

# Bodies That Touch

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*There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*

—1 John 4:18 NIV

*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Romans 8:28 NIV

## My Daughter Has a Wonderful Partner Who Calls Me Mom, and I Am Blessed

It is all too tempting to discuss sexuality and The United Methodist Church without centering our vulnerable souls in the presence of God's perfect love. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, Romans 8:28 proclaims. If we sit with 1 John 4, we know that God *is* Love. Our common ground as United Methodists is Jesus Christ, whose nature and name, according to Charles Wesley's hymn "O Thou Traveler Unknown," is Love. It is Love with whom we struggle, determined like Jacob to wrestle with God and gain a blessing. May this love hold us in its presence as we hear one another into speech about matters of the heart. Love is a practice, not an object to easily name or grasp.

My daughter has a wonderful partner who calls me Mom. She calls me Mom, and I am blessed. She is a kind, compassionate, Christian person who brings out the best of my daughter's own love, compassion, and empathy for self and others. She is a loving person and helper who keeps my daughter's heart focused on God's love, joins her in witnessing to the goodness and strength of God's love with others. They sit together, shoulders touching, arms interlinked, on our living room sofa, eating popcorn, watching family movies like any other Christian couple. I do not know the other ways in which they touch, because I respect their privacy as I respect any couple's privacy. They remind me of my heterosexual marriage with my conventional heterosexual husband.

I should note, however, that my husband has had multiple bilateral major and traumatic hip surgeries since the age of nineteen, because of the osteoporosis side effects of prednisone to manage the auto-immune disease Systemic Erythematosis he has had since the age of fifteen. Some of my women relatives discouraged me from marrying him. "Can he perform, though? Sexually?" they whispered in my ear. In and out of the uses of crutches, canes, and now permanently using wheelchair and a walker, I guess some people think all this equipment goes in the bed with us. While LGBTQI generally do not use the word *queer* to describe marriages among persons with diverse abilities, apparently some people view my marriage with my husband as *queer* too. I am comfortable with that. Sexuality within marriages in which one or

more partner has a major physical disability is another chapter for a scholar in Disability Studies. It is part of the intersectionality up for discussion in the second section of this essay. For now, back to the focus of this section, my queer daughter and her queer partner who are a blessing to me.

My daughter and her partner remind me of my husband. Like us, they are best friends who fell in love. The love, the empathy, the compassion, the desire to become one in mutual, pleasurable touching, blessed by God is a rich gift humans have common. These are bodies filled with God's breath, blessed with gifts for faith, hope, and love, which bless each other and their neighbors. They are fully human, created in God's image, enfleshed spirits in Christian incarnational faith and God's sacramental creation. They are members of the body of Christ who touch. They touch each other in sexual ways, and they touch others in nonsexual ways. They touch the hearts of others with the love of Jesus Christ, to whom they have committed their lives.

God uses the love we share as a family to cast out fear. Some people in The United Methodist Church, like Job's friends, view the situation as an aberration that is filled with hidden sin. Sometimes church people live in fear and teach fear to others. Yet, fear is not of God. I am familiar with the evangelism of fear from my college days, when dear friends at a Holiness church warned me not to associate with the Methodists of my youth, because, in their view, Methodists—like Roman Catholics and Episcopalians—were not real Christians. Methodists may not make it to heaven because they are not real Christians. I returned to The United Methodist Church. I knew commitment to Jesus Christ as influenced by my Methodist great-grandmother and my Methodist grandmother, and by the Christian teachings of Methodist, Roman Catholic, and Episcopal elders, as well as my new Holiness Christian friends. My Holiness friends' teachings on "homosexuality" made me fear there something was wrong with my feeling that LBGQTI people of God are equal to heterosexual Christians in holiness. God's perfect love cast eventually cast out my fear of affirming LBGQTI persons. My young Christian friends in the Holiness Church were unsuccessful in making me fearful of returning to The United Methodist Church. Ultimately, they were also unsuccessful in making me reject LGBTQI members in the body of Christ as less holy or acceptable to God.

