

God is Trans

Luke 9:28-36

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

When I grew up, “transgender” was something very queer indeed. The only sense I had of trans identity was of drag queens, who of course couldn’t possible live in my suburban Ohio neighborhood but lived in shadowy corners of big cities like New York. My journey of learning and growth to understand trans identity better has come mostly by knowing—and caring about and being cared for by—people who are trans. I count myself as blessed to have trans neighbors on my street, and to have my kids grow up with friends who are trans.

Our children have a very different perspective than us olds. Trans identity has blossomed and come out from closets of shame. 1.6 million Americans currently identify as trans—about .5% of the population; but the percentages of trans-identification among young people is 3-5%. Our young people understand that gender not as a binary, but is a continuum, with a range of expressions. Our young people are playful in trying on and trying out variations of gender expressivity. Our culture is increasingly aware that for some of us, our gender identity doesn’t match the sex assigned at birth. A simple sex and gender binary does not encompass the awesome diversity of God’s creation.

Embracing God’s diversity has been hard for some of us. The response by some religious folks to gender diversity has been cruel. Most recently, the President signed an “executive order” defining two biological sexes. Our state legislature passed a ban of trans women competing in sports but embedded in the bill is language that tries to fix one’s sex and gender at one’s birth. These are the latest in the many immoral, unscientific, and cruel efforts to erase from existence transgender children of God. But these politicians will learn that no one can declare simple what God has made complex. Essayist Austin Hartke wrote in *The Christian Century*, that when God appears to neatly divide human beings in Genesis 1 into male or female, that story does not reject “other sexes or genders, any more than the separation of day from night rejects the existence of dawn and dusk, or the separation of land from sea rejects the existence of marshes and estuaries. The binaries in Scripture don’t imply either or—they invite us to think about everything between and beyond.”

But in this current moment of increased persecution, it is all the more important for the church to be clear that we are a safe place for non-binary Christians. In 2018, the PCUSA General Assembly unanimously affirmed “the full dignity and the full humanity of transgender people, their full inclusion in all human rights, and their giftedness for service in the church.” NDPC has been affirming this truth for several decades—Rev. Erin Swenson, the first trans pastor in the PCUSA, hosted a support group in this building for years; we affirm our trans members and support the ministries that God has given them; we have nurtured our teenagers in their journey to become themselves, and we have provided spiritual support for our members who are trans-affirming doctors, mental health practitioners, and classroom teachers. We will continue to offer unqualified support.

What I want to do today is offer a few very simple and clear ways for you to think theologically about trans-ness. For this, I'm indebted to my friend and friend of this congregation, theologian Dr. Wendy Farley. Dr. Farley recently gave a lecture at Austin Theological Seminary in which she focused on "trans" as a metaphor for the divine. God is trans. What could that mean?

We begin by understanding what "trans" means. Trans isn't a full word. It's a prefix. Trans means crossing over, going beyond. Lots of things in God's world are trans; including God.

In today's scripture, Jesus is trans. He is *trans-figured*. Jesus' outward appearance assumes the qualities of Creator. God's face, in the Jewish tradition, can't be looked at directly—it's too bright. Here, on the mountain, Jesus' face radiates with the same Divine Light. This moment, right in the middle of Jesus' story, reveals the truth of Jesus' identity—this flesh and blood person is the Child of God. Jesus is trans. Jesus "crosses over" from human to divine and back again. Jesus is not God or human, Jesus is both-and, human and divine, the luminous, eternal Radiance of God in the perishable flesh of our human body.

As Wendy Farley observes, this trans-ness of Jesus is an expression of the Divine character. God "crosses over" continually. In the act of Creation itself, God "crosses over," God abandons the solitude of a world in which there is only God to a new reality in which the Creator is in relationship to this Creation. God "crosses over" the boundary of divine impassibility and immutability (the ideas that God is unmoved and unchangeable) to be in relationship with Creation and specifically with us. This act of "crossing over" is for the sake of Love. God "crosses over" to be with us because God is love—to be separate precludes Love: God must cross over to be vulnerable, merciful, self-emptying. God is trans.

Love itself is trans. Love is a movement, an energy, that allows discrete beings to "cross over" the boundaries that would appear to separate us. Love joins us together. Love makes us one: so that we suffer with, dream with, work with, care for one another. Love moves us out of the falsehood of separation, toward the mutual interdependence that is the nature of the Trinity and the nature of Created Reality. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" for all are one in Christ, the trans one.

The Christian life—the life of following Jesus and finding God in Jesus—is a life of transgressing separation. Draw close to the sick. Feed the hungry. Welcome the stranger. Love your enemy. Being trans is the whole point. So, Wendy Farley writes,

when someone crosses over from their gender, from gender binaries, perhaps from gender itself. There is a luminosity in their ability to see and feel the world from a nonbinary perspective. Trans people embody the foibles of all humans, but glimpsing the divine image in nonbinary forms, our trans friends help nontrans folk to enter more deeply into the apophatic strangeness – and nearness – of God.