 2022 and in Washtenaw County. In recent years, I've had a number of parents and grandparents share with me that they have a trans child or grandchild. Yet, while we as a congregation passed our LGBTQ welcoming statement in 2007, and we have tried to create a welcoming space for lesbian and gay individuals, couples, and families, we have done very little to learn about gender or consider how our church could be intentional in welcoming trans youth and adults. So, as I began putting together our sermon series on connecting the church and community, I felt it was time that we begin to educate ourselves and consider what our faith tells us about sex and gender.

But first, a language primer. As you may know, there are a number of words used now to talk about sex and gender. While we once used the words almost interchangeably, more recently, they have come to refer to very different things. When we speak about a person's sex, it refers to the biological sex they were assigned at birth based on their genitalia. Most of us have lived our lives thinking of two sexes - male and female. However, approximately 1.7% of people are intersex - born with a combination of male and female anatomical traits. That is roughly the same number of people who are born with red hair.

Gender identity is different from biological sex. Rather than focusing on physical anatomy, gender identity has more to do with how we think of ourselves, our internal sense of being male, female, both or neither. For a transgender person, their internal understanding of themselves does not match the biological sex they were assigned at birth. Transgender - trans for short - is an adjective and an umbrella term for a variety of different gender identities. The term "gender binary" refers to the long-held understanding in white and western countries that there are only two genders - male and female. A person who identifies as non-binary is someone

whose inner understanding of their gender doesn't fit into that binary. There are many other gender identities, as well, including gender-fluid, pangender, and agender.

For those of us who are cisgender, meaning our inner sense of our gender matches the sex we were assigned at birth, this can be hard to wrap our minds around - especially if we have always understood gender to be a binary. We are quick to dismiss the conversation about gender because it is new to us or makes us uncomfortable or seems to be a trendy fad our kids and grandkids are into. Yet, according to Austen Hartke's book *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*, historically, there have been cultures around the world that have recognized more than two genders - "the Two Spirit people in many Native American tribes"...the hijra of India, the sekrata of Madagascar, and the muxes of Mexico, to name just a few.

Now, obviously, this is a very complex topic and some of you may just be learning about all of this. So we will leave the language lesson there and turn to the question of how we are to respond as people of faith to those in our society whose gender doesn't conform to the gender binary. And how might scripture inform us?

First of all, I think it's helpful to recognize that a lot of what we think of as existing in a binary actually does not. If we look, for example, at the book of Genesis and God's creation of the world, many parts of nature are poetically described in binaries - light and dark, land and water, male and female. Yet, our lived experience shows us that there is not just light and dark or day and night. There is dusk and dawn and twilight and all the other gradations of day and night between. Yes, there is land and water, but there are also marshes and bogs and swamps. So, could the same be said about male and female? Could it be that just as it is true with so many other aspects of creation, we are created with far more diversity in gender than just male and female?

Jesus acknowledges this diversity in Matthew 19 when he speaks of eunuchs, the gender-nonconforming people of his day. "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so since birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can."

And in our scripture reading for today, we see the angel of the Lord send Phillip to encounter an Ethiopian eunuch, a person of high stature with responsibility for the queen of Ethiopia's treasury. This person asks Phillip about a passage from Isaiah, and Phillip sits down and teaches them all about Jesus - his love and acceptance and sacrifice. The eunuch asks to be baptized and becomes one of the earliest converts to Christianity.

Yet, we learn the most about how we might respond faithfully to gender diversity by looking at the example of Christ himself. We follow Jesus because of the depth and breadth of his love. He accepted all the people who were on the margins in his social world. He not only accepted them but taught others to look out for those who were poor, oppressed, or different in any way. When asked what is the most important commandment, he answered "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself". And on the night before he died, he taught a new commandment - that we love each other as he loves us. We all know that isn't always easy, yet it defines us Christ-followers as we journey toward perfection in love.

Unfortunately, just as they have with people who are lesbian, gay and bisexual, the Christian right in the United States has done great damage to people who identify as transgender. Organizations like Focus on the Family have thrown their weight and their dollars behind legislative bills that target transgender people. According to the ACLU, during 2022 there have been more than 170 bills in state legislatures “barring or criminalizing healthcare for trans youth, barring access to the use of appropriate facilities like restrooms, restricting trans students’ ability to fully participate in school and sports, allowing religiously-motivated discrimination against trans people, or making it more difficult for them to get identification documents with their name and gender”. Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic church has forbidden trans people from becoming godparents while the Southern Baptists have made clear that to be transgender is a sin.

According to Hartke, “Transgender people are disproportionately affected by homelessness, poverty, job discrimination, bullying in school, and harassment by law enforcement, as well.” All of this causes a great deal of stress, which brings us back to that statistic that approximately half of trans teens attempt suicide. Not surprisingly, trans individuals also have higher rates of depression and anxiety

Yet, the research also consistently shows that acceptance and affirmation from family, schools, and church communities brings the suicide and depression rates among trans teens down dramatically. We can make a real difference in the lives of transgender people in our community - especially our kids. And that is what Christ would call us to do. Love as he loved.

The single biggest thing you can do if you have a trans kid in your life is to accept them and love them just as they are. To that end, I’d like to share with you that my own child is now named Emmett. They prefer they/them or he/him pronouns. They know that I love them for the person they are no matter what gender that may be.

Of course, acceptance and welcoming transgender people is the biggest thing we can do as a church, as well. What does that look like? We can begin to talk about gender and learn about it - perhaps have a class to explore gender and faith more deeply. Those who are comfortable doing so could begin to introduce themselves with their pronouns as we welcome new people just as I did at the start of the sermon. We can be open to being corrected without embarrassment or defensiveness if we use the wrong pronouns for someone. We can point out that we have all-gender restrooms on the ground floor. We can display the trans colors and flag just as we do the rainbow. These are little steps, but they communicate that we are a Christ-like community that seeks to welcome everyone.

If you’d like to learn more about gender and faith, I encourage you to read *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians* by Austen Hartke and be sure to worship with us in two weeks as we celebrate and affirm all our LGBTQ+ siblings in Christ because we are a church where all means all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.