

## **Bridge Church Speaking - Oct 3, 2021**

**“Because of love, a service of welcome and affirmation.”**

- Good morning! First I want to acknowledge that we are on the unceded traditional territories of the Coast Salish, Sto Lo & Kwantlen People. I want to thank them for the honour of being a guest on their lands.
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- PHEW I'm SO grateful to be here. I know this isn't EXACTLY the way we had envisioned celebrating today, but we are all still "here" together. I really want to thank the Bridge leadership team for pivoting last minute and finding a way that we could truly celebrate this day TOGETHER. I feel the shared love and energy in this community. It feels really special. Also hi to everyone joining via Zoom! It's so amazing to "see" you all!

- SO, I'm not sure if everyone is aware, (spoiler alert) but I identify as a lesbian Christian, and my pronouns are she/her. Before we get into what TODAY is all about, I would LOVE to share about my experience of God through the lens of my sexuality. This framing might feel uncomfortable in a church setting, but lucky for me, I'm in a house. So this is perfect!
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- Also! When I refer to God, I will be using THEY pronouns, because I feel like that is a much more expansive view of the beauty that is our Creator.
- So, I grew up in Winnipeg, in a middle class home, with one younger brother, a mom and dad. We were what you would call the classic "conservative Christian" family. We attended a fairly large Evangelical church, the same one my Mom grew up in. And actually, I loved it! It was my second home. I was baptized days after being born - and then again in youth group just to prove that I was really committed. I went to Sunday School, youth group, Bible summer camp, every single Christian youth convention...

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- At my public school growing up, I'm pretty sure they called me "Christian Stace". I was CONVINCED that me wearing overtly Christian-themed tshirts and a cross necklace was going to bring my "secular" friends to Jesus on a weekly basis.
- Simply put, God and Jesus were a huge part of my life. And I felt like the church was my literal family. I believed they would love me no matter what - because, well, that's what they said.
- Until about the age of 16, my biggest struggle with sin was trying not to gossip about my secular friends at church. I was an extremely "good Christian girl". And I was super comfortable with the fact that my life consistently fell safely within the boundaries of what a proper Christian girl SHOULD look like.
- Then... I began to notice that my friends started having crushes on lots of boys. I also noticed that I felt nothing. I *pretended* to feel all the things though, so I wouldn't be left out. "Oh YES his hair is VERY nice... Uh-huh his smile is SO delightful.... mmmmmhmmmm..."

- I slowly realized that the opposite began to happen. I found myself wanting to be around certain GIRLS all the time. And I definitely DID feel all the things about THEIR hair and smiles...
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- But I had absolutely NO clue what that meant. There was no Christian vocabulary for it. Like literally, I did not even know the words “lesbian” or “homosexuality” existed. They had been forbidden in our house, and I hadn’t heard them at church yet. Also, this was waaaayyy before Netflix.
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- I had no tools, no support, and no understanding of what was in front of me. I had only ever known this straight, heteronormative Christian world, and my feelings were coming from an entirely different universe.
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- This was the very beginning of an arduous 13 year journey for me. One where I intensely wrestled with my faith, with myself, and my God. My church home was my refuge since birth. But it slowly started to become a dark & lonely place where I no longer fit.
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About a year into my struggle, I VERY QUIETLY admitted to myself that yes, I was actually attracted to other girls. This led me to learn all about ex-gay ministries and people who had apparently prayed their gay away. Through my hidden research behind closed doors, I learned that this was called “struggling with same-sex attraction”. Christians in the ex-gay ministries spoke of it like a disease that rapidly spread. One that you had to ALWAYS keep on top of.

I couldn't believe I could identify with THAT. I began to hate myself. I prayed and prayed for these feelings to go away, but my prayers were futile. When my church DID eventually speak on homosexuality, the message was clear: it was the wrong-est of wrongs. I had to choose. Embrace God - OR - be damned, and embrace this capital Sin. There is no world in which they can co-exist.

I clearly remember sitting in my room at 18 years old, writing in my prayer journal and just sobbing. What if everyone was right? What if I was the WORST of sinners?

What if no amount of prayer could change me? How could I live a life God would be proud of if I couldn't shake this disease of same-sex attraction?

I asked myself the same questions over and over. How could I be attracted to women? I grew up around all the "right" people, in the "ideal" Christian environment, with a loving mother and father. I loved Jesus genuinely, and my family fiercely – but there was no way they would be able to love me if I embraced being gay.

I was filled to the brim with intense turmoil. And yet sometimes when I was at my lowest, I could feel God softly sitting beside me, gently propping me up, not allowing despair to take a full hold. I would pull the covers over my head at night and listen to my Hillsong worship albums, and just cry. Under the covers was my only sacred space where I could cry and ask God why. What did I do wrong to allow this sin to consume my life?

