

Queerology: A Podcast on Belief and Being

Episode 38 – Candice Czubernat

Transcript

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Hey, friends. This is Matthias Roberts and you're listening to Queerology, a podcast on belief and being. This is Episode 38.

Candice: ... trusting of your heart, which is also something that as queer people we've been told by the church. That we are not to trust our hearts. I would say your heart is exactly where God is at. Listen to that small voice. That is the Holy Spirit.

Matthias: Candice Czubernat is a married gay Christian woman, a mother of twins, and the founder of The Christian Closet, a web based counseling practice. She's a writer. She was named by The Advocate as one of the ten pro-LGBT religious women you should know. She holds her master's degree in Counseling Psychology and she's worked in mental health for over a decade.

Candice specializes in seeing people who need a safe place to reconcile their faith with their sexual or gender identities ... and/or gender identities. She's a graduate of The Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. We don't really get into that but if you ever get the chance to meet Candice, ask her about what it was like going to Moody as a queer Christian woman. Then she did her master's degree at the Seattle School of Theology and Psychology. That's where I go to school, as well.

Candice is a dear friend of mine. I'm so excited to have her on the podcast. We're talking mental health, which is something that I think when we intersect mental health with our queer identities, with our religious identities, things can get really messy and I think as queer people of faith, we hold a lot of trauma in our bodies and in our stories. Candice and I get into that a whole lot in this episode. Let's just go ahead and dive in. Candice. Hello. Welcome.

Candice: Hey, Matthias. It's good to be with you.

Matthias: Yeah. Thank you so much for joining for me. To start, the question I ask everyone. How do you identify and then how would you say that your faith has helped form that identity?

Candice: I identify as a lesbian but I also use the word or terms "gay" and "queer" kind of interchangeably. I know a lot of people have, really, a lot of strong feelings about the word "lesbian." I don't have as many but it's just a really long word so sometimes it just feels easier to say "gay" or "queer." As far as my faith goes, I mean it feels so ... it feels like it must live in the same spot inside of me that my queerness lives.

They feel so tangled up together. I think, I mean, my experience is not unique as a Christian that for so many years it felt like, okay, I had to choose one of these. Of course, I'm going to choose the Christian part. I was raised as a Christian and so by the time I could sort of own my own faith, I wanted to be someone who is faithful to God. I wanted to be close to God. I wanted to experience God and I was under the impression that that meant whatever this queer piece was, it was bad. It did not go with my faith and in fact it just was like some random horrible sin that happened to come upon me.

Right? Like it was this thing that almost happened to me. It was terrifying. I did not even have an idea or a context to even begin to consider that, actually, my queerness was knit ... specially knit by God for me and that beautifully displayed God's glory.

By me pushing my gayness down, I actually was like sort of pushing down the greatness of God in my life and because when I was able to finally fully see I could be LGBT and Christian, it was like my life opened. My experience of God just felt so much more real and those walls that I had up came crashing down.

It still kind of blows my mind to think, "Wow. I was so off and no wonder I was suffering so much to be separated from myself and be running from God and having such an internal division, when all along, like they fit together so beautifully." I feel so grateful. Like my relationship with God just wouldn't be what it is if I wasn't also queer and I love my relationship with God. I'm so happy that I'm a lesbian.

Matthias: I love it.

Candice: I wouldn't have it any other way.

Matthias: Yeah, and guys, I mean you talk about that kind of opening up in being able to bring those pieces together and then the openness that comes out of it. I feel like that's an experience I know I have had and so many people talk about being able to finally open up into who ... I mean you say "This is specially knit by God for me." Like how we were created to be.

Candice: Exactly. I mean I think another part of my story that's not unique is this feeling of like why do I feel sort of stuck or left behind? Like all of my friends are going through these life stages at these semi-appropriate times and it felt that way. It felt that way, my

relationship with God, but it also felt that way just in my life in general, in my career, and my relationships with my friends.

Everything kind of felt stunted. I think it's because I had to had so much from who God had created me to be. I didn't know how to then go and be a successful person. There wasn't a way to do that. An opening, for sure, is what happened.

Matthias: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I was at one of your workshops at QCF conference this past January. The one on mental health. You're a mental health clinician. You do a lot of work around mental health and I'm curious. How did that interest kind of start and then how would you say that like ... I mean, would you say that your queerness has worked its way alongside that? Like if those things worked together, are they different?

