



Putting Our Bodies on the Line:
More with Liz Edman

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Transcript



Sara Hayden: You're talking about what's going on in this country right now, which is that rather than address the myriad, high, high stakes problems confronting us as a global community, we would rather spend our lives making trans youth miserable. What do you want to say? Um, normally we ask this as the last question. What is one next clear step or practice our listeners can take? What do you want people to know about this?

Liz Edman: This isn't exactly a single step, and I'm going to try to do this as clearly as I can. You're so right about the moment of crisis that we are in right now, and you are so right about the hurdles that are being thrown up, the scrims being created that are designed to sort of deflect accountability among people who are just terrified they won't get re-elected if they're, if they're actually trying to take these issues on.

And so much of the deflection is a warped view of religion. You know, so much of it is based on blasphemous religious rhetoric. For those of us who are people of faith, that raises the stakes in terms of what we proclaim and, literally, how much we are willing to put our bodies on the line in order to address these issues.

Let me just - I'm going to take a quick little circular thing here. I was talking with a friend of mine, a trans woman in Tennessee a couple of weeks ago. She was supposed to be in Florida with us, and she was calling to tell me that she couldn't come because she and her partner, who is - her partner's also trans, they're pulling up stakes, and leaving Tennessee and moving to Vermont to create a refuge for trans people.

Sara: Oh.

Liz: And what my friend said to me was, she said, "You know Tennessee just passed this anti-drag law." I said, "Yeah, I knew about that." And she said, "They're also, there's a bill barreling down that will have gender identity markers on government-issued IDs revert to your gender assigned at birth."

Sara: Ugh.

Liz: And the anxiety here is that you take these two laws together and it becomes a justification for arresting trans people pretty much soon as they walk out the door. If you were assigned male at birth but you're looking like a woman here, is that performing drag?

Sara: Wow.

Liz: And that's the anxiety. And it's not at all out of the realm of possibility that that's...

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: ... where this could go. And then my friend said, "You know, in Texas, they're compiling lists of trans people." And they're also doing that in Florida, and they're also doing that in Iowa. So this is a really terrifying moment for a lotta people. And it should be for people of faith...

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: ... a very bracing moment. So what's one thing that people could do, should be doing right now? I want to say if you care about witnessing to love as a real force in our world, if you care about witnessing to the presence of a loving God as a real force in our world, then it's time to start talking with other people in your community, whatever that community is. Church, friend group, family, whatever your - that community is, start talking about the dangerous moment that we are in right now. And start talking about the risks that you and your community together are willing to take...

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: ... to witness to this force of love as a real force in our world.

Sara: The risks that you are willing to take on behalf of one another, on behalf of love. Yeah.

Liz: That's right. And what I honestly want to say... I don't know when this show is going to come out, but as you and I are standing here talking, we're about to enter Holy Week.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: And what an extraordinary moment to reflect on this because that whole week is just a series of events where Jesus, and his disciples and his followers put themselves physically at risk to witness to a loving God. You know? To witness to the idea that, that it is more important to have a society that is just than to remain safe. You know? To witness simply to the idea that love is a greater force in our world than hate.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: And that's what that whole week is about. And it's just crystal clear to me that if we want to be able to look back on this time and not just be filled with shame, the time is now to identify how are we going to put our bodies on the line to witness to our faith?

Sara: Liz, I'm wondering if there is - I have the book here. I don't know if you carry around your book with you. (laughs)

Liz: (laughs)

Sara: Which I would do if it were my book. But I'm thinking about these identity markers that you, these virtues that you elucidate in the book. Adoption, family, scandal, and the practices that they're connected with. Risk. You talk a lot about the cross. You talk a lot about Jesus putting his body on the line, and what it means to live in a - the destruction of this binary.

Liz: Yeah.

Sara: And God ushering us into the reality of a non-binary world. And the scandal that manifests because of that.