Christian ethicist, Theodore Walker Jr., counsels students and faculty alike as part of our team-teaching at Perkins School of Theology. He teaches that there is a difference between reading and studying. Reading is not studying. We read and think we know and understand what we have read. We see this in the church, including in The United Methodist Church. We think we understand scripture, because we sometimes read a little bit of scripture. According to some recent studies, Christians, both laypeople and clergy, neither read nor study much scripture at all. We pull out scripture we recall reading or hearing. We read a little scripture. Yet very few Christians study scripture. This may be one of the reasons we are short in knowledge of the myriad ways in which bodies touch, sexually or nonsexually, in Christian scripture.

In the book of Proverbs, people of faith are persuaded, perhaps commanded, to show ourselves approved by God. This essay, is not, however, a study in academic biblical study, because I am not a Hebrew Bible Scholar or a New Testament Scholar. I am a womanist theologian and scholar of religion, as I will explain below. Womanists do refer to some of the scripture we have studied in our theological writing. This will be apparent as I reference the topic of sexuality at a few points, but the essay will not belabor the few, already much discussed texts that are often not studied or misread as describing homosexuality as an abomination.

For now, back to this problem of fear and the United Methodist, Christian, biblical teaching that perfect love casts out fear. The human mind, mortal and limited as it is, has difficulty, after

all, understanding one teaching of Jesus or his apostles at a time. “Do you still not understand?” Do you still not understand, we find him asking his disciples with compassion and loving demand in the Gospels that bear the names of Matthew and Luke? Peter understands who Jesus Christ is, the anointed one of God, the Christ and promised Messiah. Yet, in fear, Peter rejects Jesus three times in Jesus’ hours of trial and persecution, just as Jesus prophesied. Jesus loves and accepts Peter all the same, just as Jesus loves us despite our fears and denials of one another. May we United Methodists, we Christians within the larger body of a church that consists of many denominations and non-denominations, trust in God in Jesus Christ who loves us in spite any fear of discussing bodies that sexually touch.

I say that I am blessed by my daughter’s and her partner’s sexual love for each other and their empathetic, compassionate love for others; yet this is not how most people in my generation and I were raised. This is not how most of my generation was raised in the state of Indiana. Martin Luther King Jr. knew we black people are fully human, children of God; and he believed all human government and economic systems are deeply vulnerable to evil and corruption.

Why do we call people what they are not? What is this hatred, whose root is fear, that finds ways to call goodness evil? How is this different from the story in the New Testament in which some accused Jesus Christ of being demonic, rather than a good rabbi who lived fully in God, with God living in him? I defended Martin Luther King Jr. in junior high school and high school when some people called him a Communist. Why would people fear this drum major for love and justice, I wondered? As a mature scholar, I learned that he wrote about why he is not a Communist in his book *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*.

I grew up during the Cold War, in fear that a nuclear strike by the Soviet Union was possible. One of Russia’s many nuclear sites was programmed to strike Indiana, because we were the home of Fort Benjamin Harrison. I remember the air-raid drills in school in the 1960s and 1970s, because Indiana is committed to protecting its own in case of such an emergency. The possibility was something I wondered about, and it was one reason I became a theologian. What if it really happened, and somehow I was spared in a strange nuclear wasteland with a few others? What would I contribute? We would need scientists, but I enjoyed the concepts of science more than the nitty gritty, detailed steps of math and experiments. Having spent half my K–12 life in parochial schools and the Methodist Church, I believed that we would need philosophers and theologians to serve others with questions of ethics and faith. By high school, I had this much settled in my heart and mind, especially after all the “Who would you throw out of the lifeboat” exercises in required in some classes.