But like that song (The goodness of God) it says “Your goodness is running after me.” I would repeat songs like that over and over, hoping they were true. Maybe just maybe, goodness IS running after me. Deep down buried under all the shame and loneliness, I had a sense that They created me for so much more than this chaos I was feeling.

I tried to read those infamous clobber verses in all my Bible translations, wishing they would say something different. I emailed every possible Christian pastor I could find outside of my church. There was no such thing as a “gay Christian” then, so I looked only to my trusted Christian community. No way I was gonna get advice from that “secular gay community”. Satan had enough of a hold on me!

I tried to be super chill and anonymous in my emails to pastors - “Heyyy Hi there, so, I am like, SUPER straight, and I have a friend who is REALLY struggling, poor girl, and I just want to point her in the right direction....” Over the years I probably got a couple hundred different responses, and they were almost all identical.

“Hello thank you for your question. Please tell your friend they are loved by God, BUT we would direct you to our biblical definition.... Etc etc etc.”

Wow, I don't know about you, but I don't remember a lot of verses where Jesus says “I love you BUT...”

I only heard the BUT.

Each one of those responses fed my shame and self-hate. It was a constant confirmation as the years ticked by. So I continued fighting against myself. I never felt peace. On the surface if you knew me then, I was probably the same ol' Stace. I hid my struggle well. But I developed major anxiety, physical health problems, and quite honestly I started to question how much longer I could live.

I believed this struggle was MY fault. That somewhere along the way of me perfecting my Christian walk, I had let satan waltz in and corrupt me. I believed that I had made a huge mistake, or more accurately, that I WAS huge mistake.

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- Church had taught me that this sort of sin was too large, too ugly, & too damaging. God despised homosexuality. So obviously, God must despise ME.
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- I could never embrace it, and so I fought the “good fight”. Except, it wasn’t good at all. Looking back, I know God was grieving as I bullied and hated and tried to erase this beautifully sweet part of myself. This part that They made.
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- For so long I viewed my sexuality as a thorn in my side that I needed to remove or ignore. A constantly uncomfortable & inconvenient reminder of who I was trying NOT to be.

I struggled and prayed and fought until I literally almost couldn’t anymore. Then one day, bone exhausted after 13 years, something hit me.

What if this thorn was actually a mustard seed?

What if I stopped fighting, turned around and EMBRACED my sexuality as an integral PART of who God made me to be? What if my sexuality actually ENRICHED my faith?

I decided I had nothing to lose, so I asked God the one question I had been avoiding:

“Can You still truly love me if I love the gay part of myself?”

The answer was not what I was expecting. I realized that I had been listening to God’s people for 13 years – but what did God Himself want to say to me?

Soon I felt inside my soul, bubbling to the surface, a deep, resounding YES.

YES, I LOVE ALL THAT I MADE YOU TO BE.

YES, a thousand times over, YES.

And

I

Felt

Peace.

Peace began to wash over me in waves, consuming the shores of chaos and washing them away, layer by layer. Only when I was *finally* able to embrace both my faith and sexuality together, did that peace come.

You know, I did not get written answers from heaven, or theological clarity — but I got PEACE. A peace that has not wavered since that day in 2010. By opening up my heart and mind to these things I had thought impossible, my view of God themself expanded.

- Now! Let me jump forward a bit more to where I am today!

Today, I have an incredible wife, named Tams. POINT TO HER

In May of this year, we celebrated our 10th wedding

anniversary. We have a 5 yr old daughter, and a 3 yr old son at

home - and you know they are at home because there's a lot less screaming happening right now.

- Today in 2021, I stand before you, still filled with that peace. In other news, I'm also a professional artist and, incredibly, a published author! For anyone interested in hearing more details about my journey, feel free to pick up a copy of STILL STACE, officially publishing in 16 days!! SHOW BOOK

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There's a short poem by Mary Oliver that I hold close when I think of the road I have walked so far.

"Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell someone."

**Pay attention.** Because of the turmoil that God brought me through, I am forced to pay attention to the gifts in my life that I can no longer take for granted. My daughter's embrace is that much sweeter. Holding my wife's hand in public is that much more profound.

**Be astonished.** When I get hurtful messages from people who can't celebrate who I am or my family – my heart hurts. But God is always replenishing that quiet peace inside. It's like a gentle stream. It reminds me to trust Them. And my heart remains soft. That makes me astonished.

**Tell someone.** When God gave me this peace, I promised Them I would share Their story. So I speak it proudly. I believe I have been called to share my truth, to live authentically – and to leave the rest to Them. And now I guess I will leave it a little to the bookstores too!

I deeply love the LGBTQ Christian community. We have so much to give. We also have an immediate connection with each other in our shared grief.

