

I. Advanced organizer

- A. **Some of us in this room I imagine have a characteristic, a part of our identity, that for us is maybe not problematic in any way; perhaps it's even a source of pride. But had we been born in most other times or places, it would have been a real problem.** While most estimates are that about 10% of the world's population share this characteristic, at times it has been looked on with suspicion and fear. At times people have feared folks with this characteristic, believing they were evil, perhaps practicing witchcraft or devil worship. There is some evidence to suggest some people may have even been executed because of this fear. Others have experienced less grave but still problematic discrimination. People thinking you were sinful, disgusting, or maybe mentally unwell. In school, your teachers may have beat you, your parents may have berated you, you may have endured painful attempts to change your condition, all to no avail, as this condition seems to be fairly fixed and constant throughout history. **Can anyone guess which condition I'm talking about?**
- B. I'm talking about being **left-handed**.
1. there has been a bias against left-handedness in many different cultures.
 - a) Muslim world - right hand for eating, left hand for wiping unclean surfaces.
 - b) particularly Judeo-Christian cultures in the West - tradition throughout Jewish and Christian thought that associates right with goodness and left with evil. Crystallized in Christian thought with God separating sheep and goats. sheep go to the right, the goats to the left.
- C. At least in the west, **all of this is now considered silly**. Things began to change in the early 20th century, and by now most of us aren't suspicious of people for being left-handed; it's a noteworthy curiosity, nothing more.
- D. Starting asking about left-handedness because it's an example of the power that social, cultural norms and beliefs have to influence our understanding and our perceptions of reality.
1. As people of faith, this has real implications. **Might our societal glasses, our lenses and frames for viewing the world be elevated to the level of actual truth, thus becoming our version of "idols", man made forces that we worship ultimately as a means of securing control and power?**
 2. This is the third teaching in this series, "**Smashing Idols**". We started just by considering that idea, that our need to elevate certain ways of viewing life over others might be a form of idolatry, and often that prioritization of some views over others even leads to **forms of oppression** (*slide*). Two weeks ago we considered the worldview of androcentrism that impacts how we understand the value of masculine and feminine genders, and how that may even influence how we think about the gender of God. (*Possible disclaimer here about this being intense stuff, not often addressed in church.*)
 3. Today, we're gonna turn our attention to the lenses through which we view human sexuality. This seems like an appropriate way to acknowledge LGBTQ Pride month... Today, we're gonna focus on the lens that most of us have been socialized into, perhaps unknowingly: **heteronormativity**. (warning for parents: we're gonna be a bit explicit around topics of human sexuality.)

II. What is **heteronormativity**?

- A. Wikipedia - "**Heteronormativity is the belief that people fall into distinct and complementary genders (male and female) with natural roles in life. It assumes that heterosexuality is the only sexual orientation or only norm, and that sexual and marital relations are most (or only) fitting between people of opposite sexes. A "heteronormative" view therefore involves alignment of biological sex, sexuality, gender**

identity and gender roles. Heteronormativity is often linked to heterosexism and homophobia.”