Fear of a Soviet nuclear strike was a clear phobia. Sexuality was not as clear a source of fear. I experienced a mixture of fear and acceptance of diverse sexual orientations produced by the mixed messages about human sexuality I learned in church and society. I accepted LGBTQTI people of God and feared that I was wrong in my acceptance at the same time. I was not born with this fear. This fear was taught to me, and I learned it later in life. My sixth-grade teacher did not teach me this fear. My sixth-grade teacher at an Episcopal school taught us, without judgment, that “A lesbian is a woman who would rather live with another woman, and a homosexual is a man who would rather live with another man.” *Gay* still meant “happy” in the academic year of 1970–1971 in Indiana; although my mother was not happy with what I had learned in school that day, especially when I announced it loudly in the parking lot of a popular mall. “Shhh, Shhhh, Shhh. Be quiet Karen!” she scolded. “But when I go to college, I don’t want a boy roommate, Mom, and if I don’t get married I don’t want a boy roommate either!” “Stop it, Karen. Just hush.” End of conversation. Yet I would always wonder as I grew older. Who you

choose to live with—to share space for sleeping, eating, and shelter—seemed far more important to me than sexual orientation. Why make a home without love?

The diagrams of human bodies provided as learning guides in parochial and public school sex-education classes were puzzling. Teachers taught us with diagrams of bodies that did not touch. Teachers taught us with diagrams of bodies lacking flesh. It was not until college and we women undergraduates discovered the now famous book, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, that many women really learned much about our bodies at all.<sup>1</sup> How amazed we were to have this very large book that encouraged us to know what some of us had been taught only by our gynecologists; parts of our bodies that, if we married, only our husbands who identified as men in gender and genitals would be permitted to see or touch.

Basically, I grew up in an era that encouraged coerced heterosexuality and suspicion of those who read Karl Marx. In undergraduate and graduate school I was far more afraid of reading Karl Marx and ending up on “a list,” than of any of my LGBTQTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer or Questioning, and Intersex or, according to older Greek classifications, “hermaphrodites”) friends. Today, my mother laughs about my temerity in reading Karl Marx, although she continues to approve only of heterosexuality. My mother and I disagree on human sexuality and the Christian message. Yet my mother and I worship together in the denomination in which she raised me, The United Methodist Church.

My recently deceased father would not agree with my position on sexuality in The United Methodist Church; yet our love for each other, as he said on his death bed, is forever. From my Methodist father and his Methodist father, both church trustees who were very demanding about the church’s proper use of money and service among the poor, I learned early that Methodist Christian love is demanding, critically aware, sometimes argumentative, yet everlasting, unsurpassable and forevermore. My extended family and I have worshiped together in our local Indiana Methodist Church since it belonged to the segregated, black Central District, well before The UMC was formed. I do not affirm racism, which is a sin in The United Methodist Church according to the Constitution of the General Conference. Nor do I affirm heterosexism, which—as someone who is descended from ancestors and family of African descent—I see as simply another form of oppression and discrimination. Worshiping together is easy for my mother and laypeople in The UMC, at least as long as same-gender or same-sex weddings are not being planned at a local UM church. The “Social Principles” counsel us not to judge or hate our friends and family members who are LGBTQTI. The matter becomes more complicated, however, for seminarians of diverse gender and sexual identities seeking ordination, and for clergy in same-gender or same-sex marriages by any name. It becomes more complicated for United Methodist faculty teaching what The United Methodist Church’s General Conference has agreed to teach in its *Book of Discipline*.

As a person of African descent, as a United Methodist scholar, and as a theologian, the approach I use for reflecting on and behaving toward LGBTQTI people of God is called “womanist.” “Womanists” use “intersectional” analysis to discuss the ways in which institutional oppressions are connected to one another. A “womanist” is a woman of African descent whose concern is to move church and society from overlapping oppressive and harmful ways of thinking and acting institutionally to overlapping compassionate, kind, joyful, freeing, and just ways of behaving toward one another institutionally. It has some similarity to Martin Luther King Jr.’s proclamation that “none of us are free until all of us are free.”<sup>2</sup>

As a heterosexual woman of color, my heterosexuality is a privilege that, in ways that are mostly unconscious to me, is oppressive to my LGBTQTI United Methodist and more broadly

Christian family in the body of Christ. Over time, like my LGBTQI family in Christ, I have been amused and annoyed by questions like, “How do you know you are gay?” I have come to wonder how any of us can unquestionably claim to be “straight” in a church and society that work with determination to repress any sexual orientation other than heterosexuality. Denial is one of the strongest aspects of the human subconscious. Repression works more effectively on some minds than others. Would I be a heterosexual woman if I had been brought up in a less repressive culture? Is this the unlikely possibility that some heterosexuals fear? Some studies show that children know their sexuality by the age of sexual development. Other studies indicate a longer term of development in one’s sexual and gender identities. It is clear, however, that heterosexism works intentionally and systemically to repress human beings from accepting anything other than a heterosexual gender and sexuality.