Because I know mental health is a huge thing for everyone but especially for queer people and queer people raised within faith traditions. There's a lot going on there. I'd be curious about that journey for you.

Candice: Yeah. It's kind of funny. A lot of people when they go to college they're like, "I don't know what my major is going to be." It was just an assumption with myself and anyone who knew me that, of course, it was going to be psychology. Like that was just kind of who I was. It felt confusing though because there was also this God element. I didn't quite know how that was going to come into play and then when the queer piece it was like oh my god. How is God and this queer piece and therapy going to come together?

I mean I ... There was definitely a season where I was really lost professionally and personally trying to figure out how those could come together. I even had a pretty successful practice and I just thought, "Man. This is not what I thought it was going to be." I was closeted and I remember having a few patients that were queer and it just broke my heart that I couldn't come out. I couldn't be myself.

Even, I took a little break from being a therapist to try to figure that out through my own process of accepting myself and coming out and all of that began to get tapped into. Oh my god. No wonder I felt so lost to feel God's ... and this is such a, gosh, a word that has a lot of feeling around it for people, but calling. I really do feel like God called me to the space of LGBT Christians trying to figure out, okay, how do we reconcile this and then how do we live that out and how do we be with our friends and family in that space?

I think you're exactly right. I mean what happens along the way, usually, is our queerness gets pathologized and we do it to ourselves because when we are rejecting ourselves, others are rejecting us, we're closeted or having to hide, that is suffering and when people suffer greatly, usually there is mess. There is hurt. There is unhealthy coping mechanisms and so it's really easy to point to those and say, "Ah. See? I knew it. I knew being gay was wrong. It's proof right there. Look at that person's life. Look at my life. It's a mess."

But I think what happens is of course that's an easy, easy thing to do, rather than say, "I wonder if this person is suffering because of the harm that's been done to them both by

themselves and others," and it's actually when that suffering can come and be loved and healed. Do those things that you pointed out, do they actually go away? I would say most of the time they do.

It's an extra step, I think, for those of us who are queer, to begin to piece out ... The parts of my life are a result of my suffering and do I need to love and bring close into our hearts and heal? What other parts actually maybe don't have anything to do with being queer and absolutely everybody's got issues. Right? But it especially breaks my heart for people that are LGBT and Christian and they're going to their pastors and their going to their churches and their pastors are seeing, "See? This is exactly what I told you would happen. This harm and hurt is proof that God did not create you beautifully and wonderfully this way."

Man, the damage that that does and the mental health issues that that brings it's astronomical. I get so sad and so mad. It's just unneeded harm.

Matthias: Yeah.

Candice: Yeah.

Matthias: There's so much in there of like ... I mean, first, that kind of that ... that reframing of like how that tendency, I think, within some church cultures is to look at queer people and the "acting out" or whatever language they want to put on it and say, "This is all proof." That's huge. I think so many of us have heard that so many times. Look at the way they act and then putting whatever labels we want to of morality judgments or whatever on that, as you said, as that proof of their not being goodness or whatever.

Then you talked about like what parts of ourselves then do we need to bring close to ourselves and love? That is huge as well. I have chills as you're kind of talking about that of like that bringing in and caring for ourselves, maybe in ways that we have never felt cared for by anyone.

Candice: Yeah. I mean for me that has been the number one thing that has changed my life, has been to bring those broken places really close and to love them even when it's been ... I mean it has been the biggest battle too. It's not easy. It's not easy to take a part of yourself that you've said is bad, that everyone around you has said is bad, and to bring it in close and to say, "I'm going to try to love this part, and God, I'm going to believe that you love this part too."

It is the single most life changing thing that I've done and it's a practice. Right? Because I'm human, so there's times where I go back to like whatever it might be. It maybe doesn't have to do with me being queer but maybe it's ... I don't know. I got frustrated with my wife for something. Right? I feel bad. Like I'm now someone who is short-tempered and I go down this whole path of this bad, short-tempered person that I am.

