Queerology: A Podcast on Belief and Being

Episode 46 – Kenji Kuramitsu (Encore Episode)

Transcript

Matthias: If you enjoy listening to Queerology, then I need your help. Here's why. I create Queerology by myself on a shoestring budget, recording and editing every episode in my tiny closet. How's that for irony? That's where you come in. Will you help keep Queerology on the air by supporting it financially? By tipping as little as $1 a month, you can help me improve and keep making Queerology every week. All you have to do is jump over to MatthiasRoberts.com/support to make a pledge and listen away.

Hey friends, this is Matthias Roberts, and you're listening to Queerology, a podcast on belief and being. This is episode 46.

Kenji: You know, I think I see this sort of reclamation of prayer as a part of these very needed campaigns to say to the factions of the church that have claimed them for far too long. Like, no, this doesn't belong to you, this was never yours, and they're not even using it in the right way.

Matthias: Kenji Kuramitsu is a writer and a master divinity student living in Chicago. He's a queer fifth generation Japanese American, and serves on the board of the Japanese American Citizens League and the reformation project. Kenji believes that our worship and our prayers and our way of living are all intimately intertwined, and that what we do in our prayer affects our beliefs, which in terms affects our way of being in the world. His new book, A Booklet of Uncommon Prayers, explores these ideas as a collection of collects for the Black Lives Matter movement and beyond.

Every time I sit down for a conversation with Kenji, I leave in awe of his wisdom. I'm really excited to have been able to record one of those conversations and that y'all get to listen in on it. We talk a lot about prayer in this episode, especially prayer as a means of resistance, prayer as a way of standing up to oppression and as reclaiming our places within the church, within culture.

I will say, if you're listening to this episode and are unfamiliar with some ideas in critical race theory or unfamiliar of the concept of whiteness, some of those ideas, I'd encourage you to go back and listen to episode three with Dr. DiAngelo before proceeding with this episode, because that lays some good groundwork for a lot of the concepts that Kenji discusses. Go listen to that now or if you listen to this episode and you're like, "What in the world is he talking about," episode three is a really good resource to help understand some of the basics.

Let's go ahead and dive in. Kenji, good morning.

Kenji: Good morning.

Matthias: How are you doing today?

Kenji: I'm doing well. Thank you, thanks for having me on.

Matthias: Yeah, of course, it's good to have you. To start, how would you say that you identify? Then, how has your faith helped form that identity?

Kenji: Yes, thank you. Let's see. I would identify as a mixed race, fifth generation, bisexual Japanese American Christian, and my faith has helped me inform some of those identities by reminding that I am fearfully and wonderfully made by God, and that each of my identities is not something that's a burden, but something through which the divine can be felt and shared with other people.

Matthias: Yeah. I feel like, I would imagine that that probably took a while to arrive at that.

Kenji: Absolutely.

Matthias: I'm curious about that. What was that journey like for you?

Kenji: Yeah. That's a great question. I would say that it's taken a while to get to a point where I feel comfortable celebrating the identities that are not dominant in society in terms of race, in terms of sexuality, even in terms of how I view my faith. It's also a struggle that I refind myself in every day to try and affirm the parts of me that I don't see celebrated, around me and in the church and in the world. It's definitely been a long journey that I'm still daily wrestling with.

Something that's helped with that I think has been not only representation in popular media and the like, but real intense conversations with friends and other co-conspirators in and outside of the Church who are struggling with some of these same things and trying to catch a glimpse of themselves in the face of God as well.

Matthias: Yeah. I mean, that celebration of those parts of ourselves that aren't celebrated, that is an act of standing up and fighting back. That takes a lot of work.

Kenji: Yes. I feel bad almost for folks who find their salient identities overrepresented, oversaturated and celebrated in all public sectors, because this instills a sense of arrogance and pride and superiority that those folks are going to have to spend time unpacking that for instance me, as a man, I'm going to have to spend time unpacking the internalized sense of my gender superiority.

I am grateful for, at least in terms of some other identities, to be on the bottom end, where instead of trying to deconstruct pride and supremacy, I'm sort of scheming with other people and trying to build solidarity and community and self-confidence, and that feels like a painful position to be in sometimes, but it's also very affirming.

Matthias: Yeah. I would imagine it's at both end of like, it comes with a cost, and a very real cost, and there's, I'm imagining for myself for being gay, that's what I can identify with and there's a sense of gratitude present though too, it's that back and forth.

Kenji: Yes. I think Justin Lee at GCN a couple of years ago gave a remark that, he was talking, really pushing on issues of race and racism, and he said something like, "If I wasn't gay, would I even be thinking about this sort of thing," something like that. I can resonate with that very much. I almost, again, feel bad for folks whose life experiences and identities have confined them to this insularity that doesn't let them engage with suffering and with people around them.

Matthias: That's interesting, engage with suffering. I just had Rachel Virginia Hester on the podcast a few episodes ago, and something that she was talking a lot about was the role of lament and grief and engaging in suffering and how our wider culture, especially white culture has kind of lost the ability to do that.

Kenji: Yeah.

Matthias: I'm curious about that. How would you say, like, marginalized identity and suffering, acknowledging suffering, it feels like they go hand-in-hand in a way.