After I came out, things did not get easier for a long while. I had to grieve a lot of things. I had to grieve people's reactions and lost relationships. I had to grieve the life I THOUGHT I was supposed to have, and let it go.

And when I did, a new and more beautiful life grew in front me. A life that I would have not DREAMED possible.

After coming out, I got pretty accustomed to grieving things that should be celebrated. Like, telling my family Tams and I got engaged. It was not the effusive, elated conversation I had dreamed of, but rather a heartbreaking one. Many of my Christian friends also could not celebrate with me. I had to take a deep breath, close my eyes and feel that hurt. Then I would look at my engagement band and allow my joy to shine through. I was getting MARRIED. I was BELOVED, and I was finally at PEACE.

I had always imagined myself planning a HUGE fancy wedding. One that would take place in my beloved Evangelical church. One that all my family and friends would attend, smiling, celebrating and cheering me on. I also pictured myself marrying a man, a small difference.

When our wedding day arrived, I have to admit I had doubts. Not doubts about Tams, but doubts about how I could POSSIBLY enjoy my wedding day without my parents or the majority of my family there. I was sure the grief would overshadow the joy.

But something happened that morning. I felt like I was being slowly wrapped up in layers of love. As I walked down the aisle towards Tams, I looked into her eyes and I only felt joy. There was no room for my grief because I was walking towards love. I felt God so close that day beside me - beside us.

If I had continued to force myself to live a life that wasn't meant for me, I would have never experienced any of these gifts. I would have NEVER thought back then, that one day I would be happily married, to a WOMAN, with kids - having published a book about my whole journey.

Recently we were in the backyard with our kids trying clean, which with toddlers is mostly just moving around mess. Our son knocked over this planter that we thought was long dead because the soil on the top was dry and grey.

But when it spilled, a whole bunch of little brilliant green buds scattered all over the ground. Sometimes when we think that all is lost, there is new growth just waiting to burst through the surface and flourish.

- I reflected a lot on my journey as I wrote STILL STAGE. And it made me think about the experience of God vs what we are taught about God. I was taught a whole LOT of things about God. And a lot of those things did not bring peace. My experience of turning myself over, of inviting God into all the pieces of me - gay and other - that experience was *peace*. And the EVIDENCE of God is peace.
- I've experienced so much from this vantage point as a gay Christian. Since coming out, I have chosen to be visible. To speak up, to not be scared to share, to choose to take up space in this world as I am, and not quietly exist. Because I never had someone to look up to. And I vowed one day if I ever could, I would try to be that person that I needed.

- Because quite frankly, gay Christians like me being visible might save someone's life. Because I loved my church community so much, but they were not able to love me back.
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- Now, straddling both the Christian and gay communities, does come at a cost. I've had my fair share of anger from the gay community - how could you call yourself a Christian? All they do is hate us! And then from some Christians - how dare you add gay before Christian? It's blasphemous!
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- But hey, it's okay. These are all just words and labels and God knows my heart. I know I'm JUST where I'm supposed to be.
- I've seen a lot of people scared & angry by that three letter word. G-A-Y. Faces that cloud over in judgement, voices that drip with disgust, eyes that dart away in discomfort. Sometimes they don't want to listen, and they close their eyes to see what God is doing. And I think also, people are afraid to see WHO God is USING.
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- Fear is powerful, yes. But love - love is so much more powerful. By being immersed in this LGBTQ Christian community, I have learned there is SO MUCH beauty just beyond the borders of what we can see. Listening to these stories is like stopping and squinting into the distance, just long enough to notice that there are new and wondrous colours beyond the horizon.
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- Now, if I may, a quick word to those of you here today who identify as an ally. If you call yourself an ally, that is amazing. Thank you! We need all we can get! If you are a cisgendered straight person - that's okay, we still love you.
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- However, as an ally, I would challenge you to listen to how people speak about the gay community when we aren't around. And if you are able to, speak up. There are many spaces in the church that we are still not allowed in, and what you say - or don't say - carries a LOT of weight. Tams told me about a plaque she saw every day at her Bible school. It read "The absent are safe here." If you are an ally, your work is most important in those spaces where we are not.

