Queer Gifts
By Beth Carlson-Malena

(This is the text of a sermon delivered by Beth Carlson-Malena at The Bridge Church in Abbotsford, BC, on June 23, 2024. It has been edited slightly for clarity.)

Hi everyone!
It's an honour to be invited to speak to you.
As a queer pastor, I have usually been invited to preach at Anglican & United churches
during Pride month, but for the first time this year,
I've been invited to speak in a few churches
more like the ones I grew up in, evangelical or post-evangelical affirming churches,
and it's really encouraging to me that this shift is happening.

Today I've been asked to tell you some of my story,
and I'd also like to talk about queer gifts.
For a long time, queer people speaking at churches
have had to be on the defensive.
We're often asked to do battle with the six or seven so-called "clobber passages,"
and to argue about why churches should tolerate us and let us in.

But thankfully, here at the Bridge,
I know you have done much of that work already.
You know queer people are included in the "Holy Everywhere."
And I get the sense you welcome queer people
not only in a patronizing way, as people who need to receive your grace,
but inviting me to speak today
shows that there's dignity and mutuality here –
queer people have things to offer the community.

So I want to examine what some of those queer gifts might be.
And when I say queer gifts, I'm not just referring
to our musical abilities and amazing haircuts, though I happen to have both.
What I want to do is to tell you my story in five chapters,
and point out ways those five queer Christian experiences
can produce good fruit in us, gifts we can share with the body of Christ.

I know there are also family members of queer people here.
You might realize you've been through similar chapters,
and have similar things you can share with the church.
Not all of these experiences are easy or positive things.
Some are like crucibles that create enormous pressure,
but leave us with some wisdom and gifts to offer.

Let's launch into **chapter one.**
Every queer person must, at some point, come out to themselves.
They must have this interior reckoning, this "aha moment."

For some of us, this happens at a very young age.
For me, it took a while.

I grew up in Saskatoon, I was a pastor's kid, firstborn of four.
I had a sense that something was different about me
but I had so much of that firstborn pastor's kid perfectionism and pride
that I pushed that sense into a corner of my brain
and put a "do not disturb" sign on the door,
I wouldn't let myself even think about it.
I'd just pray in abstractions and hope God would sort it out,
and I tried to compensate for this sense of shame
through perfectionism, both at school and church.

Since I hit youth group at the height of purity culture,
I could congratulate myself for my lack of interest in guys,
and take pride in how I seemed less tempted than my peers.
I preferred wearing baggy sweaters and loose jeans
that wouldn't cause any youth group boys to stumble.
I told myself I was waiting for the perfect Christian guy,
and didn't date anyone through high school or university.

(Though ironically as you see in the photo, I did take a female friend to prom – but that was just because she was homeschooled and didn't get her own prom. The two of us had in fact "kissed dating goodbye.")

After my undergrad, I decided to attend Regent College in Vancouver,
half-thinking I might meet a man there who was serious about theology
and might be good husband material.
I needed a place to live, so a former pastor connected me
with Danice Carlson, who attended his Vancouver church,
and was starting at Regent at the same time as me.
He thought we'd be great housemates,
since we were both pretty "low-maintenance."
We got in touch, found a basement suite with a few other women,
and she was the one who picked me up from the airport
when I moved here in 2005 –
that's a photo of her in yellow the following day.
We played songs from our worship binders on Jericho beach.

Danice and I got along really well.
We would go for walks between theology classes,
and I'd show her birds and plants
that I'd learned about during my biology degree.
She showed me around Vancouver
and introduced me to good music, beer, and spicy food.

As I continued to live with her the following year, we grew closer and closer,
and I worried that what I felt for her wasn't appropriate.
I had been so afraid of facing my attractions,
but I was more afraid of ruining my friendship with Danice if I didn't.
So I started listen to my body, and my desires,
which is really the opposite of what I learned to do at church.

Entering that risky process of self-examination with the Spirit
and coming out the other side of that, literally
left me with a gift –
Now, others who are doing risky listening
to their own bodies, minds, and spirits –
they know they can trust me to accompany them in this process
in a non-judgmental way.

No matter what they're looking at in their lives,
whether they're discovering they are queer, or neurodivergent,
or that they need to end a relationship,
I can encourage them in that risky but rewarding listening.
That self-awareness, that self-learning,
leads to beautiful places of acceptance, and sometimes, change.

Chapter two of my story is about deconstructing, wrestling with God and scripture.
Of course, many straight and cisgender people also deconstruct,
but queer Christians, and their family members, are often *forced* into the process
as soon as we realize this thing we've been told by our pastors
about queer people being these evil people out there
who are choosing idolatry and sin… that it just isn't true.
It doesn't make sense of our experience.

