



Queer Virtue:
A Conversation with Liz Edman

June 8, 2023

Transcript



Sara Hayden: Liz, thank you so much for being here for this conversation.

Liz Edman: Sara, I'm delighted to be here.

Sara: I showed you just a minute ago, and I showed Marthame the number of post-it notes that I have in my library copy of *Queer Virtue*. I need to purchase this book because I will admit that I have taken copious highlights (laughs) and underlined some things. I really am touched by what you have written. It's exceptional writing, it's exceptionally provocative in the way that the questions you ask and the values that you lift up in your experience have helped me to understand things about my own faith much better, and I thank you.

Liz: Bless your heart, Sara, really. I mean, thank you. That means, that means a lot to me. I thank you for that.

Sara: You're a heck of a writer. (laughs) Let me say that.

Liz: (laughs)

Sara: (laughs) Yours is just, um, truly a pleasure to read, so thank you.

Liz: I'll tell you a quick story, which is that, uh, my father, who was very supportive of me in writing this book, and took a bus to come to New York for the book launch, and he's such a sweetheart. But he and I really don't always see eye-to-eye on theological matters or interpretation of scripture. His father was president of Wheaton College.

Sara: Oh, wow.

Liz: So, like, intense evangelical past. Anyway, so m- my dad's one comment about the book was, he said, "You know, Liz, I don't agree with everything you've written here..."

Sara: (laughs)

Liz: ... but it sure is well written." (laughs)

Sara: (laughs)

Liz: I'll take it. (laughs)

Sara: (laughs) Eh, since you mention your dad, I'm curious if you have early memories of the faith with him, or growing up in your family, how you understood church at that point.

Liz: Yeah. Um, not so much with him particularly. My parents split up when I was really quite young and my father moved sort of across the country, uh, and rapidly had another family over there. But both of my parents were very devout in their faith. My mother, who actually grew up in the Presbyterian Church, she was a singer of sacred music. So she found - well, she and my dad together - found the Episcopal Church and my mother just loved it 'cause she loved the music, and I think my mother would've been Catholic if she could've done that in this tiny little town in Arkansas.

But she loved the music, and the mystery, and the incense, and the sensuality of it. So they joined an Episcopal church and we were - me and my siblings, we were raised in that church. And from the time we were big enough to hold a hymnal, we were in the children's choir. So it was a really important part of my childhood and upbringing.

Sara: It's interesting to talk about the way that context shapes faith, which is a conversation we have in all of our episodes. I feel like your context, as written about in your book, *Queer Virtue*, is such a significant shaper of your faith. I'd love to begin with that question, however you want to take it. How has your own context shaped your faith?

Liz: So I've been thinking about this in terms of, like, historical context up to present context, and there are really three contexts that most, I think, have shaped my faith. The first one is that I grew up in Arkansas. And I grew up in Fayetteville, which is where the university is. So a really wonderful place where the life of the mind is very important to people. And there's also the in kind of the quintessential southern hospitality, food is really important to people in Arkansas, and coming together to share meals is really important.

And there's a tremendous amount of rural poverty. There's a tremendous - When I was growing up there, there was a tremendous amount of poverty inside Fayetteville and my point is, is that for a lot of folks, including my own family, life is hard.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: You know? And you watched people wrestling with what was hard about their lives, and, you know, trying to make the best of really hard circumstances. So I grew up in the Episcopal Church. But, of course, in Arkansas, Evangelical Christianity is all around and I'd spent time as a kid going to revivals and, you know, being part of that life as well.

And what I knew even as a kid was that what was important about Evangelical faith, what mattered about it, was the way that Evangelicalism puts people in touch personally with a God who bears them up in their struggles. And I got a lotta that. Arkansas really gave that to me, this belief in a personal God, you know, who was present in my life.

Growing up in the Episcopal Church, I got some of that, some of that personal stuff. A lot of people in my church were really lovely people. When my mother was ill, there were folks who stepped right in to take care of us. But I think, even more than that, there are two important things that the Episcopal Church gave me. One is within the Episcopal Church, we, we talk about a three-legged stool of authority, scripture, tradition and human reason or human experience. And I felt that even as a kid, the fact that what I understood to be going on, that mattered to God too.

And then, as I was saying earlier, you know, that, there is just this beautiful emphasis in ep- the Episcopal Church on sacrament, and mystery, and sexual experience. So in the Episcopal Church, I encountered this God of beauty, just such, you know, the beauty of holiness. Re- I really experienced that in our church in Fayetteville. Then, so I get out of college, and I come to New York, where I'd always, always wanted to be.

And in New York, which is so alive and filled with so many different kinds of people, this is really where I began to understand God as a relational God, a God of community. And, particularly, a God that brings together people who are really different from one another. Th- Having to work out, how do we live together here? It's, you know, it's Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, you know, chapter 12. Like, what is it to be members of a body? How do we lean into needing each other enough to carve out a, a life together?