## The Intersection of Oppressing LGBTQI Love as *Divine Eros* with Other Types of Oppression

Because of the perfect love that United Methodists emphasize Christians are called to live into, it is important to talk about what it means to embody God’s love in all aspects of life, including sexual life. It is important to contemplate human, earthy bodies, which God created, inspiring breath and life into us. The Christian faith is incarnational, one in which God so loved the world that God has sent God’s own self through the Wisdom-filled, everlasting, divine Word to dwell among us; Immanuel is God with us, Jesus the Christ, the anointed one, the messiah, the savior, the Son of God and a woman who bore this son, raised this son, Mary. This savior, dwelling among us, calls us to remember our interrelationship with God, self, and neighbor. This savior is said to call human creatures to remember that our joys and sufferings are interconnected, that what affects one affects all. Therefore, whether we discuss our bodily and spiritual experience as people of faith in terms of sexuality, poverty, race, gender, ability, or sexuality, this is all part of what womanists and feminists call the intersectionality of human experience. I discuss these matters from a “womanist” United Methodist, Christian perspective.

Again, “What is a womanist?” Succinctly, womanist scholars of religion and society emerged in the 1980s among black women who saw a need for a holistic approach to emancipatory theology that gives attention to God’s activity amid interlocking systems of oppression. The legal black feminist Kimberley Crenshaw is given credit by the legal scholar Patricia Collins and others for coming to call this approach “intersectional.” Black feminist Angela Davis recalls that black feminists were really engaging intersectionality before Kimberley Crenshaw ever used the term “intersectional.”<sup>3</sup> These writers/activists are in accord with United Methodist social principles, leaning toward a socialism that can be reworked into a type of Christian Socialism. They look at racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and classism as interlocking systems of oppression.

Regarding sexuality, Cuba has made strong progress in its acceptance of diverse sexualities among human beings, and children are learning to accept themselves and others in their schools as they grow into persons of diverse sexualities. There is nothing Marxist/Leninist, Communist, or even Socialist about this Cuban program. Their reasons for acceptance of diverse sexualities among humankind are based in science, not ideology. Cuba has a national organization called “The National Center for Sexuality.” The acronym for the organization is “CENESEX.” As Cuba transitions from a Castro-driven, strict Marxist-Leninist Communist state with dictatorship to an economy that is slowly becoming more blended, with opportunities for its citizens to engage in

entrepreneurship, United Methodists who have an opportunity to travel to Cuba would find it well worth their time to visit CENESEX to learn how Cuba is managing to move beyond its tensions regarding human sexuality and fuller acceptance of LGBTQ persons. Cuba continues to struggle in this area, but is making progress in understanding its peoples in their diverse sexual orientations. It helps to travel to places that have found humane and humanizing ways of resolving tensions on sexual orientation and understanding of human sexuality in general. Human sexuality is related to the whole of who we are in our race, gender, class, ability, nationality, age, and other factors. Again, this is intersectionality. As United Methodists, let us now move to Christian love. What is the meaning of Christian love in relation to intersectional human experience?

## What Kind of Love Are We Talking About? Remembering Divine *Eros* with *Agape* and *Filia*

As the Christian, Nazarene, Wesleyan theologian Thomas J. Oord points out, the Psalms, particularly Psalm 119, describe God's love as everlasting.<sup>4</sup> God is love, and the nature of God is love. We are nothing without love. If we do not love God as God loves us and our neighbors as ourselves, we do not truly love God or ourselves. We fail to love God, self, one another, and God's good creation. If we do not love one another, 1 John 4:19 counsels, then we do not love God. This is true whether we speak of God's *agape*, *filial*, or *eros* love, the three key aspects of divine love that Christians have historically contemplated in their use of Aristotle's ethics as they apply to Christian ethics.

