

# A Queer Eye for Union to Try

June 28, 2020

Who are your ancestors? Do you know? And it is a trick question. Go ahead and identify an ancestor or two of yours on Facebook, if you’re watching with us live there. Who is someone with whom you identify as a significant predecessor in your life?

Now, I said that this is a trick question, because when you think about it, identifying ancestors means identifying how we might define them—and how we might define ourselves.

For instance, you may have identified at first an ethnic ancestor. In my case, that would mean the Olsens who emigrated from Oslo and Trondheim in Norway, and the Pahls who left the small German village of Warnow, north of Berlin, to come to America.

But ethnicity is only one way to identify ancestors. You might have identified a Christian ancestor. For most of my life, I’ve been a Lutheran; and Lutherans literally take our name from Martin, that rebellious Augustinian (another ancestor!) 16th century monk.

Or perhaps you identified a national ancestor: we’re on the cusp of the 4th of July, after all, so maybe George Washington or Frederick Douglass or Elizabeth Cady Stanton—the suffragist, came to mind.

Identifying ancestors is important because today we hear the story about a collective ancestor our ours—Abraham, and his son, Isaac. It’s a horrifying story, isn’t it? It’s especially horrifying if we take it at face value (I won’t say literally, because most of what goes by the name of a “literal” reading of Scripture is in fact a profound distortion of its original intent).

At face value the story goes like this: God tells Abraham to kill his son Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham is willing. He builds an altar, brings Isaac with him, ties him to it, brings out his knife—and then, at the last minute, an “angel” shows up, dissuades Abraham from killing his son, and a ram gets cut up and burnt instead.

Happy ending? Not really—if you’re the ram. And not really, if you think God is all about love. God has a bit of a sadistic streak here, right? God’s behavior is spun in the story (probably by a later editor) as a “test” of Abraham. But what kind of God needs to test people like this? And what kind of father—the word gets stuck in my throat when I say it—would follow through? Abraham comes across as a lot like Sarah in Pastor Bridget’s sermon last week—calculating, callous, and dutiful to the point of violence. Are these our ancestors?

They are. For much of history, people have been all too willing to sacrifice others to save themselves. For most of history, people have been all too willing to kill to prove their own worth. From Abraham down to us, the powerful try to “test” our allegiance by asking us to “sacrifice” for some cause or another. It’s perhaps the single most important theme in the history of religions—the practice of sacrifice. It’s found across Hinduism,

Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, indigenous traditions: people burning, offering, killing things to show their devotion. Sacrifice.

And we know how this works, here in the U.S. Our ancestors built this empire on the backs of others. They required sacrifices that have continued to be demanded by the power structures associated with our economic order. If you haven't seen the movie "Just Mercy," see it. Its depiction of capital punishment as a ritual of human sacrifice is both honest and terrifying.

But we don't have to look at that cruel and unusual punishment to see the consequences of our empire of sacrifice all around us. We can see the system of sacrifice in the inequality that this pandemic has revealed, starkly. And we can see the sacrifices we are apparently willing to make in the 120,000 people dying, unnecessarily, when coherent public health policies and practices: WEAR A MASK, as followed in other countries, could have prevented many of these deaths—thousands of fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers who could still be alive.

What in the world is going on? Last week, Pastor Bridget challenged us to name things rightly; to see the attempted sacrifice of Hagar by Sarah as the brutal act it was, to see our exclusions for what they are, and then to resolve to act differently ourselves. We shall overcome? As Pastor Bridget put it: "It won't be easy."

And this week, Open and Affirming Sunday, I want to talk about the sacrifice of sex. I want to talk about the way homophobia and the scapegoating of LGBTQ individuals has prevented us from realizing the beloved community of God where life is not about sacrifice, but mercy; not about sacrifice, but compassion; not about sacrifice, but passion; not about sacrifice, but love.

And I want to take us into this alternative way to understand our ancestors via the television series "Queer Eye." As my title for today's sermon puts it, I want to propose for us "A Queer Eye for Union to Try." That is, it just might be the case that when we identify our QUEER ancestors, we might also be able to begin to see how to make-over Union, and make-over America, in the same way that the Fab Five make-over an individual in each episode of the TV series.

Now, I suspect many if not most of you are already familiar with the series, but for those who aren't, a series called "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" first aired in 2003 and ran for four seasons on the Bravo Network. In it, a cast of five gay men provided fashion, culinary, interior design, grooming and culture advice to a straight guy—a different one each episode. More recently, in a revival of the series, which opened in 2015 on Netflix, now just called "Queer Eye," the plot-line expanded, with a new "Fab Five" providing make-overs to diverse individuals, not just straight guys. Season 5 just dropped June 5th, and it is set in my former city of Philadelphia. Each episode, as in the original, is basically a conversion: a person is born anew, in every story.