It's a ... like I said, a practice, where I have to stop myself and go to a place of love and understanding. It doesn't look like, hey, it's okay. Who cares that you maybe hurt your

wife? Right? I think that's the assumption that it just is this permission of, "All you queer people, I know that it's that you want to go have all of this crazy sex. Go have your crazy sex and you can hurt whoever you want." There's this assumption that it's just ... It means giving over to this deprived kind of disgusting self-indulgent way of living.

That's a real big misunderstanding of what God-centered self-love is because a God-centered self-love actually like turns us towards holiness. It turns us towards loving the other. It turns us towards selflessness and gentleness. It doesn't turn us towards, "Great. How much bad stuff can I go do and get away with?" It's a trusting of your heart, which is also something that as queer people, we've been told by the church, that we are not to trust our hearts.

I would say your heart is exactly where God is at. Listen to that small voice. That is the Holy Spirit.

Matthias: I'm hearing ... like I'm going to say full-disclosure to people listening, like Candice and I went to the same school.

Candice: Yes.

Matthias: There's so much language in here that I'm like ... even though you were at the school way before I was and like yes. Like yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. This concept, though, of self-love and you kind of like ... You touched on this a little bit but how ... I think we often hear that term and that like "You just need to love that part of yourself," and with an eye roll. Like yeah right. Like what is that going to do?"

I'd be curious about, like maybe, maybe,, you said this has been a huge life changing thing for you. What has that kind of looked like, specifically, and what has that self-love actually looked like as opposed to this fluffy, as you were saying, fluffy, "I can do anything," or "It doesn't matter what I do." It is a radical act, what you're talking about.

Candice: Yeah. I love the word "radical." I often call it "radical self-acceptance." Earlier, I mean, the word "battle" feels so appropriate because for me, and I know that I'm not alone, when there's parts of me that are hard to love, when I go into that quiet space of "I'm going to bring that broken piece in close," there are other parts of me that are judging me. They're saying, "She doesn't deserve love. You hate her." There's all of these other voices, voices of other people that have harmed me in my life coming out of those moments.

It's not as if it's like, "This was easy and I just love myself." There's a battle of all these other voices and so trying to quiet myself, it looks like me going to a place where I'm alone, where I can quiet myself, or I can begin to even visualize this part of me. In the workshop that you were, I think a meditation, like visualization type thing, where often these parts of us have an age associated. How old did I feel when I did that? Or what part of me engaged in that thing that I'm rejecting now?

I even imagine that part of me. I imagine maybe it's this 21-year-old young me who just discovered she was gay and there's some kind of shame in there. I imagine my adult self meeting her there and God being there and all of the messages of, like I said, "I knit you this way, my daughter."

The battle of those other voices coming out of those moments and me having to choose to believe the goodness more than those hurtful words and doing it over and over and over again. The thing is when I come out of those moments, like I said, my heart is soft. My heart is so open to loving others better. You know we say like, "Hurt people hurt people."

I think that couldn't be more true. When I come out of that quiet place of being loved my ability to love others is so much deeper. I'm curious, from you, Matthias, like going to the same school that I went to, it was kind of a concept when I was going there, not a huge concept. I'm wondering, is it something that you encounter as a grad school student in your studies or even just amongst your colleagues?

Matthias: Gah. I feel like ... I feel like so much of our training has been centered a lot around that. That work of how do we bring kindness and love into these spaces? Now, that you asked me that, I'm wondering, how much of it has been prompted by the school and how much of it has been my own work as well because I know I've latched onto the work of Dr. Kristin Neff and her work around self-compassion. I don't know if you're familiar with it.

Candice: Mm-mm (negative).

Matthias: She has a whole ... which she had taken from Buddhist meditation practices and has kind of codified a ... in her doctoral work, a way of bringing mindful self-compassion into a therapeutic space but into just daily lives and her work has been transformative for me because she has a way of like this is exactly how we do this and how we bring ourselves into these spaces to accept and be kind and literally transform the way that we treat ourselves. That wasn't taught at school. That's something I stumbled across.

Candice: Yeah.

Matthias: I don't know how much of it ... if it goes hand-in-hand or not. There's some of that there.

Candice: Well, I love that. I'm going to check out her stuff because sounds like I would be eating it up.

Matthias: Yeah. I think you probably would. It's so good. It's so, so good.