In a discussion on sexuality and The United Methodist Church, it makes sense to focus on *eros*. *Eros* is interrelated with the whole of God's love, including *agape* and *filia*. According to Oord, "*eros* is acting intentionally, in sympathetic response to others (including God), to promote overall well-being when affirming what is valuable, beautiful or excellent," or in brief "*eros* is intentional sympathetic response to promote overall well-being when affirming what is valuable." For Oord "we should not regard *eros* as equivalent with sex and romance because *eros* as affirmation of what is valuable often has nothing to do with romance and sexuality. Romance and sex may or may not be expressions of *eros*."<sup>5</sup> Nor, I add to Oord's caveat, can we say that *eros* has nothing to do with romance and sex. *Eros* is very important in marital love. *Eros* gives and receives pleasure, in events in which marital partners become one. *Eros* affirms and edifies the value of one's partner. The key word is *value*.

Martin Luther King Jr., Anders Nygren, and Aristotle discuss three aspects of divine love God invites Christians to embody: *agape*, *filia*, and *eros*. King's understanding of *agape* grounds his commitment to "beloved community." For King, *agape* is "disinterested love. It is Jesus' ethic of unconditional love for just relationships among humankind. *Filia* is love among friends with shared interests who exercise mutual giving and taking. *Agape* is the aspect of divine love we United Methodists pray to embody in our discussions and decisions about what we find difficult, like human sexuality. In *agape*, our hope is that tensions among us will produce beloved community rather than hateful division. Tension is an opportunity to realize abundant love.

Coretta Scott King, Martin Luther King Jr.'s wife, who preserved his legacy and expanded its *agape* love well into the twenty-first century and for generations to come, came to affirm LGBTQI persons as people of God. She understood that just as racists during slavery and segregation claimed they did not hate people of color and Jewish people, so also do some

Christians today rationalize that they do not *hate* LGBTQI people of God, but simply find them inferior in holiness. *Hate*, however, whose root emotion is fear, is sneaky. Nor is hate is shy about masking itself as love. Coretta Scott King understood this, and her love for LGBTQI persons of faith as equal in holiness to heterosexual persons of faith is a helpful point to consider. While she did not call herself a “womanist,” her thoughtfulness is helpful for womanist United Methodists and all kinds of United Methodists. Womanist Christian thought, noting over-attention to *agape* and insufficient attention to *eros* by Martin Luther King Jr., recovers a positive valuation of *eros* for life and faith. Just as Barbara Holmes gives cosmic flesh to King’s understanding of “beloved community” to speak of “a community called beloved,” so also might it be helpful flesh out the intimacy between lover and beloved through a discussion of *eros*.

*Eros* is often confused with *epithymia*—physical lust that treats the other as an object of masturbation rather than as an event of divine love. In a world where human trafficking—involving sex trade of women and children—is a multibillion dollar local, national, and global industry, *eros* has been degraded to mean pornography, sexual abuse, and “soul murder.”<sup>6</sup> Quoting Pamela Cooper-White, United Christ of Church pastor Dr. Irie Lynne Session describes *eros* as “love that includes physical passion, but also includes the whole person, body and soul together” and a “life force that reaches out toward the other for intimacy, mutual creativity, and exchange.”<sup>7</sup> Violence and violation of *eros*, Pamela Lightsey warns, is a problem. It underlies hateful attitudes and acts of homophobia in communities of faith and general populations. Lightsey quotes Audre Lorde to reclaim *eros* as a sensual, creative, wondrous response to life:

The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling . . . The erotic has often been named by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, and plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with the pornographic.<sup>8</sup>

Lorde explains that *eros* is deeply rooted in our preconscious, underlying feelings. Lorde goes on to express concern for oppressing and repressing *eros* in women. Lorde describes *eros* as, particularly for women, “that creative energy empowered” that produces “our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.”<sup>9</sup> When we recognize this, Lorde explains, “For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy” women are capable of.<sup>10</sup> *Eros* is not limited to women, I would argue, but its oppression and repression among women is rampant in cultures where men seek to control women. The erotic *is not* pornographic. The erotic *is* God’s gift to all humans, including black women, as we recall the ways in which racism, heterosexism, and other oppressions overlap.