1. As this definition makes clear, when we talk about human sexuality, there are actually multiple categories to consider. I think most of us understand that gender roles are largely socially constructed and can vary somewhat from context to context, so we'll leave that one be, but the other three, I think are easy to confuse. These are linked but they're not the same.
 - a) **Biological Sex** - how is our body engineered? Do we have male sexual organs, in which the sex is clearly male, or female organs, in which the biological sex is clearly female?
 - b) **Gender Identity** - how do we experience our gender? Do we feel like a man or a woman? Do we adhere in some way to how our society understands what it means to be masculine and feminine? If our gender identity matches our biological sex we are “cisgender”. If it doesn't, that's what's known as “transgender”.
 - c) Finally, **Sexuality or Sexual Orientation** - who are we attracted to? Same sex? opposite sex?
2. **Heteronormativity tends to collapse all of these into one. Biological sex, gender, and sexuality are conflated.** And in a sense, this is totally understandable. Statistically the **vast majority of human beings do have sex characteristics that match their gender identity, and they experience attraction toward the opposite sex.** That is simply true. For most people throughout history those things have gone together. But in the same way, that most human beings throughout history have been right handed, but not all, how are we to think about those who don't fall in the statistical majority?
3. Part of the problem is that **heteronormativity positions all three of these as binaries.** Two categories. You're **Male/female**. Your sex determines your gender and your sexuality. And heteronormativity assumes essentially that the binary should be heterosexual.
4. Now there may be folks here, and I'm not trying to put people on the spot either way, who by and large believe in heteronormativity; maybe think it's appropriate. **Certainly the heteronormative view squares nicely with traditional understandings of faith.** In the Judeo/Christian religion - the Bible has generally been seen to bolster, even require heteronormativity. Many Christians will point to Adam and Eve, saying that we see male and female created in the beginning as an archetype for humanity. Throughout the Bible men and women are presented as sexual partners. And that metaphor is taken to extend to Jesus's unity with the church, depicted in the New Testament as the Bride of Christ. You could easily make the case that the Bible affirms heteronormativity and the binaries it reinforces.
5. But **the question we have to contend with is are sex, gender identity, and sexuality simply binaries?** As medical science, psychology, and social scientists have all testified in recent history, and I think most of us in this room are likely aware, things are not quite so simple. Both scientific experimentation and social experience seem to testify to realities beyond the binaries.
6. Today, as we think about the **lens of heteronormativity and how it functions to shape our understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality, I want to just focus on one of these areas this morning,** which is probably the one that most of us have thought and talked about **the least**, both from a sociological and a theological point of view.
7. But as we consider the question of binaries and how they function, my hope is that this focus on one binary will open our awareness to other related binaries that we also need to

consider. **The implications of the our conversation relate to other areas of sexuality, and even how we think more generally about what it means to be a human in a physical body.**

8. So the question we're gonna think about today more specifically as we consider heteronormativity and experiences outside the binary is what happens with people outside the binary of the first category, biological sex. Folks who are not clearly medically male or female. A condition that is known as **"intersex"**.

III. Intersex

- A. What do I mean by intersex? While it's true that the majority of human beings have been born throughout history to clearly easily be identified at birth with **some version of "It's a girl!" or "It's a boy!" not every parent has had the experience of hearing that declaration.** Occasionally there are babies born for whom that call is harder to make. These babies in recent years have come to be called "intersex".
- B. **How common is this?** Well, it turns out that that question is tricky to answer, mainly because there's not yet total medical consensus on what "counts" as intersex. It turns out that there are a number of different biological genetic abnormalities that can result in sexual development that is not typically male or female.
 1. Some of these people are born with **external genitalia that are ambiguous** - it's not clear if we're looking at a small penis or a large clitoris. Their development is in the middle.
 2. Other folks have conditions that are **invisible at birth**. The outer genitalia looks one way, but the chromosomes don't match that gender and down the line there may be issues as the body doesn't produce hormones needed for sexual development.
 3. So **Intersex is an umbrella term**, depending on which cases you include somewhere between .5% and almost 2% of humans. Even at it's most conservative, more common than Down's Syndrome or Cystic Fibrosis, which most of us have heard about. On the more inclusive accounting, about as common as having red hair or being a naturally-conceived twin.
- C. Now if you're feeling unsettled just thinking about what it means to be intersex, you're not alone. **Intersex people are troubling to many of us. Perhaps it's easy to think of gender and sexual orientation as being somewhat fluid.** We can think perhaps those are just about socialization and choice. Maybe people decide to be trans or gay, **but the body itself is determined one way or another. Unless its not.**
- D. Like many other variations of biology, some human beings don't line up with the majority. Some people are red headed. Some are left handed. And some are intersex. Here's the story of a woman for whom that is the case.
- E. **show video, Lianne Simon. 3:30**
 1. Intersex people are often erased. Why is that? The truth is, it's a combination of factors. **In some cases, the erasure is medical.** For several decades at least the norm has been that when a child is born with ambiguous genitalia, the medical community has opted to perform surgeries to cosmetically "correct the problem". But the problem isn't just a cosmetic issue. Like Lianne, what's going on hormonally may not match the outer genitalia, so surgery at birth doesn't really correct anything. It often just creates harm.
 2. And then there's the reality that a number of folks have conditions that don't show up until later in life. One common intersex condition known as **androgen insensitivity syndrome** means someone is born with genitals that looks female, but internally she has gonads that were trying to develop into testes, but didn't make it all the way. So she doesn't have ovaries, and she has no uterus. Often these folks do feel like women in terms of gender

identity and they are often raised as girls, but it isn't until they hit puberty and don't begin menstruating that they often come to realize that they are not actually fully medically women. They are intersex women.