Candice: Yeah. I mean back when I was sort of discovering this, I was really, and I still do love, Henry Nouwen. He was a big voice for me in this trying to discover the self-love thing, as well as lots of different therapists and therapy along the way.

Matthias: Right.

Candice: Exploring that.

Matthias: Right. Yeah. I'm curious like ... I mean we're talking about mental health from the perspective of how do we love ourselves. I'm thinking about a couple episodes ago I had Dr. Robyn Henderson-Espinoza and they talk about this concept of how do we love ourselves into our stories and I feel like that's kind of what we're talking about. That practice.

There's a whole nother side of mental health that I think we're not talking about of actual mental health diagnosis and those struggles that we have that, sure, self-love can make a huge difference in but it also takes a lot of other work as well. I would be curious if you could talk about that and ... because as queer people, those things impact us as well. There's ...

Candice: Absolutely.

Matthias: It's something that we don't talk about a whole lot.

Candice: Yeah. Why do you think that is?

Matthias: Gosh. I feel like, from my perspective, even from larger culture's perspective is like it's taboo topics but then I think as queer people, we don't want to talk about them because ... and going back to what you were saying before the more we talked about I'm depressed or I have anxiety or I have a personal disorder or whatever, it feels like further proof that something about is bad.

Candice: Yes.

Matthias: I feel like there's that double ... that double layering there of like we can't talk about the bad things in our lives or the hard things in our lives. Maybe not bad but the hard things in our lives because of the risks associated with it.

Candice: Absolutely. Yeah. I think that's completely insightful and so true that is further proof of ... see? That's exactly why being queer is so bad. Look at this person who's depressed or look at this person who is so anxious they can't leave their house or they're dealing with a personality disorder. That, I think, unfortunately, it happens inside and outside the queer community and that is one place that, I think the LGBT community could really grow in is I think so many people have been rejected and hurt that, like I said, hurt people hurt people. It's not always the safest place to talk about our mental health issues because they don't want to be associated with that.

Like, "You've got one ... like don't talk ... I don't want to associate with you because I don't want someone to think that I am bad," or something, but it's very real. I mean a mental health diagnosis can come about because of hurt and harm that's done, trauma, biology. There isn't one thing that creates it but one thing that makes it worse is untreating it, or not treating it. Untreating it ... I just coined that.

Matthias: Great.

Candice: That was a special term. "Untreated." That actually, it increases our suffering. We have already suffered enough. Each one of us, our mantra needs to be like, "I have suffered enough." If you are depressed or anxious or feel like there's just something going on inside and you're not sure what, you don't have to suffer that. There are very legitimate scientific ways of treating that so that you don't have to suffer anymore.

I think there have been times in my life where I thought I was just a depressed person. That was my personality but it actually wasn't my personality. It was that I was rejecting myself and others were hurting me but I needed a therapist to walk me through that. I absolutely was depressed. That's what happens when there's so many hurtful voices in our heads. To expect that you would come out of that without a need for others to walk with you and maybe the medication, it's just not fair. I thank God for medication.

I think the other thing is that people misunderstand it. There's just this idea of like "I don't want to change my personality. I don't want to gain 50 pounds. I'm strong enough to deal with this." There's all these misnomers of like "I'm going to become someone else. The side effects are going to be horrible." I would say if that's your experience, you might be on the wrong medication because medication is a God-send. It ... I like to describe it as like it takes the edge off and lets you start where everyone else gets a start in the morning. Why wouldn't you offer that to yourself?

If you feel like you need it and you can't offer that to yourself, find a therapist who will work with you through that. You can take your time working through your feelings about medication so that you won't have to suffer more. I'm so grateful that we live in a time where it exists.

Matthias: Right?

Candice: Yeah.

Matthias: I think about my clients as we start walking down those paths of starting on medication and then like the huge shifts that happen in their lives just from taking the medication. Yeah. Medication doesn't change everything. It doesn't cure everything but as you said, it gets people up to a starting point that is similar to other people so that we can continue to engage in the work that still needs to be done. It's like the both end but they're wonderful, wonderful things.

Candice: Yeah. Our bodies need things sometimes. Our bodies sometimes need medicines. All different kinds. I have a cold right now. I am taking Sudafed so that ... it's okay that our bodies need medication sometimes and focus and prayer. Those things are great but it is not a way of curing what our bodies need.

