

Thanks for the introduction, Jamie.

I'm grateful to be here, and grateful you all showed up.

I'm here to kick us off tonight with some opening thoughts on allies and allyship from the perspective of a queer person, that is, yours truly, and also share thoughts from other LGBTQ+ folks in our Generous Space community.

My hope in the next 15 minutes is to "queer" the idea of allyship. In other words, I want to shake it up and turn it inside-out, to break it out of its box. (in case you've never heard "queer" used as a verb before!)

The word "queer" is queerer than you knew – it's multifaceted and sometimes slippery, even when used as a noun.

You have to handle it with care –  
it has its baggage and it has its beauty,  
and can elicit polar opposite responses within the LGBTQ+ community, let alone outside it.  
... much like the word "ally."  
Ally is just as slippery and tricky,  
and I think that's especially true in Christian LGBTQ+ contexts.

Now I won't assume that just because you're here, you consider yourself an LGBTQ+ ally. Some of you might be LGBTQ yourselves, though we need to be allies too – more on that later! I'm willing to bet a bunch of you are primarily here to see Sarah, and honestly, I don't blame you. She's on a very short list of "Christians who I would probably follow on Instagram even if I **didn't** know they approved of my gay marriage." I'm a huge fan.

But just theoretically, let's say I met you as you came in the door tonight, and you introduced yourself to me as an ally. With that word, you could be implying a lot of different things, and that sets us up for misunderstanding – more likely than not, it sets me up for disappointment.

By "ally" you could simply want me to understand that you're not LGBTQ yourself. You might be using it as a way to say you're straight and "cisgender" FYI – "cisgender" or "cis" for short means your gender identity matches your assigned sex at birth. So it means you're not trans. Some of you will be leaving with a brand new adjective for yourselves – congrats! So by "ally" you might mean – I'm straight and cis.

Or by "ally" you could be trying to tell me you don't consider yourself homophobic or transphobic. You want to be kind to LGBTQ people and you want them to thrive, even though you yourself might hold more traditional theology.

By "ally" you could be indicating that you've got the LGBTQ terminology down. You're an ally because you already knew about "cisgender," and "queer" before I even told you.

You know what to say and what not to say to avoid offending people.

Or maybe by saying “I’m an ally,” you’re referencing a specific belief – you’re using it as a shorthand to tell me you hold affirming theology, you affirm same-sex intimate relationships and all gender identities and expressions.

The problem is, none of the above meanings of “ally” holds water in the LGBTQ+ community at large.

For us, allyship isn’t **simply** being straight or cis, being nice, knowing terms, or holding affirming beliefs.

It’s far more active and intentional than that.

Allies are actively leveraging their privilege, resisting injustice, and advocating for LGBTQ equity in their churches, and in society at large.

In other words, if you’re an ally, **we need to see the receipts**.

Unfortunately, our headaches with the word “ally” don’t end there.

Because even those who **are** attempting to be active and intentional in their allyship can make queer folks weary and wary of the term when they perform their allyship with the wrong motives, or succumb to a bunch of pitfalls that I’ll mention near the end.

To top it all off, some of those among us with pacifist tendencies don’t like how “ally” is drawn from the terminology of war.

Rachel Held Evans, whom we’ve adopted as one of our straight/cis patron saints, didn’t really resonate with the term “ally” for this reason.

She wasn’t keen on the idea of being primarily united by a common enemy, & I respect that.

As someone who grew up in relative peace and who never played the board game Risk,

I didn’t even make this “war” connection until embarrassingly recently.

So because of all this accumulated baggage around “ally,” other words have been suggested as replacements.

Some draw on that same vocabulary of war, but have more of a conniving criminality to them, words like “accomplice” and “turncoat,”

suggesting their namesakes must betray their own privilege and bear the responsibility, risks and consequences with folks on the margins.

Other suggested replacements are softer, like “advocate” or “supporter.”

I definitely wouldn’t fault you for choosing an alternate term in attempt to return us to the kind of working relationship we hope for.

I guess I’m just not convinced these newer terms will catch on broadly.

I was chatting with my colleague Jamie, whom you met earlier – he’s a writer, and he noted that **all** words tend to drift from their original intended meaning.

So instead of replacing ally, maybe my energy would be better spent redefining it, snatching it back from where it’s drifted.

This conversation made me want to look up the original meaning of ally

(This is nothing new for me - my friends call me Etymology Beth. I'm a word nerd.)

Turns out "ally" originated long before World War 2, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century,  
it's from the French "allier": "to unite, to bind or tie together, to join in marriage, to make kin."  
Those are promising origins. Ally started as a beautiful word – and as a verb. To ally.  
It wasn't even used as a noun until two centuries later.

So how do we bring out the beauty and strip the baggage from "ally"?

I think one way is to reclaim its original verb-i-ness,  
to stop pretending it's a noun, a state of being,  
an identity we can claim and chisel into our permanent identity.  
Instead of saying "I am an ally," we can say, "I'm **practicing** allyship."  
or even "I'm **trying to be** an ally to LGBTQ people."  
I'm working on it.

Using it that way will hopefully remind you

that no matter how much allying you did today,  
you can't just rest on your laurels, and pretend you've now earned a title.  
You start back at square one tomorrow,  
to use Vincent Mousseau's image, tomorrow you get a fresh ally card to fill.  
You're in process, you're on the way to allyship.  
There's always more for you to learn and to do.

There's always more for **me** to learn and do, too.

Because even though I'm queer, I'm also practicing allyship.  
I hope all of the LGBTQ+ folks in this room are doing the same.  
We can't pretend this is a room full of allies on one side and LGBTQ+ people on the other –  
let's "queer" that binary, shall we?  
All of us are called to allyship with oppressed communities we don't belong to.  
And almost all of us in this room have benefited from the allyship of others.  
There's a lot of women here – how many of you can think of men in your lives  
who have practiced allyship toward you in their feminism?