- a) **One intersex you-tuber, Lavelle**, (Slide) with this condition tells the story online of wanting to join the U.S. navy as a young woman, except she was rejected, because once she elects female on her application, and goes in for her medical exam and when asked about her last menstrual period she has to explain that she doesn't have a uterus, ovaries, filopian tubes, or any way to menstruate, but she also does not have a penis or testes, the navy doesn't know what to do with her. Intersex is not yet a category for them. And so she was rejected.
3. These stories of rejection are sad, and as people of faith we might regret their experiences of rejection, but also feel at a loss for what to do differently. How are we to think about intersex persons theologically?

IV. Theology around Intersex

A. Megan DeFranza is the theologian from the video whose work is centered around thinking through these questions, gonna draw from her work this morning.

1. Many Christians begin with Genesis, for good reason.

- a) Look at text - Genesis 1:26-28

(1) 26 Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

***27 So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.***

28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

- b) So here we see it: male and female created in the image of God. A chapter later we get another accounting in which God makes woman from the side of man, because it was "not good for man to be alone". So then this happens (Genesis 2:22-24):

(1) 22 Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

***23 The man said,
"This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called 'woman,'
for she was taken out of man."***

***24 That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife,
and they become one flesh.***

- c) So we have these stories, these founding myths that are meant to communicate something about how humanity is connected to God. **But is this story meant to establish heteronormativity as right and good?** How are we to think about these first humans? They are unambiguously sexed as male and female, cisgendered, heterosexuals. **Are they to serve as the models of what it means to be human? Or are they simply the first parents, not the model for all humanity?**

- d) Looking at this text alone doesn't tell us how to answer that question. **We have to go broader**, looking both at how the ancient cultures that produced and upheld the Bible thought about sexual identity, and what else the Bible itself has to say about it.
- 2. In studying the ancient texts from both the Bible and from other sources from Jewish and Christian thinkers, as well as texts from other cultures, it is clear that **many people have long been aware that sex is not a binary**. That there are norms of male and female to be sure, but that there are also people who fall outside of this characterization.
 - a) Augustine, Early Church Father and influential Christian thinker who lived around the 3rd century, said this, *"Although androgynes, whom men also call hermaphrodites, are very rare, yet it is difficult to find periods when they do not occur. In them the marks of both sexes appear together in such a way that it is uncertain from which they should properly receive their name. However, our established manner of speaking has given them the gender of the better sex, calling them masculine."* (And once again we see androcentrism at play...)
 - b) **The writings of ancient Jewish rabbis, going back to the Biblical era show that they also understood this to be the case.** The ancient Jews didn't talk about "androgynes" or "hermaphrodites" (terms from Greco-Roman mythology), they spoke about *eunuchs*. In fact they had multiple categories for eunuchs.
 - (1) "eunuchs of the sun" (*saris khama*) — (*slide*) indicating that they were discovered to be eunuchs at the moment the sun shone upon them. Babies with ambiguous genitalia.
 - (2) Another category of eunuch was **man-made eunuchs**, men who were born unambiguously male, but were castrated before puberty which meant that they did not have a typical sexual development. This was common practice for slaves, and these slaves were considered particularly valuable.
 - (3) Jesus himself was clearly familiar with these terms and classifications, because he used them himself. If we want to think beyond Genesis about the binary of biological sex, perhaps the words of Jesus are where we should go next.

B. What Jesus has to say about Intersex - Matthew 19

- 1. **3 Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"**
- 4 **"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' 5 and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."**
- 7 **"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"**
- 8 **Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."**
- 10 **The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."**
- 11 **Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. 12 For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose**

to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.