In fact, the first episode of Season 5 features a former student from the Seminary where I teach in Philadelphia, Pastor Noah Hepler. Noah is the pastor of Lutheran Church of the Atonement in the Fishtown neighborhood of Philadelphia—a hipster hangout. The

episode also features a cameo by the man who will in August be inaugurated as the President of that Seminary, Rev. Dr. Guy Irwin, who is the first gay Bishop in the Lutheran Church (and he also happens to be a proud member of the Osage nation).

Now, I mention these names not only to name-drop (it is kind of cool, though), but more as a confession. You see, Noah and I haven't always seen eye-to-eye. When he was my student, I had no idea that Noah was gay, and we had some pretty bitter arguments; he was passive-aggressive a lot, and then simply aggressive. In fact, as the show reveals, in a powerful way, Noah was struggling with his sexual identity. That struggle made him reactive. It was really holding him back personally and professionally. As the tag-line for the episode on the Queer Eye website puts it: "The Fab Five help a timid gay pastor who came out in his 30s update his look and find the confidence to lead his congregation into the future."

You see, Noah had some ancestors, good church folk, who thought he needed to sacrifice his sexuality in order to be worthy. He grew up in a so-called "conservative," so-called "Christian" home. I say "so-called" because defining Christianity over and against gays and lesbians is a decidedly MODERN phenomenon—only an issue since the 20th century, and such an us-versus-them is not really conserving the great tradition at all. And even more, basing your religion on hate is a decidedly NOT-Christian practice.

So, overcoming the stigma of his indoctrination into self-hate took Noah a long time—and it's something he's still working on. Indeed, we are we all working on something, aren't we? I'm guessing many of you can identify with Noah's struggle.

And it's a struggle that should never have had to happen. Here's the thing: homophobia harms all of us. Christians should never have been divided about this matter. Because the church is queer. Or as Pastor Bridget put it even more strongly from our pulpit in her Pride sermon last year: "God is queer." I happen to think both assertions are true and necessary.

Now, the language of queerness is important to understand; it's not self-evident. The term originated in English in the 16th century, and of course means odd, strange, unusual. It was originally used as a slur. But in the early 1990s, Queer Nation thought they might be able to "disarm homophobes" by "co-opting the word" queer not only as a non-pejorative term, but actually as something positive, distinctive, attractive. Queer Nation was itself an offshoot of ACT UP, which stood for the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power, which was founded in 1987 to demand more action to solve the AIDS crisis.

In other words, "queerness," the Q in the LGBTQIA+ acronym, includes lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people, and their persons, gifts, loves, and lived experiences. AND "queerness" also might include those of us who are straight but not narrow; those of us who might also identify as allies—the "A" in LGBTQIA+. Queer identities overlap, in short, just like liquid water, ice, and steam overlap as forms of water, and as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit overlap as identities of the person of the Trinity, if you must. And Christians, hear this: we worship Jesus as the Christ, an incarnate God, Spirit-in-the flesh, a God-man, which is a decidedly non-binary identification.

God is queer. I guess that means some of our ancestors are queer, then, right? How could it be otherwise? Everything comes from God, everything returns to God—as St. Thomas Aquinas put it (another ancestor). A God whose image is both male and female, Spirit-driven, breath, wind, light, waters, rock, Father/Mother, three-in-one, one-in-three, when someone welcomes you, they welcome me, Jesus says, and that means they welcome God.... How can we possibly imagine such relationships, such a God, as anything but really, really queer?

And the church is queer. I learned this from another student, Lenny Duncan, in his book “Dear Church,” which we will read together this fall in a Union Big Read.

*“The reason we are so afraid to admit the church is queer,”* Lenny writes—as an African American queer cis-gender male, *“has everything to do with our theology of sex. The leaders of the church have failed you. We have made sex dirty and have reduced human wholeness and love to the physical act of sex. We no longer see our sexuality as God given and therefore good. We have adopted a view of sex handed to us by Paul—a man who thought the apocalypse was imminent and who urged celibacy in preparation for that event. We have a puritan view of sex, as if pleasure and the flesh are evil. Yet we worship a God who was physically resurrected-flesh and blood.”*

And it’s because we celebrate this incarnate and resurrected God, flesh and blood, that we prayed together, earlier in our service today, “to help us to move beyond our attempts to limit You, intellectualize You, or to eliminate You from all that is earthy, sensuous, or vibrant, so that we may greet You in every particle of this spectacular universe which You are creating.” When we worship an incarnate God, the Christ Spirit as we put it in our Bond of Union, we follow the way of Jesus and Mary, and all of the disciples: those are our ancestors, too.

Which means that we can now go back to the story of Abraham and Isaac, and Sarah and Hagar, and read them anew—as (I believe) they were originally intended: to reveal to us that our ancestors gave up human sacrifice, and to help us to move beyond our arbitrary exclusions. Let me say it again: Our ancestors renounced sacrifice, and they forged a more inclusive way—becoming a great lineage, in the process. It’s obvious once you begin to understand our Jewish sisters and brothers: our collective tradition is not about who we can exclude; it’s about who God embraces. Our tradition is not about rituals we must repeat to make us feel righteous; it’s about learning God’s Torah so as to live together and to flourish. Torah teaches that God desires mercy, not sacrifice; love, not hate; justice, not violence. That’s our legacy from Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, and Ishmael.