Then we begin to find out that those scriptures
that seem to reference queer people
aren't as simple or straightforward as we were told.
This shakes our confidence that we can trust our pastors and
scriptures and sometimes shakes our trust in God.

In this chapter of my own journey, after coming out to myself,
I went into full research mode.
I began heading to the Regent library weekly
to take out book after book about sexuality.
That's a picture of Danice in the library with me – isn't she cute?

I would type up quotes and organize arguments & counterarguments
into a Microsoft Word document that's now over 200 pages long.

Queer Christians are often the deep divers.
the "Jacobs" who have wrestled all night with the angel,
who have stared down the barrel of our doubt,
who have had to sort out the baby from the bathwater.

Usually we end up approaching God
with a greater sense of mystery, wonder, and humility.
We realize we don't have a lot of certainty,
but we know none of us are perfect interpreters of God's will,
and that God doesn't require perfect interpretations or beliefs of us.
Perfect theology was never the prerequisite
for entering God's kingdom, thank God!

This is another gift we offer you.
We can be resources and safe conversation partners
for other doubters and deconstructers,
the ones sitting in the pews feeling like imposters,
because they're not sure what they believe and whether they still belong.

We can remind you that the Word of God is a person who is still alive,
questions are not the end but the beginning of faith.
Doubt is not the opposite of faith – certainty is.
Together we can embrace a beautifully expansive God.

Chapter three – at some point, most queer folks begin **coming out to others**.
The first person I came out to was my pastor, back in 2008, who reacted beautifully.
She let me sit and weep on her couch for half an hour before I finally said the words:
"I think I'm attracted to women."
It was one of the hardest things, to get those words out –
knowing that once I did, I couldn't stuff them back in.
My pastor said she was proud of me for <u>bringing it into the light</u>,
and sent me on my own journey to seek God's will in it.
She trusted the Spirit to lead me, and this meant the world to me.

I came out to Danice, who later came out to me.
And this photo is of the weekend I told my first family member –
my brother Danny, on the right, who was studying in Victoria at the time.
He came to spend Thanksgiving weekend in 2008 with us on Galiano.
He had seemed preoccupied and distant all weekend.
Finally, he pulled me aside and sat me down
and said, "Beth, I'm not attracted to girls."
Stunned, I blurted out, "Well I sometimes am."
It was a completely mutually unexpected and perfect coming out.

We BOTH came out to the rest of our family that winter,
and our parents, like many of the parents in this congregation,
went on their own journey of learning,
and ultimately affirmed our relationships, and were a huge source of support.

The biggest season of coming out for me was in 2013,
after Danice and I were both pastoring in Baptist churches,
and we realized we needed to make a decision – were we going to keep our jobs
and continue to live celibate, mostly closeted lives,
or were we going to lose our jobs and move toward marriage?
After years of wrestling and praying, we chose the latter option.
Which meant a year of coming out to everyone we loved,
culminating in the announcements to our congregations,
and the end of our employment in that denomination.

There can be hard consequences to truth-telling
but truth-telling is, in itself, a hopeful thing,
and I believe it's a gift we offer.

It won't always be received as a gift, though –
some people will already have stereotypes or baggage around these concepts,
or they will attach stigma to our story.
So queer people learn to pay close attention to signs of readiness,
carefully discerning safety and boundaries for sharing –
queer youth, for example, may wait
until they are independent from non-affirming parents.
considering safety and wellbeing.
We can weigh the risks and the benefits.

I see so many parallels with evangelism.
Telling someone about a core part of our identity,
whether it's sharing about our sexual orientation, gender identity,

or our journey with faith, is a gift of vulnerability.

Even though coming out is often framed as a singular event,
it's actually an ongoing reality.
I am always reading the room, especially in mixed Christian gatherings,
and deciding whether or not I'll mention the fact that I have a wife,
whether I have energy for the conversations that will follow.

Whether it's truth-telling about queerness, or other realities,
queer Christians are well equipped to shatter oppressive silences
and challenge "don't ask, don't tell" situations within our churches,
to name things others might be afraid or ashamed to say out loud,
to bring light so that solutions can be found
and shame can be dispelled.

Speaking of shame – let's move to **chapter four**.
Coming out to ourselves and to others, and telling risky truths,
tends to stir up a lot of **shame and fear**,
which are probably the two biggest adversaries queer Christians face.
To face them, we cultivate the gift of Pride.

This is not the sinful kind of pride, that puffs up our ego,
but rather the kind of pride that fights shame.
It's the knowledge that our worth does not depend on the approval of others
but on the fact that we are made in the image of our Creator,
we are beloved children of God, who is our proud parent.
This gives us incredible dignity and builds our confidence.