Liz: Well, and I guess I should be clear what Christianity calls us into, and queerness as well, is not necessarily nonbinary as an absolute. Certainly, in queer identity, nonbinary identity is this really important identity itself that people are naming, and claiming and living into in extraordinary ways. But the rupturing that queerness accomplishes is the rupturing of false binaries particularly. Of course, nonbinary identity is the disruption of a false binary, for sure.

This is what I mean when I talk about queerness. So in queer theory, there is this idea that to queer something is to rupture it, and specifically to rupture false binaries. So the word queer becomes a verb. And you see this in queer identity when people disrupt the idea that male and female are two completely separate poles. We just mix that up all the time and you've got the growing numbers of people who are rejecting any notion that they are male or female at all.

So that's queerness applied to human sexuality. I see queerness in the Christian tradition in moments where we talk about Jesus being both human and divine. Well, that's the disruption of an incredible binary, right?

Sara: Right. That's the big one, right? Yeah.

Liz: Right? And it's not just that he's kind of a little human and a little divine. I mean, we've got centuries and centuries of argument about this. And it comes down to, no, he's fully human and fully divine.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: Which, if you think about it hard enough, makes your head explode. I mean, like, (laughs) that's, like, like, how do we even conceive what that means? So disruption of a false binary then. When Jesus touched people who were ritually unclean in order to heal them, were his actions sacred or were they profane?

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: Well, they were both. When he was resurrected, had he died or was he alive? Well, we say both. You know? He queers the very idea of what life and death are, and their relationship to each other. And then Jesus tells these gorgeous parables that relentlessly encourage people to disrupt a false binary of self and other. Don't tell me about this woman you've caught in adultery. Tell me about the sins you've committed. I mean, that's what the parable The Good Samaritan is all about.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: Who do we define as other and what are our moral obligations to each other, regardless? He does this again, and again and again. And, of course, this disruption of false binary of self and other is what Paul does in the letter to the Galatians. You are no longer Jew or Greek, you are no longer slave or free. You are no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ. Those were the biggest binaries of Paul's day.

Sara: Mm.

Liz: And he says if you're a church, you must disrupt everyone. And the point of all this, Sara, is that these are not, like, marginal ideas in Christian theology. I mean, these are the central tenets of the faith. Which is why, to me, I can only but say that if we take these disruptions seriously, that authentic Christianity itself must be queer. We must be queer in that sense.

Sara: I find that so powerful. I think many of us come from traditions or identities where we have not had a lot at stake when we consider those theologies. Something you wrote about in, in your chapter entitled Pride is, "I exist. This is not a minor declaration of the patently obvious. There are entire theologies dedicated to the idea that we do not exist as a people. I exist. I am queer. My queer self exists." This simple and profound acknowledgement of what it means to witness, to be fully alive in one's own being, the power of your testimony in this book, it's because there was stuff on the line when you wrote it.

It's not the same for someone else to say it, but when you say it, it helps those of us for whom nothing really is on the line. Or we can pretend like nothing is on the line for us...

Liz: Mm.

Sara: ... personally. It helps us recover what's at stake both for those who are in our family- And I mean that expansively, but also for our faith, and collectively, the profound truths of our faith, and what they actually mean, and who they include, and what they demand of us.

Liz: Yeah. So many of the anti-trans laws that are passing right now are about trying to erase trans identity, and many of them are explicit about that. Yeah. So I mean, it's terrifying to think that people who have transitioned, who are in the midst of transitioning, may lose access to this process that they're in, in the midst of. The cruelty, uh, of this is, it just leaves me speechless. And theologically, I don't know how to respond to that, (laughs) other than to say we exist.

(laughs) You can't just say we don't exist because that works for you politically. And you can't rub us out because that works for you politically, which is why it matters so much, so much right now that those of us who are Christian step up to, uh, c- certainly combat the laws, combat all the hate that's behind it, but also proclaim the gospel, the real gospel.

It matters to say you shall not murder. That means something. And that applies to this moment that we're in. When I'm, um, doing, like, public speaking events, the question that I'm getting more than any other right now is people will say to me, "My church, my diocese, my synod, my council of elders, we have been open and affirming, welcoming and inclusive for years, and years and years, and it's not enough."

