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Acceptance, Love and Belonging

A few times over the course of recent months I've heard or read sermons or articles referring to the acceptance of homosexuals in church congregations. Church leaders are quick to state that there are all sorts of ways that homosexuals can be part of the church community, and that we are welcome amongst the body of Christ. I get the sense that the writer/preacher feels quite happy that they've managed to demonstrate to their audience that they've gone against the media-portrayed stereotype of "anti-gay Christian" by saying the words "gays are accepted in church". Unfortunately this usually precedes a report from the Church of England about its stance on marriage equality... oh dear.

In addition to this brand of acceptance you'll also find that "homosexuals" will often be quoted in a list alongside the words addict, prostitute, alcoholic, swindler (tax collector), thief, and murderer. The priest will eagerly say "all these people are accepted in church!" In an effort to portray a position of grace and acceptance the preacher has simply lumped me with the archetypal "outcasts" and made me feel like I should be examining my "alternative lifestyle".

Please don't misunderstand me; I'm not trying to rank my wrong doings in some sort of order in a list of sins. My issue is that the preacher has put my *identity* amongst a list of *behaviours*. I'm gay because I was born this way, not because of circumstance. I could take this further and argue why do we have these lists anyway? I don't think addicts are addicts out of choice, or prostitutes are prostitutes out of choice. Life happens, and God knows, nobody would choose a path like that if they could avoid it. But, putting me in a list like that makes me feel like the preacher thinks being gay/being me is a behaviour that can be repented from or, given the right circumstances, be fixed in some way. How can I repent from an attraction? How can I be forgiven for being the very thing that I am?

Gays are accepted* in church.

I almost feel like I should put an asterisk after the word "accepted" and have a footnote at the bottom of the page saying "subject to terms and conditions. Fair usage rules apply." I've been thinking a lot lately about what it means to be accepted just as you are. As a Christian you hear a lot of cute, trite phrases. One I've heard (and quite like, actually) is "God loves you as you are, but He loves you too much to leave you that way." I like it because I've found it to be true. Perhaps not in the way some conservative Christians would like, but God has changed me drastically over the course of the last two years and, as you'd expect, it's all for the better. One phrase you hear a lot as a gay Christian is "Love the sinner, hate the sin". Tony Campolo has been quoted as saying we should change the phrase to "Love the sinner, hate your own sin." And I believe Jesus would have said something much more akin to the latter of those two than the former.

This leads me on to what I've been mulling over the past few months, and I think I've had a bit of a breakthrough. What does it mean to "love" somebody? What does that look like and how does it feel compared to some of the emotions I feel when I'm in Church. Also, what does it mean to be accepted? What does that look like to me, and what do other people think it looks like? People use these words quite a lot, but I'm not sure we're reading the same definitions!

I've recently read a book that's helped transform my thinking and nail down what's going on with my emotions when I'm confronted with certain language used by church leadership. The book is called *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* by Dr Brené Brown. She speaks about her research and says that in the course of her many interviews she has observed that certain words are often talked about in pairs. Sometimes a pairing happens so frequently that you come to realise it's no accident, but actually this intertwining of words is an intentional "knot". "Love" and "belonging" is one such pairing.

Brené says: "A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all women, men and children. We are biologically, cognitively physically, and spiritually made to love and be loved; and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don't function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick... the absence of love and belonging will always lead to suffering."

She says, "Belonging doesn't require us to change who we are; it requires us to *be* who we are." This approach is no different when I want to feel like I belong in a church. The reason I hurt sometimes when I'm at church or listening to the words of a church leader on TV or radio is because the words I hear don't make me feel like I belong to this entity called "church". Their words make me feel shame because of the person I am, or because of the things I hope to have in my future; like a wife. Church leadership says it accepts me for who I am and says I can be part of church life, but it's always followed by hidden (or not so hidden) conditions; live a life of celibacy, or be against equal marriage, or agree with me and say that you think it's wrong, or at least say you've tried not to be gay. And in an effort to seek approval and "fit in" I think I've tried to adhere to all of the above at one time or another. Thankfully I'm now realising the detrimental effects of such a strategy and am moving towards being more authentic in life and in church.

But gays are accepted* in church.

Brené's definition of belonging is as follows: "Belonging: Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us; because this yearning is so primal we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which are not only hollow substitutes for belonging, but often barriers to it, because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world. Our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self acceptance."

Wow. Just writing those words makes me want to cry. I'm not sure whether its sadness at the amount of time I spent "hustling" for acceptance and approval, or because of the joy at finding the words I've been searching for all this time. In a time when I'm more accepting of myself than I have ever been, I understand now why I'm struggling to belong in church; the one place where my level of acceptance is questionable. And it also makes sense why it hurts so much when I feel like I don't belong.

Let's see what Brené has to say about love: "Love: We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honour the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness and affection. Love is not something we give or get; it is something that we nurture and grow; a connection that can only be cultivated between two people when it exists within each one of them – we can only love others as much as we love ourselves. Shame, blame, disrespect, betrayal, and the withholding of affection damage the roots from which love grows. Love can only survive these injuries if they are acknowledged, healed and rare."

To feel loved I must feel honoured when I reveal my true self. To feel loved I must feel respected; I must trust the other person. Can love be cultivated when I'm not sure the other person loves all of who I am? The fact that I'm gay will determine the outcome of some of my greatest life choices; the biggest being who I choose to spend the rest of my life with, marry and raise a family with. That sounds like a large part of who I am. Can a member of church still say they love me if they disagree with these parts of who I am?

At the moment I feel like I'm beginning to at least understand why I feel like the church's version of "love" and "acceptance" isn't stacking up against the definitions I believe to hold true. You see, actively seeking to prevent me from having the right to marry is not something you can do and then still expect me to feel loved afterwards. Using coded language like "lifestyle" or reducing me to a "homosexual" does not make me feel understood or accepted. Hearing church leadership say I'm "grotesque" or my partner and I are "encouraging one another in sin" is definitely not a loving thing to say. Comparing gay marriage to sexually immoral acts during a sermon does not make me feel like church is a spiritually safe place to be. It makes me feel like church is a spiritually damaging place to be. Just saying the words "gays are accepted in church" does not make it true.

I guess the biggest struggle as a gay Christian trying to fight it out in church is figuring out which "church" is more important to me. Do I think every member of church feels the same about same-sex issues as the church leaders hitting the headlines? No I don't. I know for a fact that there are many Christians in leadership roles who think that gender does not determine whether God can bless you in your relationship. Do I think the whole of my congregation feels the same as my Pastor does about same-sex marriage? No I don't. I can't believe all of the young and vibrant congregation would hold steadfastly to such an opinion. But, crikey, it's hard to remember all of that on a bad day. When it feels like you'll never belong, when you see the number of my gay friends in churches diminishing by the month, when you hear of friends doing all they can to just fit in and live up to the requirements set by church leadership, when you hear the heartbreaking stories of the bruises and scars people acquired in church; it's hard.

But I am so glad- so glad - that I will always belong to my Jesus. And He'll always love me. No caveat. No small print. Just oceans of his unending love.

Blessings,

Lindsey