During 2013, my big year of coming out, I got up early each morning
and walked a labyrinth that was painted on the concrete near my house.
(The lines were painted white when I walked it,
but as you can see, it's now been repainted with rainbow colours! Ironic!)
Each morning I would walk it, and when I reached the center,
I whispered, "I am the beloved child of God,
and nothing anyone says to me today can separate me from God's love."
I clung to that truth and tried to let it sink in as deeply as possible.

Eventually, I made it through that hard season of losing job prospects
and I got to marry Danice – that was May 2014, a little over 10 years ago.
We got to delight in the love of our community
and take pride in the depth of our love for each other.

Now we offer pride as a gift to the Christian community.
It's not just a parade, not just a month, but an outlook
that promotes unabashed celebration and joy in who we are.

It claims that deeper than the total depravity thread of scripture,
deeper than the idea that we are no better than worms, wretches, disgusting to God,
there's a stronger thread in scripture that affirms
and how much God loves us from the start,
and how even God meeting Adam and Eve in the garden
and giving them clothes to cover their shame is an expression of gentle care.

Pride is about fighting shame and fear
with the truth that God doesn't just tolerate us,
doesn't just love us because God is required to love everyone –
we believe God actually likes us, even or especially the queer parts of us,
the parts that showcase the diversity in God's creation.

Finally – **chapter five**. For most queer Christians,
coming out publicly means facing at least some degree of **rejection**.
There's a reason why 40% of homeless youth are LGBTQ+,
and why the number one reason they name for their homelessness
is lack of family acceptance.

So the queer community has developed this concept of chosen family.
Chosen family could include fellow queer folks
as well as straight and cisgender allies,
who become our adopted elders and siblings and children.
If we're especially lucky, church can be a place to find chosen family.

Queer folks pursue chosen family and practice the gift of hospitality
because we need each other to survive.
And yet we end up realizing that this parallels our place in the family of God.
God's family is an adoptive family, not of blood, but of choosing.
We are grafted on to the vine of Christ.

Soon after Danice and I lost our Baptist pastor jobs,
we were offered jobs with a queer Christian non-profit called Generous Space.
This meant widening our tent and learning from new queer friends.
For the first time, I had the privilege of meeting
lots of transgender and non-binary folks – some are in this photo on the left.
Seeing them take courageous steps to express their gender identity

helped me feel freer to find creativity in expressing my own gender.
Eventually our queer Christian family extended across the country.
Sadly, Generous Space closed down a few years ago,
but many of the friendships hold strong.

Now I spend most of my time pastoring at Open Way,
a church I helped plant in Vancouver 6.5 years ago.
My friend Mark Fox agreed to start the church with me – he's a straight guy in his 60s,
with lots of experience as a Baptist pastor – crucial for me.
Mark has since retired, and now I have two queer co-pastors –
this photo is from our commissioning service a few months ago.

We usually have about 30-40 people attending,
half of them are fantastic straight and cisgender people,
and the other half are queer Christians – the cream of the crop, really,
because of all of these gifts I've been mentioning.

We're challenging ourselves to keep making space for the other,
because this experience of exclusion
helps us empathize with others who are oppressed.
We realize we don't want anyone else to feel the kind of rejection we felt,
not Black people, not First Nations people, not disabled people.

We know that to be forced off the edges of our churches
is to be pushed into the waiting arms of a God
who doesn't just equalize power, but reverses it, upsets it, queers it,
in this upside-down kingdom.
My favourite image is of the people of God like a big circle of fabric
with a string running along the outside,
when God gathers the margins, the ones at the edges,
the center is gathered in too.

So these, I believe, are just some of the gifts and resources
that queer Christian journeys can provide –

Coming out to ourselves
allows us to give the gift of self-examination, taking risky inventory
of what's happening in our bodies, minds and spirits.

Wrestling with scripture and God
allows us to give the gift of mystery, and love of humility, and of our doubts and questions,
which we know to be essential parts of the faith journey.

Coming out publicly
allows us to give the gift of vulnerable risk-taking trust
and equips us for non-manipulative truth-telling and evangelism.

Fighting shame and fear
gives us the of pride, of claiming our inherent worth and belovedness.

Surviving rejection and finding chosen family
allows us to give the gift of hospitality,
empathy for others who are excluded,
and the will to dismantle any system that doesn't allow them to flourish.