- For so many years, I experienced other Christians as barriers to God. I kept putting my straight mask on, and knocking on the door of the church asking to come in. If I pretended, I was allowed in. I was even *celebrated*. But if I wanted to be authentic with my struggle & who I was, I had to leave. I prayed that one day, I would help build a bridge in those places that I had met only barriers.
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- That brings me to today! TODAY I feel like I get to bring a few pieces of wood and some nails, and together, we can get to work on that bridge. And let me tell you, it's a monumentously beautiful thing to see.
- Today is called "Because of Love". Today, as has been shared - The Bridge will be overtly welcoming the LGBTQ+ community and become an AFFIRMING church. WOW, that is a BIG word for a church to throw out there! And let me tell you, NOT MANY CHURCHES do!
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- So what does it mean, to becoming an *affirming* church? Well let me tell you what it means to ME. From a queer Christian person's perspective.
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- Taking that step to be affirming, quite simply is like turning a light on a very, very dark path. Now, that light isn't going to tell you how long the path is, or what direction to go. That light is also not going to tell you how treacherous the path is up ahead. But MAN, that light is going to make it a WHOLE LOT easier to see. And it's going to be a WHOLE LOT safer to keep walking. And having safe spaces to an LGBTQ person of faith, is like having a drink of cold water in the middle of a massive desert.
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- Now, let's be clear. Becoming affirming isn't the end of the journey, rather it is the beginning. It doesn't mean the work or the learning is done. It doesn't erase the years and years of deep hurt and trauma that the church as a whole has caused to gay people.
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- BUT it means, now we can acknowledge and grieve that TOGETHER. It means taking each other's hand, and taking that first big step toward healing. Because we were CREATED for healing.
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- By saying you are affirming, it means you are saying to me and people like me: I SEE you and I CELEBRATE ALL of YOU as a child of God - your sexuality *included*.
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- PHEW! Let me tell you. That is REVOLUTIONARY to us. It always makes me emotional, because quite honestly, it does NOT legitimately happen very often. And when it does, it's actually hard for our tender hearts to believe.
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- Because so many of us have been promised a real welcome, but when it comes right down to it, they were hiding a huge ASTERISK that allowed them a way out. I personally have been a part of that journey many times, and each time it happens, it chips away a little more of your soul. So please, be gentle with our fragile & untrusting hearts. I think I even

texted Karina and said - OKAY I can actually SAY you are affirming right?? I have learned to quadruple check.

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- So to actually FOLLOW THROUGH with being affirming - for us queer folks... it is life CHANGING. It means that you are not just saying we have a seat at the table, but you are showing us where to sit.

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- Hear me when I say this: a church becoming affirming is LIFE SAVING. Let me say that again for the folks in the back: BECOMING AN AFFIRMING CHURCH IS LIFE SAVING. And wow, that aligns quite well with the church's business model of wanting to save lives, am I right??

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- Now, this bit is going to be hard for me to get through. But I need to take a moment to acknowledge my LGBTQ+ friends who couldn't wait any longer for a day like this to come. To my friends who have been hurt too deeply, and too many times, I see you. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry the church turned their back on you and your pain and did not embrace and celebrate ALL you are.

- You are loved, you are beautiful, you are GOOD. God is SO UNBELIEVABLY FOR YOU and their goodness will just keep on running after you. I pray for courage, peace and restoration for your soul, that you would physically FEEL loved, to the tips of your toes.
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- Now, as we continue on after today, will we screw up and say the wrong thing and hurt each other? Oh definitely. Because we are human. And this process of trying to understand & love each other is messy. But it will be easier to forgive and work through, because that light is shining on our shared path. We can move forward together.
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- And really, isn't that what Jesus wanted for us anyway? Just doing messy, heartbreaking, breathtaking life TOGETHER??
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- Before I end my time with a blessing I have written, I have one last short story to share.

- All this talk about the light on the path made me think of my Grandma. Growing up in Winnipeg, my grandparents lived next door to us. My Grandma's kitchen window faced our house, and when I was a teenager she would always see me come home at night after it got dark. We often forgot to leave the porch light on, so she would immediately call me and say, "Hey Stace! Put the light on, it's black as your boot out there!" It always made me smile, because I knew she was constantly looking out for me. She wanted me to feel safe coming home.

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- Today, in a way, I get to do that. I get to turn on the porch light and tell my queer Christian friends - it's safe now.

- The light is on. You can come home.

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If it's alright, to end our time today, I have written a **blessing** that I would love to share.

## **BLESSING**

May you - wonderful humans of The Bridge Church in Abbotsford, BC & everyone else joining us via Zoom - may you breathe in deeply this day.

May you close your eyes, and feel the hum in the air, and know that this hum is love. It is now able to sing just a little more freely.

May you know that you are already equipped to operate fully out of love. A love that heals. A love that restores.

May you understand that sometimes it's not just about offering a seat at the table - perhaps it is time that we each take a corner and move the table itself.

May this place, and all of you who make it up, become a refuge for those who have been hurt, invalidated, kicked out, ignored and cast away.

May you extend grace and radical generosity with each other at times when it is easy, and even more so at times when it is not.

May you trust what is simply simple: that the Jesus who is in you, is also in me. What glorious freedom comes with that truth.

And may you say to all with triumphant fervour - YOU are SAFE here. We are leaving the light on.

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- Stacey Chomiak 2021 ([staceychomiak.com](http://staceychomiak.com))