And for me particularly, when I got here, the fact that New York has always been home to a really robust LGBTQ community, that became part of my faith journey and my, my understanding of myself and my understanding of community itself.

Sara: Liz, I'd love to ask you about that, how the queer community in New York shaped you. What would you say?

Liz: This is actually so much the basis of *Queer Virtue*, the book. This is so much what informs the book. I kind of want to say I wrote a book, uh, about it.

Sara: Yeah.

Liz: What I found in queer community - And I moved to New York in, uh, 1985. So we were at a particular moment in queer history. We weren't out and visible in, not nearly the same way that the community is now. HIV/AIDS was just about to slam into the community. So we're in this kind of nascent place of a social justice movement that is really getting going, and then people coming together simply to survive.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: And all of this is taking place for me just as I'm really discerning a call to ministry, getting ready to go to seminary. I went to Union here in New York. Uh, so there are a couple things that

were formative about that. One is that I saw so clearly people within queer communities living into an ethic of generosity, of patience with each other, of hospitality that I knew was right out of scripture.

I think I tell the story in the book about going to an Act Up meeting where the pope was about to come to Central Park.

Sara: So this was a protest, a chance for the community to sort of gather and protest.

Liz: Exactly, yeah. So Act Up was a direct action group that was born as a response to government inaction around HIV/AIDS. They were really pushing for the FDA to approve drugs and, and more funding, and better care, and that sort of thing. Uh, so we would come together in order to come up with these protests that were vivid and evocative, you know? Using symbolism and civil disobedience in order to make a larger point.

So the pope was coming to Central Park and that pope had been terrible about HIV/AIDS, just terrible at even recognizing that it was going on. So we're having this Act Up meeting about the protest that's going to take place, and pretty rapidly the protest devolved into these really unkind (laughs) remarks about the pope's person.

Sara: And this is Pope John Paul II?

Liz: Yes. And at some point, a man in the group asked everybody to stop. And he said, "I understand your anger. I really do. This pope is terrible on our issues, and he is doing more to address extreme poverty on this planet than anybody else, and that matters to me, and I won't participate in attacking him personally."

That one moment crystallized so much for me. You know, this silence fell and nobody knew what was going to happen next. What happened was the silence fell and we just sat in silence for probably not very long. It felt like forever. And then the conversation picked back up, and we had completely shifted away from all the kind of negative, ugly comments into focusing now on, okay, what are we actually doing here? What's the point that we're trying to make?

What that community did in that moment was, one, you've got a member of that community who is saying, "It's not just about us." It is about us, and it's not just about us. There are people who are not in this room, literally and metaphorically, whose wellbeing matters and we have to keep those people in view." I heard that again and again, and still in places where people take queer ethics really seriously, that's an important part of the dialogue.

This man courageously gave voice to that, knowing that he was risking being mocked, being laughed at. He said it clearly, he said it cleanly. He said it without pressuring anybody else in the room. The room received his words, took them in, really took them in, and then responded. To me, that's what Christian community should be able to do. That's a community of faith right there.

Sara: You know, what strikes me is your earlier comment of growing up in the Evangelical Church or being exposed to that in Arkansas. And how God was seen as someone who saw and lifted people up through and out of, in the midst of their difficulties, tremendous difficulties. And here you have this experience of the queer community in New York who are facing every kind of difficulty. Not necessarily as folks who are a part of the church. What you say in your book that really struck me was you have the Evangelical Church that has lifted up those who see their identity in that, but for people who are queer to find a family, they're finding a family in adoption alone in many cases because the church itself, historically, has pushed people out of the church.

And so, whereas we might gather as someone who is experiencing life as a straight white woman being welcomed into a church and finding community there, folks who are queer found it around and outside of the church.

Liz: Yeah. I really believe deeply that queer people are highly attuned to the sacred. Not everybody, you know, like,

Sara: Yeah.

Liz: ... anybody who identifies as a queer atheist, I have nothing but respect...

Sara: Yeah.

Liz: ... for those interior definitions.

Sara: You communicate that in the book, yeah.

Liz: Yeah. It is my experience that, as a people, we are highly attuned to the sacred. And so it's not a surprise to me, given that, that people within queer communities often do seek out homes that can be spiritual homes. And I mean, just as you say, you know, I mean, it's the church's loss, really, that the church has spent so much time pushing these people out or making us feel horrible about ourselves.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: You know? And, uh, communicating unwelcome in, or ambivalence in myriad ways. If people can't gather in what is explicitly a spiritual space, what looks like a spiritual space when you walk into it, then people will create that for themselves.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: And they have. And we have, and we do. And they are spiritual spaces.

Sara: Yeah. You say: "What can be said about LGBTQ community that is true? What can be said that Christians can appreciate? Among many things, we know of our need of each other."