For Lightsey “Black LBTQ women especially need to understand their internal sources of power and not allow them to be corrupted by anyone or any lover! Lorde clearly counters a misuse and misnaming of the erotic.”<sup>11</sup> Again, citing Lorde’s *Sister Outsider*, Lightsey clarifies that “the dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false” and that “the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic—the sensual.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, it is because the erotic involves “those physical, emotional and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings” that “the erotic is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognized at all.”<sup>13</sup> *Eros* includes the bedroom, but it is not limited to the bedroom.

According to Lightsey, we need more womanist theologians, like Kelly Brown Douglas and M. Shawn Copeland, who are “willing to say categorically, ‘Human sexuality as expressed through consensual loving actions including intercourse is not sin.’”<sup>14</sup> Douglas, Lightsey notes, has written about the range of human sexualities and the need for black churches to address sexuality in healthy ways and as a gift from God, including the sexuality of queer people. Copeland, Lightsey observes, writes specifically about “the sexual expression-acts-of LGBTQ persons” and “the dilemma LGBTQ persons have with Church teaching.”<sup>15</sup> Womanist discussion of human sexuality and the church ought not be limited to writings by Douglas and Copeland. “We need extensive and frank discussion about the loving ways in which LGBTQ sensuality is expressed, as well as reflection on God’s gracious act of creating our bodies in God’s image and likeness,”<sup>16</sup> Lightsey avers.

Lightsey is the first womanist to write a queer, United Methodist, Christian womanist theologian as a queer person. The intersections of racism, classism, heterosexism, and other institutional oppressions are real, she carefully argues through her research. Lightsey finds that

It falls to queer womanist theologians to demonstrate a healthy perspective on sexuality that is not silent on the subject of sex acts (including intercourse) and on the power of the erotic, the sensual. We must speak of the healthy expression of sexuality in ways that do not limit Black queer persons or require that we hand over our sexual drives and expression to be subsumed by the Church’s demands that we be good celibate Christian queers.”<sup>17</sup>

The bodies of LBQT black women are also part of the body of Christ, she argues.<sup>18</sup> Black, LBQT women enflesh divine love in all its aspects, including *eros*. Jesus is God’s love in the flesh. People of faith are invited to enflesh God’s love through Jesus Christ.

Biblically, one finds clues of *eros* in the poetic imagination of the writer(s) of Genesis 1–2 in which the Spirit of God hovers over the waters or the deep as well verses in which *dabhar*, God’s word, speaks creation into becoming. *Eros* is the potential and power of creation. It is a holistic, creative response of communion with life itself. *Eros* in Christian faith and life is an aspect of divine love that God shares with humankind across genders. Even Mary, who in popular Christian culture and Church media is often rendered sexless, was fully human like us and embodied God’s *eros* as well as God’s *agape* and *filia*.

## The Challenge of Understanding Sexuality in The United Methodist Church: A Reflection on Mary and *Eros*

As Christians we have difficulty understanding God and ourselves. Sometimes the challenge to understanding sexuality becomes a source of frustration based in fear, anger, hatred, and even the will to divide. Concerns emerge regarding how to reasonably and lovingly understand LGBTQI sexual orientations as fitting established, institutional norms of Christian life. Some cite readings in Leviticus or in the Pauline text, Romans 1:20–2:6, to argue that “homosexuality” is sin, although the word *homosexuality* is not in Leviticus, Romans, or any other biblical text. We United Methodists tend to practice very few laws from Leviticus. Many of us eat shellfish and pork, wear cloth with seams, do not stone children who dishonor their parents or stone those caught in adultery. In Romans 1:20–2:6, Paul counsels the church not to judge Gentile Christians for practicing what Jewish and older Gentile Christians also once practiced so that they may not be judged.