Matthias: Yeah.

Candice: Yeah. I'm so glad that you've gotten to experience the power of it.

Matthias: Yeah.

Candice: Yeah.

Matthias: I mean it's just incredible to watch and see and be like your life has already changed.

Candice: Yeah. I haven't even done anything as a therapist.

Matthias: Right.

Candice: I've just been with you and it's like your body is [inaudible 00:28:26] this awesome. Like amazing.

Matthias: Yep.

Candice: Yep.

Matthias: I'm curious, for like ... I mean I know that step of ... I mean, we're both mental health clinicians, like therapy is what we do. We go to our own therapy. Like all of that ... It's the world we're seeped in but I know for so many people, like that's not their worlds.

Candice: Yeah.

Matthias: That idea of like going to see a therapist or even thinking about going to see a therapist is an anxiety filled, fear filled, like terrifying prospect. It goes onto that admitting, "What if there's something terribly wrong with me?" and the insecurity that can come up in all of that. I'd be curious. How do you work with that? With people who are coming to therapy the first time or are just trying to start this process of taking care of their mental health and that fear and terror that can come with the prospect of seeing a therapist?

Candice: Yeah. It makes me feel so tender. I know what that's like and I have seen therapists myself and by now I'm pretty used to it but there was a time in my life where I wasn't and it was really ... I remember going to a therapist and my body kind of shaking. You know that feeling when you're like, you think you're cold but it's just your nerves shaking? I remember feeling that way.

I would say if you could be brave and tell the person that you're going to see as a therapist tell them how scared you are and let them care for you, let them be with you, and let them provide space that is safe and that is not rushed to work through those fears. Also, that we are human. I'm a person. I want to know you. I want to be with you. I am not superhuman. To remember that, there's this title "therapist," but therapist equals real person and so if you call someone or you see someone and they don't seem like a real person, it might be time to find someone who is a real person and a therapist at the same time.

It doesn't need to be scary. Vulnerable? Yes. You don't want to pay for therapy and not dig into your stuff because it is. It's a financial investment. Yeah. I don't know if that's

kind of connecting to what you're saying but it ... Yeah. Gosh. What a tender, tender place to be.

Matthias: I mean the bravery, the vulnerability that goes into it. I'm thinking like ... in my yoga practice this morning, we were focusing on this idea of triumph in the idea of the small steps and the just showing up kind of steps and how do we take pride in the fact that we are doing something for ourselves that are good for us? It feels like that ties in so much with that kind of taking those steps to start seeing someone. It's scary but it's something to be really proud of, too.

Candice: Hugely. It makes me think of my kids. Especially my daughter. She was recently scooting on her little scooter. They're three and a half so being on a scooter is a huge deal. She was tearing around the corner and like, boom, went over the handlebars and crying. She did not want to get back on that scooter. I was like, "Are you kidding me? You just did the most epic, like hardcore freaking rad over the handlebars. I want it on video so I can put it on YouTube."

Matthias: Yeah.

Candice: To me, that's how I think about going to therapy. Like "Are you kidding me? You just did the most epic, hardcore ... " There are so many people who stay in the hurt place, who stay in the like ... in the ball of the life that they are in. They don't ... They will not engage that bravery in that I'm going to go all freaking out and just face this hardcore. Wrap around that corner and go over those handlebars because it's hardcore and freaking awesome.

Matthias: Yeah. Like oh my gosh. I'm hearing you say that and that how easy it is to stay in that place of hurt and like ... I mean, of course, we need to stay in those places of hurt but to even recognize the fact that like we can then take steps to jump right back in again and care for ourselves in those steps but like the goodness that comes out of seeing our own bravery. Like even in the hurt.

Candice: Yeah. It feels awesome.

Matthias: Yeah.

Candice: Confidence is built. Trust is built. It's a special thing.

Matthias: Goodness. I'm sitting here like, well, where do we go now?

Candice: Now, that we've solved the world's problems I think I'll go take a nap. I don't know.

Matthias: Gosh.

Candice: I mean it's easy for us to sit here and talk about it and I think but both of us our keenly aware as easy as it is for for this to roll off our tongues but it is a battle of that bravery, like we're talking about, it's not easy and none of these things are easy. I would say ...

