

**LOVING EACH OTHER INTO CHRISTIAN QUEERNESS**  
**A Sermon**

ARC Worship at Perkins Chapel on October 13, 2016  
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Do you remember what our Dean told us during the Service of Thanksgiving for his appointment last Wednesday? He said—in a nutshell—that to be a Christian means to live in a “countercultural” way. “The first will be last” and those highest in status wash the feet of the lowest in status, literally and metaphorically. I want to suggest today, on this two-day belated celebration of the National Coming Out Day, to replace the adjective “countercultural” with “queer.” To be a Christian means to live in a “queer” way! Before you shake your collective heads and reject my suggestion, hear me out and allow me to elaborate just a little bit on the meaning of queer.

First of all, we must recognize that the old-fashioned meaning of queer as “strange,” “odd,” “peculiar,” or “eccentric” is long gone. The meaning of queer has been re-appropriated by the LGBTQI movements since the 1980s. The reappropriation has also made it into academia and theological studies since the 1990s. By now, the word “queer” holds a far more general meaning than suggested by the original re-appropriation. Queer theorist, Jonathan Kemp, explains that “queer is nothing new” and “just another name for those who want

revolution, those who choose to live outside of and thereby challenge society's norms."<sup>1</sup>

Does that reappropriation of "queer" not sound like "countercultural"?

Kemp sums it up like this: "Queer is whatever is at odds with the norm." Queerness is an "inherently political motivation"<sup>2</sup> that includes "a practice or process of critique."<sup>3</sup> Countercultural is queer.

Another thinker, David M. Halperin, offers an explanation that generalizes the meaning of "queer" even further. Halperin emphasizes that a queer stance critiques the various hegemonies of power. He writes:

"Queer"... does not designate a class of already objectified pathologies or perversions; rather, it describes a horizon of possibilities whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance. It is from the eccentric positionality occupied by the queer subject that it may become possible to envision a variety of possibilities for reordering the relations among sexual behaviours, erotic identities, constructions of gender, forms of knowledge, regimes of enunciation, logics of representations, modes of self-construction, and practices of community—for restructuring, that is, the relations among power, truth and desire.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, queerness is a future-oriented practice that restructures "the relations among power, truth, and desire." Queerness envisions and embraces innovations and possibilities beyond the current status quo. Queerness challenges hegemonic socio-political, economic, cultural, and religious-theological norms. Put another way, being queer requires that we resist assimilation, in sharp contrast to the famous assertion of the Borgs in *Star Trek* that "resistance is futile."

Queerness “disturb[s] the order of things.”<sup>5</sup> It re-appropriates “queer” as “a badge of honor.”<sup>6</sup>

This notion of queerness as countercultural fits exactly the situation of Christian believers throughout the last 2,000 years. It is not a pretty picture. Here at Perkins we study, deconstruct, and reconstruct the histories, politics, and ongoing failures and sometimes successes of Christians to practice a countercultural, queer faith. As we all know very well, empire assimilations and adaptations to the hegemonies of power permeate Christian history, theology, and practices. Lack of integrity, pretense on so many levels, and fear of the queer have shaped Christian organizations and lives worldwide. Hence, Christians everywhere and today struggle with the various –isms: racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, nationalism, colonialism, religious supremacism. That’s why the National Coming Out Day two days ago has tried since 1988 to provide a counterbalance, an alternative, to the hegemonies of homophobia and heterosexism that are still so very present in religious organizations, such as ours, and society at large. As queer Christians we have to offer an alternative Christian theology and way of life to provide our countercultural, queer vision for us and our way of life in the world.

As prescribed by the Common Lectionary, a famous biblical figure stands out to inform and inspire us on our queer journey at Perkins and elsewhere. It is