Liz: Yeah. And we're incredibly intentional then about how we form community, how we get those needs met, how we look around to make sure other people's needs are met. I should probably say here, it's just a bit of a caveat, that I have talked to a number of queer people, younger, considerably younger than myself, whose experience of queer community has not been this, like, sort of halo (laughs) experience that I had growing up and sort of coming of age in the '80s and '90s.

And, to some degree that's, I think, what happens when you do start to make headway on justice. It'll be interesting to see now, with the terrible threats that we're in the midst of, my suspicion is that you'll see a real rejuvenation of queer community at its best. That's my hope.

Sara: When you think about the ethical and spiritual demands that queerness makes of those who claim and live that identity, what comes to mind for you?

Liz: So, I see a queer ethical path. And in order to understand what that is, it's super helpful to think a little bit about what queer experience entails.

Sara: Yeah.

Liz: So, for a lot of people, not everybody...

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: ... but for a lot of people, queer experience looks something like this. You have to discern an identity. Comes from within, and this is an identity that affects how you present yourself to the world, how you navigate your most intimate relationships. It's an important identity. Says a lot about who you are and how you will live. You have to tell the truth about that identity, even if you are fairly certain that that identity is not gonna be received well.

So this is a move that demands courage. It requires risk. You have to find other people who share that identity in order to learn about it. I'd refer to that as touch. And then build community together. Queer people have a really beautiful history of building community together. And look into the margins to see who is still struggling and doing something about that.

And that, to me, is the ethical path that we have to walk. What's interesting to me, and where the book comes from, is seeing that that ethical path is identical to the ethical path that Christians are supposed to walk.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: We're supposed to discern an identity too. For us, our identity is we are children of God, created by God. We depend on God for our very lives. That's supposed to be an identity marker for us. We're supposed to tell the truth about that to other people, even when it's not popular. We have to find other people in order to understand what this identity demands, build community together, look to the margins to see who's struggling and do something about that.

It's the same path.

Sara: Hmm. I'm, continue to be struck by the corollary and often feel that my experience of Christianity bobbles between (laughs) this, look to the margins, self, understanding identity and relationship with those who are a part of this great family. Uh, that church wasn't really my vibe or, like (laughs) you know what I mean?

Liz: (laughs) Right.

Sara: Right? You go and you, you see this community made manifest, which is just the architecture, music, eh, the words spoken. The tangible aspects of what we would call a church or a, quote, "Christian community." And most of us, many of us in the United States, kind of go in, decide whether or not that feels like us, and oftentimes in the process of deconstruction, we might choose to leave those environments. And, you know, I guess that's a sort of, a pilgrimage in a way that is not exactly the same, but in some ways is linked to the pilgrimage of finding your family in the queer community.

Liz: It is. In many ways, it's exactly the same thing. With the crucial component that queer people, in my experience, have really high standards...

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Liz: ... for what it means to enter into family.

Sara: Mm.

Liz: What it means to build those kinds of relationships. I had this experience just this past week. I came together with a group of queer and trans faith leaders in Florida, and what we're trying to do is figure out how to mobilize churches to address the anti queer and trans legislation that's now passing across the country.

I had the most extraordinary experience there. We had two days to work, and we were very ambitious about what we wanted to get done. So I had co-organized this with my dear friend, M Kaiser, one of the co-founders of Enfleshed. And M and I had really thought carefully how we were gonna organize our time. And pretty much, almost as soon as we landed there, I realized how much my conception of our time was going to be based on this, like, white progressive Protestant model and wasn't going to speak clearly to the members of the Black church who were there. It wasn't going to speak clearly to the younger folks who were part of more activist

communities. It was just so clear that, like, I'd structured the whole conversation out of my own context. And we just rapidly moved into this place where we sort of tore up the plan and wrote a new plan...

Sara: Hmm.

Liz: ... together. And my job then, as facilitator, largely just became to let this process emerge. I was stunned though by what we were able to do just by people kind of stepping in to take different pieces of it and feel our way forward together with many of these queer ethics at stake, and we were for the most part – it was a small group, but many of us, we'd never even met before.

So we were forming community, we were forming a process. We had this goal in mind. And when you think, Sara, about the difference there in the power dynamic compared to what almost anybody experiences when you walk into a church for the first time, where, for the most part, our churches are still modeled on the idea that you come and you sit down.

Sara: (laughs)

Liz: All the action is being done by other people, and it takes a while. Like, successive, like, weeks, or days or months to even reach a place where you're participating in decisions about what we're doing as a community together.

Sara: Yeah.

Liz: But that's kind of what family is. Family is you show up. Suddenly, you're making decisions together.

Sara: Yeah.

Liz: If it's a healthy family.

Sara: Yeah. I mean, a family at its baseline looks toward one another's survival. You have to make decisions every day to survive.

Liz: Yeah.

Sara: You know, even if it's as elemental as the food that's placed on the table, and paying the bills, and keeping the heat on.

Liz: Yeah. Caring for your space together. Caring for each other in that space, yeah.