In my case, as a cisgender person, I try to be an ally to transgender and nonbinary people.

As a white person, I'm fumbling along in my attempts to ally with people of colour.

As a settler, I try to figure out how to go beyond land acknowledgments

in my practice of allyship toward First Nations folks.

And of course, some people intersect many of these identities.

So we can't pick and choose which groups to ally with –

in a paraphrase of that great Desmond Tutu quote Wendy has tattooed on her arm,

"If I diminish anyone, I diminish myself."

I've been humbled in many of my allyship attempts, just this week.

I think we can agree that allyship isn't straightforward (pun very much intended).

It involves the constant self-interrogation our assumptions and our motives,  
and keeping our radar active to read the power dynamics in the room  
so we can make educated guesses about our best course of action  
(because this is about action.... ally is a verb).

For example, wearing your rainbow ally button in your non-affirming church  
is a fantastic way to instigate conversation and to signal folks can feel safer coming out to you.  
But wearing that same button to a poetry slam on Commercial Drive  
will likely be perceived as more of an attempt to prove your wokeness.  
Same action, different context, different dynamics.

So people practicing allyship need to be always asking,  
“What’s my motive? How will this be read? And what does this accomplish?”  
“Is this the right context to tell a First Nations person “I’m sorry” on behalf of settlers,  
or would it only center me and my need for absolution?  
Is this transphobic Facebook post a good place for me to share  
what I’ve learned from my trans friends? Maybe.  
But at this rally, should I direct the reporter to speak to a trans organizer? Yes.  
Should I remain in this non-affirming community and try to change it from the inside,  
or would that be complicity?  
Should I leave and make a statement, or would that be abandoning my duties?  
Should I ask a queer person how to proceed, or would that burden them?  
How can I leverage my privilege, my unearned advantages, in this situation?

Sometimes there is no one correct answer –  
and because of different histories and traumas and needs,  
sometimes different marginalized individuals will ask different things from allies.  
Sometimes I think God asks different things of allies, wiring us in different ways.  
This can feel like you’re set up to be criticized – it can be exhausting and frustrating...  
... but of course not as exhausting and frustrating as actually being oppressed,  
and having no choice but to engage in that constant analysis.  
Marginalized folks can’t opt out of reading the room to see their next best move  
so they can have the best crack at communicating, belonging,  
or in some cases, surviving.

Just this morning my wife was stressing  
about whether to out herself in a talk about the enneagram  
when there was the possibility of a homophobic person being present.

So it’s our calling, as people working on our allyship,  
to take on some of that complexity alongside marginalized folks,  
to make mistakes, to be teachable, and to do better when we know better.  
It’s our calling to walk into the trenches in humility,  
whether you want to talk about war trenches or garden trenches,  
and to stand shoulder to shoulder with those who are not there by choice.  
It’s our calling to do, to ally, to put that in action.

To those who are practicing allyship in this room – I want to say thank you.  
Your support and your in-the-trenches solidarity, resisting injustice with the oppressed, is crucial.  
And I also want to say – now is the time. Lives are on the line.  
So let’s keep exhorting each other to hone our ally game,  
and pull each other away from common ally pitfalls.

To pull away from the savior and missionary complexes,  
from our tendency to treat marginalized people like victims and create dependencies,  
to pull away from the paternalistic trap of thinking we know better than they do.

To avoid seeking what aspect of allyship is trendy and sexy right now,  
and to avoid showing up only in the wake of media-covered emergencies.

To pull away from our guilt-drivenness,  
where we risk using the struggles of others for our own therapeutic needs.

Away from our human desire to check boxes, to earn badges,  
to rack up wokeness points and ask for cookies.

Away from those things, and toward real allyship, which I think is basically Christlikeness.  
It's self-emptying love. It's not considering our status something to be used to our own advantage,  
rather, making ourselves nothing.

Taking the nature of a servant, becoming obedient to death –  
literal death, yes, but also the small deaths of a hundred humbling moments.

This is allyship. This is being united and tied up together, being kin in this,  
because as wiser people than me have quipped, our liberation is bound up together.

There are so many things allies have done to bless me.  
I know an ally who would come to our Camp-Out event every year  
where we had composting toilets  
and literally haul our shit.

One of my favourite allies is a semi-retired guy who  
when I had a crazy idea of launching a church called Open Way,  
but didn't want to attempt it as a solo pastor,  
said, "I'll co-pastor with you – let's make this happen."

I also know allies who pray like heck for our community,  
and allies who give money. More on that later.

Another great way to ally is to share your "ally story"  
when you think it might mobilize or inspire others to show up more fully  
on this shared way of solidarity.

And that's what we've asked Sarah Bessey to come do for us tonight.  
She's the bait, friends. We've shamelessly used her to get you all here.  
We've asked her to leverage her privilege and her well deserved fame,  
and like a good ally, she said yes.

In case you don't know about Sarah...

She comes to us all the way from Abbotsford (shout out!)

where she lives with her husband Brian and her four children.

She was an avid blogger when blogging was a big thing – remember that?

She's a speaker, a co-curator of the Evolving Faith Conference – anyone been to that?

And she's written three books – "Jesus Feminist,"

"Out of Sorts: Making Peace with an Evolving Faith,"

and her most recent one which I just finished:

"Miracles and Other Reasonable Things."

I'm going to read a paragraph from the last chapter,

her benediction, the chapter that always makes people cry,

because I think it sums up what it means to queer faith.

[reading]

Please welcome Sarah Bessey!