Jacob. Interestingly, the author of the *Torah Queeries* calls Jacob “a classic queer character” (p. 44). Jacob “is a quiet man, living in tents (Gen 25:27)—and in the heteronormative, patriarchal order tents are women’s spaces. Promptly, the *Queer Bible Commentary* observes that Jacob is depicted as effeminate; he is not a “real” man, and his mother, Rebecca, prefers this “femmy son” to his heteronormative, masculine twin, Esau. Jacob dresses up like a drag queen, pretending to be somebody else, namely his hairy and strong brother, a hunter who cooks what he kills. Unsurprisingly, Jacob ends up running away from his family of origin. I cannot go into all the details here, but don’t you agree that Jacob’s family was quite messed up? Just think of his dad, Isaac, who gets almost killed by his dad, Jacob’s grandfather, in Genesis 22. Talk about a multi-generational trauma complex! Jacob’s granddad experienced his own trauma. Abraham left everything he knew to become a migrant, a refugee, in a foreign land. After various threats that included his wife’s move into the palace of the Egyptian king, Abraham is even ready to kill his second-born son, Jacob’s father. Then there are the mothers... In a nutshell, this family was not exactly a prototype of an ideal, normative family. Jacob, the classic queer character, comes from a rather queer family of origin.

Should we be surprised that Jacob does not demur when he himself is required to marry twice, and sisters at that? He wants to be “normal,” fit in, and

not be so countercultural. His desire for normativity creates a mess with Bilhah and Zilpah, his two wives' women slaves, Bilhah and Zilpah. Family-wise I do not recommend we adhere to this family's dealings with each other.

All commentators emphasize—and this is interesting for us trying to live a countercultural or queer Christian life—that Jacob never stops aspiring to live an “authentic” life, a truthful life that is his and not marked by his family's messes. His queerness, his counterculturalness, consists in his ongoing attempt to live authentically. Of course, he fails, gets intimidated, afraid, and things go wrong over and over again, as he tries to be normal and to adapt to the hegemonic expectations and forces. For a long time, Jacob is not comfortable in his queerness, in his counterculturalness.

This all changes in Genesis 32:17-33. The central moment in his life happens during that fateful night when he “wrestles” with ha-ish, Elohim, maleach, man, God, an angel. At that moment Jacob is all alone. In the depth of the night, he finds out who is really is, what he really wants, and what he really needs. It is a blessing from the divine, an affirmation that he is okay, that despite all his trickery, cheating, and running, he is acceptable to God. At that moment Jacob faces his innermost fears. Wrestling with God, which the Queer Bible Commentary depicts as a highly homo-erotic encounter, Jacob demands affirmation that in his queerness he is okay. As a result, he gets another name: Israel.

The *Torah Queeries* talks about this central moment in the following way:

“Out of this struggle, blessing emerged, including the new name Yisrael, “for you have wrestled with beings divine and human and have prevailed” (32:29). The story of Jacob lends itself to being read as a classic coming-out narrative; but even were we to retell it stripped of its campy details, the story remains appealing because of its truth and resonance with so much of human experience: the yearning to uncover and realize the authentic self; the need to find food and sustenance as one lives out the journey; the heartfelt desire to integrate the whole self with “the ancestral house” of family, community, and culture; and the lifelong tasks of acceptance, integration, and connection” ( p. 45).

Can we then agree that this event is definitely “countercultural,” queer? The homo-erotic wrestling match between Jacob and “the man” symbolizes “the lifelong tasks of acceptance, integration, and connection.”

The “life-altering”<sup>7</sup> encounter brings out the best in Jacob. After going inward, wrestling or perhaps even “sleeping” with the “mysterious being”<sup>8</sup> (is it a demon? his authentic self? God?<sup>9</sup>), Jacob comes out transformed, ready to be reconciled with his brother and the world.

So sisters and brothers in Christ, our queer Bible encourages us to lead queer, countercultural lives, not to be afraid, accepting ourselves as queer, as being blessed by God, and thus to contribute to the transformation of imperial hegemonies, structures of domination and normativities so prevalent. The biblical story of Jacob is a reminder for us that it is not an easy way to be and live queerly, counterculturally. But it is the authentic Christian way that requires of us to practice it, not to give up, to become reconciled with ourselves and each other so

that we don't lose our way, our integrity, our faith. In light of Jacob's trials, efforts, and struggle as well as his love for God and being loved by God, let's love each other into our Christian queerness in boldness, confidence, and with courage.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Kemp, "A Queer Age: Or, Discourse Has a History," *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 6.1 (2009): p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Kemp, "A Queer Age," p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> For the phrase, see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Kemp, "A Queer Age," pp. 18, 19, 20.

<sup>7</sup> *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, p. 186.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> For God, see, e.g., Gen. 32:31; 33:10; Hos. 12:5-6