

The Q
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Queer, I've decided, is like cilantro. Some people love it. Some people hate it. And, like cilantro, it's hard to describe. If you ask my mother, cilantro, tastes like soap and rotting things; probably soapy rotting things. She believes that the presence of cilantro in otherwise delicious dishes was either designed to a) routinely torment her taste buds or b) hone her fine mortar skills by providing her with regular opportunities to pick small green leafy bits out of rice.

But I get ahead of myself, I want to say something important before we get rolling: it's become clear to me over the past couple of days that though this sermon is titled "The Q," it should be titled, "One of the Qs" because Q in the acronym LGBTQ or GLBTQ or QUILTBAG – whatever acronym you use, if it has a Q, the Q can stand for questioning or for queer; or for both questioning and queer. The identity of questioning, which applies to someone who is in the process of questioning and exploring their sexuality orientation, is super important, particularly for youth who may crave a space where they don't have to identify lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, but can identify as questioning. But important as questioning is it's not what I'm here to talk about. I'm here to talk about queer. And, apparently, cilantro.

I love cilantro. My dad loves cilantro, my mom, as you've heard, not so much. So it goes with cilantro, and with queer. When we're all at the same kitchen table trying to eat tacos or pho the conversation can inevitable turn heated when it comes to the controversial herb. So it goes with queer. All kinds of people at the dinner table with all kinds of experience with the word, loving it, hating it. People who are part of the same community, all trying to name themselves and name others.

So first, what is a queer identity?

There is no clear, uncontroversial definition of queer – not as an identity, not as political stance, not as a slur. Just like there is no clear, uncontroversial definition of other important words that describe identity like Black or feminist.

A quick, three part definition of queer:

First part: Queer can be used as an umbrella term for anybody who is not heterosexual or cisgender (another way of saying non-transgender); queer can be a stand in for saying lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.

Second part: queer does require people to have static, binary gender identities. For example if two folks identify towards the middle of the gender spectrum in between maleness and femaleness and these two people love each other – gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight – don't really fit. Queer might fit.

Third part, queer is an identity that a person can claim as theirs; it doesn't rely on who their partner is or who their partner is not.

Fourth, bonus part: Queer, for many folks is about resistance – resisting dominant culture's ideas of 'normal', rejoicing in transgression, celebrating the margins, reveling in difference – blessing ourselves. In the words of Haitian American poet, playwright Lenelle Moïse, "I am only queer b/c you are not, brother."ⁱ

Queers are women who date transgender men and men who date transgender women. Queers are people who could be called lesbian or gay but prefer queer. Queers are people who could identify as bisexual but who do not want to perpetuate the idea that gender is binary. Queers are people who are attracted to folks across the spectrum of gender identity.

When I came out, I had the privilege of having queer as an identity out there – the cilantro was on the table, if you will. I chose to identify as a queer because it's the word that many of my friends and co-workers used and using it gave me a place in a queer community. I choose to identify as a queer because I believe in this idea of both building up and tearing down boundaries of identity. And I choose to identify as queer because I see gender on a spectrum and I want my identity to have space for trans and genderqueer folks.

Many folks are like me, identifying as queer because it was a possibility to do so when they came out. Many other folks who identify as queer, like my friend and colleague at Harvard Divinity School, Tara Yule, claimed queerness after a variety of experiences with other identities. Tara wrote a piece about coming out as queer for a worship service on queer spirituality at Harvard Divinity School. I love it so I'm going to read it to you all. Tara writes:

"When I six, I came out as a boy. By that I mean I literally put my hair up under my baseball cap and put a rolled up sock in my pants and came out my front door and introduced myself to my friends as Scott.

When I was thirteen, I found out what a dyke was because someone calling herself a dyke kissed me and asked me if I'd ever thought about being a dyke. I came out in my head as a secret.

When I was seventeen, I found out there were bars and parades for people like me. I came out as a lesbian. By that I mean lesbian disco queen.

When I was twenty, I moved from LA to San Francisco. It took only months to gain thirty pounds, shave my head, buy a motorcycle, get my commercial truck driver's license, and discover alternatives to socks. When I was twenty, I came out as a dyke. By that I mean big, bulldagger, daddy dyke.

By the time I was thirty, I had a wife, I moved to Minneapolis to buy a house. I started getting even bigger, I started wearing more sweaters, I had a Home Depot card. I got bored. Then I got mad. All of the previous labels now seem to be fraught with expectations and

devoid of fun. More importantly, some of the letters toward the front of our ever-longer acronym were starting to be meaner to some of the other letters. There was only one thing I could do. When I was thirty-six, I came out as queer.”ⁱⁱ

“I wish I knew how it would feel to be free; I wish I could say all the things that I could say. Say 'em loud, say 'em clear for the whole round world to hear. I wish we knew how it would feel to be free.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Queer, like any word that is reclaimed from the mouths of bigots, a beginning, the start of new ways to enact self-definition.