Some United Methodists argue that it is not possible to understand how a Christian could reasonably and lovingly condone LGBTQTI relationships regarding marriage and ordained ministry. Are there no other aspects of human and divine *eros* that we do not understand? We accept our human family and God regardless of incomplete understanding. Heterosexual couples do not always understand how to touch each other in a pleasurable, loving way that gives rises to becoming one, and they seek counsel to improve romance in their marriage. Perhaps the greatest tenet of Christian faith that we do not completely understand is the sexuality of the blessed, Virgin Mary. We accept Mary, although her sexuality is “queer.” God did not have sex with Mary. Yet God and Mary have erotic relationship through the Holy Spirit to conceive Jesus Christ, their mutual true son. United Methodist teaching through the General Conference and its *Book of Discipline* accept this *erotic* union. Acceptance overrides human understanding of “but how can this be?” (Luke 1:3).

I bring up Mary, not to question her virginity in conceiving Jesus, but because she is someone whose sexuality we do not understand. Yet, like Joseph and God, we accept her. Joseph did not understand Mary’s conception of Jesus, but he married and accepted her. He let go of his fear that she was not holy enough for marriage. He raised Mary’s son and God’s Son as his own. Mary and Joseph’s story is a story of love and acceptance. Some may protest “But this is different.” It is certainly easier for us to accept Mary, because Joseph and God already did the hardest work for us. It is different for us, because not all of us have studied church history to learn that it took between four hundred and five hundred years of early church controversies for the Western church to agree to Mary’s immaculate conception and status as Mother of God. Joseph, however, in the biblical texts, struggles in fear and trembling to take on Mary as his wife rather than send her away. Imagine being in Joseph’s position, his fear and consternation. Do we, too, risk missing out on God’s gifts among those whose sexual holiness we question? Do we risk missing out on their gifts of ministry? Are we questioning the holiness of LGBTQTI people of God? Or are we questioning God’s freedom to call whomever God freely chooses for marriage and ordained ministry?

In the Roman Catholic tradition, Mary remains a perpetual virgin; in Protestant and Methodist Christian traditions, Mary is not. She becomes a mother of other children with Joseph after Jesus’ birth. She is a human woman whom Joseph can touch; and she can touch Joseph. While some, particularly in the Roman Catholic tradition, argue that these were Joseph’s children by marriages to other wives in his polygamous society, for Methodists and Protestants the biblical accounts leave room for Mary and Joseph to intimately, pleasurably touch. There is room in the biblical accounts for Mary and Joseph to enjoy an *eros*-filled marital relationship in which the two become one.

Mary and Joseph were sexual human beings. If we can permit ourselves to accept that, then perhaps we can stop seeing ourselves as sexually inferior to Mary. Perhaps we can stop seeing Joseph as a divinely cuckolded husband. In his shock, Joseph felt there was something peculiar or queer about Mary. God conquered Joseph’s fear of Mary’s queerness. Perhaps there is something queer about all of us. Each married couple touches each other in myriad ways, known only to each other and God. We are diverse in our erogenous zones and in our union with each other through God. Perhaps God gave a unique spiritual erogenous zone, making immaculate conception possible for Mary alone in history. Like Mary and Joseph, God loves us enough for us to accept our divinely created sexual selves. How many Marys and Josephs do we know? What range of sexual orientations do we find among them? What gifts do they bring to the

church, its ministry, and its mission to draw others to Jesus Christ? How have we been blessed by their compassion, kindness, and commitments to freedom and justice for the least of these?