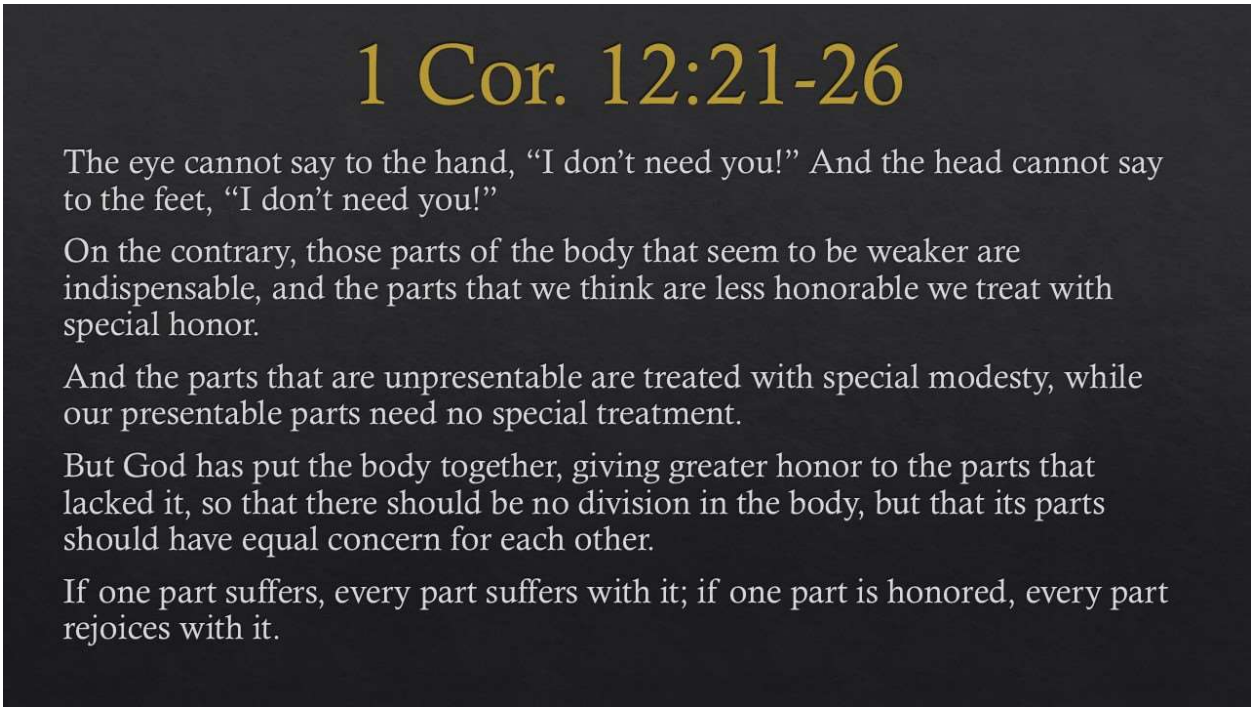
Ocean Vuong, a queer poet, wrote:
"Being queer saved my life. Often we see queerness as deprivation.
But when I look at my life,
I saw that queerness demanded an alternative innovation from me.
I had to make alternative routes; it made me curious;

it made me ask, “is this enough for me?”

I resonate with that. As painful as being queer in the church has been,
I wouldn’t trade it for the world.
It’s profoundly deepened and widened my faith practice.

This is why I think the church is so impoverished
when they reject (or at least put up a stained glass ceiling) for queer Christians.
They’re missing out on this plethora of gifts I’ve named – and many more.
And they’re missing out on out on what God looks like as imaged by queer folks.

As we see in this passage from 1 Corinthians,
churches who limit the expression of queer gifts and theologies are dismembered.
They are missing a part of the body of Christ, a particularly fabulous part –
the kind of part that might be treated as shameful or indecent
by some who cry, “I have no need of you,”
but the kind of part to which God actually gives greater honour.



Thankfully, we know God’s kingdom is a community where nothing is missing and nothing is broken.
God will reassemble the parts, God will re-member God’s body, in time.
We’ll all be part of that body – because we belong to each other.
In the meantime, not only do we get to share each other’s sufferings,
but we share each other’s joys.
Paul says that when one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.
We all start to remember who we are.

Thank you for being part of re-membering the body of Christ here at the Bridge.
Thank you for being a place where queer gifts can be received.
Of course, it may take time for queer folks to heal from trauma,
to trust that we will truly be welcome in churches,
and to build capacity to be able to offer these gifts.

While we wait for that trust and capacity to be rebuilt,
please keep leaning into hospitality, asking whose voices are missing,
and what might help them feel welcome here.
How can you practice active and tangible allyship,
and solidarity with others who have been excluded?
Our liberation is bound up together, and this is beautiful.

Beth can be reached via openwaychurch.ca or prideandjoyceremonies.ca.

For further reading, Beth highly recommends Queer Virtue, by Elizabeth Edman. "It's packed with theology but very accessible. It's what inspired a lot of my talk today – finding queer gifts in our queer journeys. Liz is a queer Episcopal priest in New York, and also a wonderful preacher."