2. So this is a head scratcher: **first Jesus points to men and women and Genesis**, affirming that most people will marry and that marriage is sacred, and that something about the Garden story is relevant for how we understand that. Some might argue that **Jesus is holding up heteronormativity**. I get that interpretation.
 - a) **but it doesn't end there**. Jesus's followers are like, "if you're gonna take marriage this seriously, and most of us are in arranged marriages, maybe it's not actually a good deal."
3. And this is where Jesus says this tricky thing. "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given...."and then **he talks about three classes of eunuchs**: the born under the sun ones, what we'd probably call intersex, the man-made castrated eunuchs, and a third version that's been debatable throughout history. So What does this mean?
 - (1) It's historically a very tricky passage to interpret. But **one thing we have to acknowledge: Jesus seems to be lifting up the eunuch as a model**. Far from excluding the eunuch or saying the eunuch is not included in God's plan because the eunuch doesn't fall in the heteronormative binary, **Jesus is centering the eunuch**. Saying it would be better for folks to be like the eunuch. What is that about?
 - (2) It might be helpful to remember that **this was a patriarchal society. To be a husband and father meant to be a power-holder in society. But eunuchs were not able to have that role**. Similarly, while women had very little power, the place they had any was in relation to childbearing. Again, eunuchs could not bear children. Some of the intersex conditions we've talked about, like androgyne insensitivity syndrome, might have actually been understood to be women who were infertile in Jesus' day.
 - (3) But here, **rather than calling those outside the binary of patriarch or mother outsiders because they don't fit the binaries, he celebrates them. He even takes on their lifestyle as his own**.
 - (4) **For all intents and purposes, Jesus was living the life of a eunuch himself**. He denied himself the power and privilege that came with being a patriarch in a patriarchal culture. Likely many were suspicious of him. Some theologians wonder if he brought up eunuchs here as a way to address the slur that folks were using against him, questioning his masculinity behind his back. **He was suspicious as a bachelor; a celibate, unmarried man. That wasn't normally a thing for a good rabbi to be**.
 - (5) This connects actually with a comic I just saw on Facebook this week, plays with this ambiguity of Jesus' own identity, as he dialogues with superhero, Wonderella. (slide)
4. So in our passage, Jesus not only identifies with and celebrates the eunuchs, he gives us a clue for how to interpret the Garden and its role in helping us understand what it means to be human. **Jesus reminds us that the move of understanding and celebrating God's creation is from narrow to wide**.
 - a) Jesus' inclusion of sexual minorities reminds us that throughout our tradition and Scripture, **we move from the Garden where there are two people - one male, one**

female, to a reality where more diversity in humanity is acknowledged and celebrated by Jesus.

- b) This trajectory of **narrow to wide is reflected elsewhere, too.** In the law, there were prohibitions around the inclusion of eunuchs as well as gentiles in worship: they were outsiders to the community. Deuteronomy 23:1, ***“No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord.”***
- c) But later in the words of the prophet Isaiah, we get a sense that God has something else in mind for the future. The tent is widening. We see it here in Isaiah 56

(1) **3 *Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say,
“The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.”***

And let no eunuch complain,

“I am only a dry tree.”

4 *For this is what the Lord says:*

***“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose what pleases me
and hold fast to my covenant—***

***5 to them I will give within my temple and its walls
a memorial and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that will endure forever.***

***6 And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord
to minister to him,
to love the name of the Lord,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it
and who hold fast to my covenant—***

***7 these I will bring to my holy mountain
and give them joy in my house of prayer.***

***Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;***

***for my house will be called
a house of prayer for all nations.”***

- d) So **from Genesis to Deuteronomy to Isaiah, widening.** Then we have Jesus, seeming to initiate that widening further, **embodying himself life that is not defined by living a traditional male sexuality** and the power and privilege that come with patriarchy.
- e) But it doesn't end there. If we continue to follow the arc of scripture, the widening tent keeps widening. **In Acts we see the inclusion of foreigners and eunuchs fully lived out, as the first non-Jew baptized into the church is a eunuch from Ethiopia.**
- f) Then finally, we have the **end of the story to come, a preview of where this is all going in Revelation.** John has this picture of the end of the story; a picture of a very, very diverse group of people united in worship of Jesus. People from every tongue, tribe, and nation worshipping Jesus.