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: "And we know now, it's not enough. What should we be doing now?" Next steps. What's next for us? This is what's next for us. Not just saying, "Oh, how lovely that you've come in the door of our church." This is about us, I think, going the other direction.

Sara: Mm.

Liz: Walking outside and really, quite literally, putting our bodies on the line.

Sara: Mm.

Liz: In witness to our faith.

Sara: This conversation is so very hopeful and so very hard to realize what is at stake. You write about hope and in your book recall a scene in a movie, *Shawshank Redemption*, (laughs) where the two characters who are imprisoned in that moment, one of them gets hold of the loudspeaker system and plays classical music over the yard, and everyone stops and sort of wonders what's happening, and hears the music for the first time in forever.

And his companion asks him, you know, "Why are you doing this? What-" You know, this is ridiculous. Sort of, like, this pithy kind of thing. And he says, "You need it." And I think, in his case, it was the music. So you don't forget that there's something inside that they can't get to, that they can't touch, that's yours.

Liz: Yeah.

Sara: And you write, Liz, that hope for these prisoners wasn't that they would one day get out or is to say that the system that holds them captive releases them, but rather predominantly in that moment, hope was the knowledge that some part of them wasn't locked up.

Liz: Yeah. When I saw *Shawshank Redemption*, I was working as a chaplain to folks with HIV/AIDS during the height of that pandemic. There was this one wo- young woman who was

surrounded by this, like, church who'd kind of adopted her to make her a test case, and they were going to pray away the HIV is what they basically were going to do. And her immune system started to crash at some point, and she was devastated. And the question for her became, "Where is my hope here?" And so that's what I was looking for when I saw this movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: What is hope? I mean, I just don't believe that the term false hope is real. Hope cannot be false, so what is it? If your life ends badly, and it does for...

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: ... so many people. If you die a terrible death, and many, many people do. Does that mean hope doesn't exist or it's not real? No. So what is it? And it's that clip from that movie. I'm watching that, realizing it's this thing inside of you. It's the part of you that knows, no matter what awful things happen, there is some part of you that survives.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: There is some part of you that is alive, and whole, and beloved that can feel joy and gratitude to God. You might have to really work at it, but it's there. Hope.

Sara: Mm.

Liz: So I think this question of what should we be doing is pressing, and it's difficult. I think it's very- It's a really, really knotty and gnarled question. If you live in a place where these laws are passing, there may be one sort of thing demanded of you if you're living in a place where these, not passing, and what's demanded of you then, how do we do that? How do we risk? How do we stay in community?

So last week, I was with this group of queer and trans faith leaders in Florida, and what we were doing was developing an upstander training for faith communities. The upstander concept is born of the anti-violence movement. I'm on the board of the New York City Anti-Violence Project...

Sara: Mm.

Liz: ... and AVP has this upstander training. And the idea is, if you're on the subway and somebody's getting aggressive, how can you be an upstander for the person being targeted...

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: ... rather than just being a bystander? So these faith leaders got together last week and we took the AVP training. And we are now going to adapt this in order to help Christian and Christian-aligned communities. Imagine what it means to be an upstander, particularly to queer and trans people in this moment. Imagine how you step into the space of being an upstander. Imagine, how do you bring your faith to bear in that moment? So we're working on this and developing this. We're going to run a couple of pilot projects around this. But if that's a concept that is interesting to folks, I'm starting a list (laughs) of people who might be interested in that.

Sara: Amazing, amazing. Just this conversation, Liz, this vital look at our faith, and you as a vital witness of our faith makes me excited to move forward with more courage and greater examination of my own conscience about what it means to be a person of faith and a member of a broad and beautiful family. Just really honored for this time that you've spent with all of us, and thank you so much.

Liz: Thank you. That hope is in family, right? That's the hope right there. And so Sara, to have this time with you and the others who are listening, that's a beautiful experience. And gives me hope and courage at a, kind of a scary time right now.

Sara: Yeah.

Liz: Thank you for that.