I'm imagining someone listening to this feeling even shamed that they can't do this with the ease at which you and I talk about it.

Matthias: Yeah.

Candice: I would say I'll be heartbroken if someone listens to this and ends up feeling shame afterwards, that even your fear is allowed, your questioning is allowed, your uncertainty that therapy will ever work for you is allowed, where you are at and who you are right now is allowed. There doesn't have to be a ... I should be something else to simply love exactly where you're at even if it's a place of fear and uncertainty.

Matthias: That is like damn hard work.

Candice: Hard, hard, hard, hard. Yeah. It makes me want to curse. It's so hard.

Matthias: Yeah. It's not easy.

Candice: Well, I'm certainly glad that more therapists like yourself are joining the ranks.

Matthias: Yeah. I feel like there's so ... I mean I feel like it's still kind of few and far between that there is ... That there are people who are really doing this work of like intersections of faith and sexuality but there are more and more popping up all over the place.

Candice: Yeah. I love it.

Matthias: Like it's so needed because I feel like the trauma, like it's such a specific, like focus of trauma that we have been through in our lives that while other people can absolutely help with it and if you can't find a therapist who works at those intersections, like still give therapy a chance but like ... but to have people that understand that, I mean it's so needed in this world.

Candice: Yeah. I mean other people who are like, "Oh my god. I can't believe I found someone who is lesbian, who is also Christian, who gets these things, who can be my therapist. Oh my god." I am just so, so happy that other people are joining this because more and more, you're exactly right. We need so many other therapists who understand those intersections and who can walk with people because you can find someone who is queer but if they don't understand the faith piece, they're just not going to get it. Obviously, the other way around, someone who is Christian who doesn't get the queer piece can actually do a lot of harm in trying to help somebody.

I'm stoked that I'm getting more and more colleagues in this space.

Matthias: Yeah. Yeah. Me too. I will say, as people hear that, because I think like ... because I think so many of us who are working at those intersections are in like the big cities on the coast. I feel like that's kind of ... or the big cities in the center of the US but like ... for everyone who listens in this world of where ... like that isn't even a concept. I think about where I grew up in the Midwest like ...

Candice: Yeah.

Matthias: That's just not ... The hope of even finding a therapist who could even engage in sexuality like end ... like being a Christian, I mean like you said, there's so much harm that can be done in there. Like all of that to say, I know you do psychotherapy via internet.

Candice: I do.

Matthias: I have clients all over the US. Maybe the world, I guess, I don't know.

Candice: I do.

Matthias: What does that look like? If someone wants to maybe get involved, I guess, what I'm trying to say is there are options for people who don't feel like they can have that right in their own hometown, either with you or with other people.

Candice: Yeah. I mean it's ... Technology is amazing nowadays for that exact reason that I get to see people all over the world who are in these places, that just like your hometown, that like, okay. If I get to the place of I will see a therapist, but who? There's no one within a two mile drive. I do all my therapy via the web. Which, at first, I was uncertain, like, okay. How is this going to work? I've never done this before. Will it feel too disconnected? I have been so surprised. It feels like we are in the same room.

For me, I think the hardest part is every once in a while wanting to give someone a hug or a pat on the back as they leave the office. That's like the saddest part for me. Other than that, it is amazing to be able to sit with someone halfway across the world and talk through these things and process through these things. I'm really grateful for technology and the people who have created it.

You'll probably say it but my website is thechristiancloset.com if you want to find out about that and if you don't like me or my therapy style there are absolutely other therapists who do online stuff nowadays.

Matthias: Candice, thank you so very much.

Candice: Yeah. It was fun hanging out with you.

Matthias: Yeah. Likewise. Yeah. I will absolutely link up everything in the show notes that people can find you. I hope you have a great rest of your afternoon.

Candice: I will. You too.

Matthias: You can find out more about Candice's work over at thechristiancloset.com. Her block is candiceczubernat.com. That's C-Z-U-B-E-R-N-A-T. She's on Twitter @The Christian CL and on Facebook at The Christian Closet. Queerology is on Twitter and Instagram @QueerologyPod or you can tweet me directly @matthiasroberts. Queerology is

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As always, I'd love to hear from you. If you have ideas of what you want to hear on the podcast or just want to say hi, reach out. I'll get back to you. Til next week, ya'll. Bye.