In our responsive reading we heard the words of Denise Levertov: “We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life...so much is unfolding that must complete its gesture, so much is in bud.”^{iv} Much of our wariness of embracing queer comes from a place of deep pain and woundedness, a place that could never imagine how queer could be anything but a slur. And for some of us, it will always be a word that invokes shame and hurt and violence. And for others of us, including myself, have the privilege of not associating the word with bullying or getting beat up, with taunts or slurs, with fear or pain. We associate it with celebrating who we are, with resistance and transgression, messiness and liberation. And there are those of us who live in the middle, who know queer as a slur and as a reclaimed identity, who feel both shame and pride, who both say yes! I am queer, and also, please don't ever call me queer. So much is unfolding. So much is in bud.

I bow to you, to those who have carved the path before, who knew the slurs and heartbreak, to those who live them now. And ask that we are patient with each other, that we talk to each other. That we not simply say “It's generational.” Though it is! But that we take advantage of the LGBTQ community of many generations, right here in this church where there are people who came out 30 years ago and people who are coming out now. So much is unfolding, so much is in bud.

“I wish I knew how it would feel to be free; I wish you could know what it means to be me, Then you'd see and agree that everyone should be free. I wish that we could do all the things that we can do, though we're way overdue we'd be starting anew.”^v

Yesterday, I along with associate minister Rev. Lilia Cuervo, and some of the members of the transformation team attended a workshop where we were asked to assess where our congregation is on a number of things including on being a welcoming congregation. On welcoming lesbians and gays we assessed that we met the most advanced level – a transformed church community. On welcoming queer, genderqueer and transgender people we assessed that we were in a place of unexamined status quo. Here at First Parish in Cambridge we are a welcoming congregation. And we can renew that commitment by committing to becoming more conscious and more inclusive of people who identify as a queer and transgender. Today we start the conversation about queer.

Whether queer is a word that describes your identity or not, whether you identify as straight, as heterosexual or as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender but not queer, I ask you to

respect and seek to understand a person's desire to be identified as queer and a person's desire not to be identified as queer.

When I make tacos, I serve cilantro. I put in bowl in between the shredded cheese and chopped tomatoes. People can take it or not. Just because some folks can't stand it doesn't mean that other folks are going to stop serving it or eating or loving it. It's gonna be there; some people love it, some people hate it.

We prayed, in Ted Loder's words, for the ability to make beginnings, to begin going out of our weary minds into fresh dreams, daring to make our own bold tracks in the land of now. Help us to be beginnings so that we may not just grow old, but grow new each day of this wild, amazing life.^{vi}

Claiming queer and being ok with those who claim it is part of growing new, part of believing in beginnings, in words that change meanings to suit new possibilities and new ways of being. Our language changes as we grow new each day of this wild amazing life. When we let it change, we we're ok with new meanings for old words, we affirm the land of now, we make room for fresh dreams.

Living in the land of the now and embracing fresh dreams opens us as a spiritual community to the gifts of queer theology and queer Biblical commentary, of queering God and inventing rituals to celebrate the rites of passage of queer people.

Being able to say that we welcome queer identified people here at First Parish in Cambridge broadens our circle of love and community and makes those who are already here more at home. It is one more way we can be a welcoming congregation.

"I wish we knew how it would feel to be free, to live like we are longing to live, to share all the love that's in our hearts, remove all the bars that keep us apart. Oh we'd soar to the sun and look down at the sea, then we'd sing 'cause we'd know how it feels to be free."^{vii}

Let us create a world where those who wish to be called queer, where those who, who in the words of the Rev. Sue Phillips, the executive of the Clara Barton and Mass Bay districts of which this church is a part, "feel joyfully, abundantly and thoroughly queer,"^{viii} can be called queer, and where those who wish to go by other names, may go by other names.

May we all be able to eat tacos together.

"Oh we'd soar to the sun and look down at the sea, then we'd sing 'cause we'd know how it feels to be free."^{ix}

Amen. Blessed be.

Benediction:

“We clasp the hands of those who go before us, and the hands of those who come after us. We enter the little circle of each other’s arms and the larger circle of lovers whose hands are joined in a dance. And the larger circle of all creatures, passing in and out of life who move also in a dance.”^x We are all, straight and gay, lesbian and bisexual, transgender and cisgender, queer and hetero, called by so many names, held in the circle of this community and the larger circle of all creatures. May we live like we are longing to live. May we know how it feels to be free.

Amen and blessed be.

Works Cited:

ⁱ Lenelle Moïse. “Stop Killing Us,” *Madvinez*. Lenelle Moïse, 2007.

ⁱⁱ Tara Yule. “What Queer Means to Me” (adapted)

ⁱⁱⁱ Bill Taylor and Dick Dallas. “I Wish I Knew How” (adapted)

^{iv} Denise Levertov. “Beginnings” #648 *Singing the Living Tradition* (adapted)

^v Bill Taylor and Dick Dallas. “I Wish I Knew How” (adapted)

^{vi} Ted Loder. *Guerillas of Grace* (adapted)

^{vii} Bill Taylor and Dick Dallas. “I Wish I Knew How” (adapted)

^{viii} Rev. Sue Phillips. “On Being an Issue” www.uua.org/worship/words/sermons/submissions/8779.shtml

^{ix} Bill Taylor and Dick Dallas. “I Wish I Knew How” (adapted)

^x Wendell Berry. “The Larger Circle” (adapted) #646 *Singing the Living Tradition*