(1) **So the story isn't that we're supposed to be going back to the garden, to some narrow version of humanity. The story of Genesis was never meant to be a prescription for all of humanity.** There was only one language in the garden. There

was only one race. There was only one hair color. There was only one expression of sex, gender, or sexuality. But the picture throughout the rest of the story is of more and more diversity and more and more inclusion. **God's family getting more and more colorful. God's creation in more and more dimensions.** And all of it is centered not around any form of hierarchy or oppression, but around that which takes physical form and is embodied in Jesus: **self-giving love.**

5. When we take Adam and Eve, or our favorite movie characters, or our own parents for that matter, as the model of what it means to be human for all time, we can fall into heteronormativity. **It's not wrong to celebrate cisgender heterosexual identity. It is wrong to impose the binaries of sex, gender, and sexuality on all of humanity, and oppress those who do not fit within those binaries.** When we use that narrow heteronormative lens, often rooted in narrow understandings of what it means to be created in God's image, to **exclude or erase those who don't fit it the heteronormative mode, we miss seeing the full creativity of the God we worship.** We begin to shape our **understanding of creation in our own heteronormative image.** This is where I think we may practice a form of idolatry.

6. **Ending story -**

- a) *Junia and her teacher. Kindergarten teacher was non-binary gender. Prefers in English the pronoun "they" rather than "he" or "she". School is dual immersion, Spanish and English. Spanish is a binary gendered language. "Teacher" is generally "Maestro" for male and "Maestra" for female. For those who are non-binary, problematic. This teacher known as Maestre. Parents struggle with it; don't often remember to use the preferred pronoun. But Junia, after being confused, was helped early in the school year by Lourdes' explanation that they are part boy and part girl. Some of both. Most people are one or the other, but some folks are a mix of both. And when that's the case, "they" is the right pronoun.*
- b) *Recently I was playing with the kids, joking around asking something like "How do you get so cute? or Silly, Or fun, and the girls said, "from You mommy". And I said, "And from God. I think it was mostly from Him." And immediately Junia looked at me with reproach? Him? Him? God? You mean "They".*
- c) *I don't think Junia was making an allusion to the Trinity. But she was highlighting a facet of God's mystery; a facet of non-binary that even her six year old mind has integrated and learned to interpret with acceptance. Junia knows that God is beyond gender; neither male nor female, but somehow both. And now Junia knows a person like that, too. Maestre is like God, and if "they" is the appropriate pronoun for her teacher, it must be the appropriate pronoun for God too. Maestre by their very presence in Junia's life, and commitment to be themselves out loud has taught Junia a framework with which to receive God, free of the endeared baggage many followers of God have struggled with for centuries. My child's non-binary gender kindergarten teacher has taught her something important about God.*

7. Our Queer and Trans family members have been given unique gifts and unique calls and reflect the character of God in Queer, wonderful ways that our Body suffers when we won't open our eyes and our hearts wide enough to receive them.

V. So where do we go from here?

- A. **Examine the ways our thinking about God and the journey of faith are shaped by the binaries.**

1. I invite you to consider how heteronormativity has shaped your thinking about God, and about what it means to follow God faithfully. Has there been space in the way you think about those for life outside the binaries?

B. Be willing to center and listen to more stories that challenge the binaries.

1. Consider reading or listening to more stories from intersex, transgender, nonbinary, gay brothers and sisters. As you do, if that's not your experience, particularly if it's challenging, I encourage you to take a posture of listening and empathy.

C. Invite God's Spirit to continue to do a new thing amongst us, even if that is costly.

1. How is Jesus inviting us to stand, like he did, with the eunuchs of our day?
2. Recognize this will be costly. As Megan says, "You don't get to have it both ways. **You don't get to have solidarity with the marginalized and popularity with the powerful.** It doesn't work like that."
3. But it also means we will find Jesus with us in the place of standing with those on the margins, bearing witness to the new things God is doing among us. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation:

1. Consider the binaries of sex, gender, and sexuality. How have they impacted your understanding of yourself?
2. How have they impacted your understanding of others; people you know and care deeply for, and people who are more distant from you?
3. How have the binaries impacted your understanding of God and the life of faith?