Besides Mary, the Christian biblical canon contains stories of other unconventional sexualities and genders. There is the story of Ruth and Naomi in the book of Ruth, and Ruth's decision to lie at her in-law Boaz's feet. The Hebrew word translated in English as "feet" is a euphemism for "genitals." Ruth lay against Boaz's feet, a bold way to encourage Boaz to marry Ruth and keep her family status with Naomi official. There is Deborah the judge, whose gender identity for conventional United Methodists potentially fits within the category of what it means to have a masculine gender identity. There is the woman warrior, Ja'El, whose gender identity could be categorized as masculine for conventional thinkers. There is the profound love between Jonathan and David, with David's love for Johnathan greater than his love for a woman and his many wives. Unfortunately, we as a church live in threat of enmity with one another. May God's grace be sufficient for the wounds we bear in our misunderstandings of one another and God. May God also heal these wounds in moments of kairos, God's own time that transcends chronological time. I close with a scripture to contemplate in our personal prayer time:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy."  
But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."  
(Matt. 5:43-48 NRSV)

## Post-Colloquy Addendum

A majority of the discussion papers for the "Colloquy on The United Methodist Church and Sexuality" focused on 1) restructuring The UMC, 2) historical review of debates and division in Methodist Episcopal history in the United States, 3) structure of The UMC and discussion of legislation past and present, and 4) an ecumenical model for restructuring The UMC. This paper focused on how and why someone might ask various questions about sexuality over four decades in relation to belonging to The United Methodist Church. During plenary discussions, some commented that sexuality in The UMC has been discussed for decades and that it probably would not help to discuss it more at this point. Given that African American women UMs have come out with some new published material in the last five–ten years, I thought it would be helpful to hear what some black women theologians in academics are writing and discussing now.

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### **Bodies That Touch—Karen Baker-Fletcher**

<sup>1</sup> Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves: A Book by and for Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> See more in Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* (1963).

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, "What Is Intersectionality," *Intersectionality*, (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016), 1–29. Also see Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016), 18–19, 21, 41–42, 45, 189, 144.

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- <sup>4</sup> Thomas Jay Oord, *The Nature of Love: A Theology* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2010), 18, 61, 118, 130, 162, 165; 77–80, 88, 130.
- <sup>5</sup> Thomas Jay Oord, *Defining Love: A philosophical, Scientific, and Theological Engagement*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 46–47. Anders Nygren and Martin Luther King, Jr. write about *eros* as an acquisitive form of love drawn by the aesthetic qualities of the object it desires in comparison to *agape*, the creative, unconditional love of God that entails total yielding to God’s redemptive love beyond self-interest or self-love. Nygren compares *eros* as a Greek philosophical understanding of love, unlike Paul’s understanding of love as *agape* in the New Testament. Oord notes that while Nygren describes *eros* as a Greek understanding of love in the writings of Plato, it is more accurately attributed to Aristotle in his discussions of *eros*, *filia*, and *agape*. See Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 27–40, 722–41. See also Martin Luther King Jr., “Nonviolence and Racial Justice,” “The Power of Nonviolence,” “Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience,” “Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” and “A Christian Sermon on Peace,” in James Melvin Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1986), 8, 13, 46, 140, 256. See especially King’s discussion of love in “Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience”: “*Agape* is more than romantic love, *agape* is more than friendship. . . . [It is] an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. Theologians would say that it is the love of God operating in the human heart. So that when [you] rise to love on this level, [you love] men not because [you] like them, not because their ways appeal to [you], but . . . because God loves [them]” (46). King fails to capture the more complex and nuanced understanding of *eros* as ascent into the self-love of God that Nygren wrestles with in his comparison of *eros* and *agape*. Nygren’s comparison is one of two motifs in Christian tradition involving Martin Luther’s response of *agape* to what Nygren describes as the Roman Catholic *eros* or ascent of self into God’s own self-love.
- <sup>6</sup> Irie Lynne Session, *Murdered Souls, Resurrected Lives: Postmodern Womanist Thought in Ministry with Women Prostituted and Marginalized by Commercial Sexual Exploitation* (Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 30–31. Here Session quotes Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church’s Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).
- <sup>7</sup> Session, *Murdered Souls, Resurrected Lives*, 30; Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, 59.
- <sup>8</sup> Pamela Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 8–9.
- <sup>9</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 55. See also Karen Baker-Fletcher, “The Erotic in Contemporary Black Women’s Writings” in Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight Hopkins, eds., *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic* (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2004).
- <sup>10</sup> Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 9–10, quoting Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 57.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 9, quoting Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 56.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 11.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid, 7.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 10.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 11
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.