And that other ancestor of ours, Martin Luther, what did he teach us (because those pilgrims who founded congregationalism learned from Luther, too)? Luther’s critique of the medieval Roman Catholic church came down to one point: the Mass that centered on Jesus’ death as a sacrifice obscured the central point of God’s creative, redeeming, and sustaining work: God’s grace. It was as if in the story of Abraham and Isaac the angel and the ram never showed up. For Luther, God’s grace is what saves us all. God’s grace

cannot be contained in any of our exclusions or sacrifices. God's grace breaks free of any of our exclusions and sacrifices; God's grace is stronger even than death—that ultimate (so it seems) exclusion. To believe in God means to trust in grace, and then to find ways to work together, in love. That's Luther: love wins.

So, who are our ancestors? In last Sunday's New York Times, there was a wonderful special report—an entire section, simply entitled "Pride." In it, I found particularly compelling the story of a trans man, Thomas Page McBee, who wrote about his experiences of beginning in 2003 to inject testosterone and to go through the other transitions along the way to becoming who he is today. As he remembered his early identifications as queer, he said: "Pride was a parade." But how then can one have pride in a time of pandemic when we can't even have big picnics?

As he's matured, over the past 17 years, Thomas McBee has come to realize, following a book by J. Jack Halberstam, "In a Queer Time and Place," that queer cultures produce "'alternative temporalities,' or 'queer time,' by allowing us to imagine futures for ourselves outside birth, marriage, reproduction and death, those 'paradigmatic markers of life experience.'"

*"When I began my transition in 2011,"* McBee goes on, *"my internal sense of time grew increasingly nonlinear, even associative, as I tried to bridge a coherent sense of self across bodies and lifetimes. As my shoulders broadened and my voice deepened, my visible queerness disappeared, camouflaging me so that I was no longer the recipient of head nods or small smiles of recognition. ... Though I eventually returned to the fold, I avoided Pride for those confusing first few years between worlds, my history no longer telegraphed in my haircut or my swagger."*

He continues:

*To the Before me, Pride had been a celebration, a party, a reclamation, a safe space. Now ... in a completely new queer identity, it's come to mean a whole lot more to me than that. My queerness ... and this Pride, for me, is about connecting the struggles of my queer ancestors to the liberation of all people—and especially honoring the debt white queer people like me owe to the black trans activists, like Marsha P. Johnson, who started our movement by standing with protestors fighting for racial justice today. The most powerful kind of pride, to me, is the pride of ancestry. For queer people, our lineage extends alongside heteronormative history—and just as far back.*

*"I'm spending my quarantine,"* McBee concludes, *"bearing witness to that history...honoring my lineage by insisting on our existence and fighting for the recognition and protection of all bodies, equal in our right to live freely and without fear in these United States of America."*

*“Pride is, after all, the opposite of shame. We’re here, we’re queer, and, even if you can’t see us, we can’t be erased. We don’t need a parade to make ourselves known.”*

So, as I wrap up today, I want to ask you just a few more questions, starting with this one: if the Fab-Five came to Green Bay, how might they make-over Union? At Noah Hepler’s church, they added rainbow accent lights along the walls, and some great purple accent paint on the front of the church. These changes signaled, as Noah put it, that “we’re the weirdest church in Fishtown.” That weird church would be one where the pastor was no longer afraid to identify who he was, and who then APOLOGIZED to those hurt by the church’s homophobia in the past. It’s an apology I have to make, too. I am an ally, but I know my perspective has been too limited by the exclusions I’ve lived with and accepted as a cis-gender straight man; it’s an apology I have to make as one whose hetero-privilege has often blocked me from empathy with others’ pain, and no doubt contributed to making that pain worse. So, I’m sorry—on behalf of the church, capital C.

And yet, I’m the one who has the capacity to ask, the office to ask: what changes do we have to make to live up fully to the queerness of God and the queerness of the church, here at Union? What changes must we make in America to live into God’s queer vision of the beloved community where everybody is welcome? What changes must we make as Christians to renounce sacrifice and to live more fully into the promises of our ancestors—all of them?

The church is queer, because God is queer. To say that the church is queer means that the church exists to open up alternatives to the way empire operates; alternatives to violence and force; alternatives to exclusions and sacrifice; alternatives to us-versus-them binaries—alternatives to death that bring us eternal life. The church is queer because it is the beloved community; a community where love wins.

I’ll leave you, then, for today, with those questions—how do we need to change? Or, as the poet Rainer Maria Rilke put it in 1903, in a “Letter to a Young Poet”:

*I want to beg you, as much as I can ... to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.*

Amen.

Dr. Jon Pahl  
Union Congregational United Church of Christ  
Green Bay, Wisconsin  
**Genesis 22:1-14, Matthew 10:40-42**  
June 28, 2020