Kenji: Yeah, that's a good question. I think it's crucial that folks with marginalized identities are able to acknowledge their own suffering. I think to the times of my life when I was really in a depth of depression. For me, this was mostly during high school. I think part of that state came from the fact that I was denying and suppressing and not allowing any honest legitimate expression of the grief and the suffering I was feeling about pain around my parents' separation or my family, or any of the other traumas that I wasn't even able to acknowledge in myself. At the very least, I think there's a relationship between acknowledging suffering and sort of healing as people with marginalized identities from the violences inflicted by a dominant society. I'm exactly sure what the relationship there is, other than the sense of catharsis, and once you're able to tap into your own pain, perhaps there's a way to enter more into the suffering of others as well.

Matthias: That makes sense from a psychological perspective, if we're pushing away pain, pushing pain into other people, projecting it, then it makes it next to impossible for us to see it in ourselves. As we take a hard look at ourselves and acknowledge the things in ourselves, of course that pain comes rushing back and we have to deal with it. It makes for a more holistic being.

Kenji: Yeah.

Matthias: This is a little bit of a pivot, but you just published a book.

Kenji: Yes.

Matthias: A book of prayers. It's beautiful, the Booklet of Uncommon Prayer. I was wondering if we could maybe talk about prayer a little bit? That's something that I feel like, at least for me and in the circles that I find myself in right now, that's not something that we talk about a whole lot, the idea of prayer, or when we talk about prayer, it's kind of the more framing it in terms of mindfulness or meditation, which I think have deep value.

You write in your introduction, "Our worship and our prayers and our way of living are all intimately intertwined. What we do in our prayer affects our beliefs, which in turn affects our very way of being in the world." I'm wondering if you can talk about that a little bit, what your view of prayer is, why you wrote this book.

Kenji: Absolutely. Yeah. Thank you. I was really happy to see the book come out, Evangelicals Through Social Action actually published this collection of prayers that is designed to help us think through praying for social issues. I used the lenses of the Black Lives Matter movement and some of the platform demands as a sort of structure for the book and a way to approach bringing our prayer lives and our conversations with God into conversation with the social justice movements around us.

I think what you named in thinking about prayer is true. I think in more progressive circles we maybe drift towards more meditative or centering practices of prayer, which are extremely valuable, the contexts that some of us come from.

I remember praying with an elder of our church, my family and I at the front of our Southern Baptist-ish megachurch when I was a kid, praying for my mom to repent of lesbianism and come back to our family, you know. This was like, the first sort of instance of public prayer that I can remember participating in as a kid. We have the rhyming prayers in my family too before meals and before going to sleep, and even waking up in the morning, which I still say to this day.

It's sort of steeped me in the knowledge that we can connect to God at any time and for any reason, but I've never really considered prayer taking on a sort of protest function until probably pretty recently. That's, I think, another lens of looking at prayers that folks in activist circles have been nourished by a long time, and have even used as an organizing tool, that I wasn't previously exposed to.

For instance, my professor Joerg Rieger was telling me about protests that he was helping to organize to unionize workers at Walmart. Walmart workers were joining a bible study that my professor was running, and it was talking about themes of labor and justice and trying to foment a sort of consciousness around their rights as workers and spiritual values, sort of approaching the Christianity that these workers practiced in a way that says, hey, this has something to say you not being able to take a break in the amount that you need to, or to be compensated for your work.

Eventually a protest was staged at the Walmart store. The police were called, the security director of the store came to escort my professor and this group of workers off of the property, and Joerg says that they gathered into a circle, and they said, "Okay, but first, we're going to pray," and they started praying, so heads lowered, hands held.

The closing in security officers has stopped to see this prayer circle happening and crossed their own arms in front of them and were respectfully waiting for this to finish. Joerg says at that point, the organizer said to the security officers, "Would you care to join us in prayer for a second," which they did, giving this protest a crucial two, three more minutes of life.

The fact that this prayer thing could be used as a tool to sort of bring people who are pitted against each other into this same spirit of consciousness for a few minutes, that's powerful.

I told this story at the book launch about being at home at my father's house on the night of the Ferguson verdict, when Michael Brown's killer was acquitted ... Excuse me, not acquitted, but the prosecutor said that there wasn't enough to press charges. I remember that night, maybe you remember the same, my thumb raw almost from swiping through my phone, hours, eyes glazed by the brightness of the screen and the darkness of the room around me, and hours and hours, I'm just swiping through social media furious, sobbing.

I had gotten into fights with my family members that whole night because of our different views on race and racism. Both of my parents were police officers for their whole careers, so we definitely have some different perspectives. I must have been up until five, six in the morning, utterly helpless, paralyzed in my bed, spiraling into the righteous but, for me, disorienting fury of Twitter, no one around that I could call in the 'burbs.

My dad knocked on the door of my room around six, and he sat down next to me on my bed, we'd been exchanging sharp words that whole night. He sort of lied down next to me and he put his hand on me and he started to pray. He said, "God, I don't understand why my son is feeling this way. I know we have different views on this, but I know that you are working in his life and that you've given him a spirit of truth to speak to these issues, and I pray that you can bring us together and our country together in healing and that you might make peace."

I don't remember the exact, I'm sort of constructing from memory the words that he said, and I calmed. I fell asleep and I rested for the first time in hours of feeling flighted and then panic. He just laid there with me praying until I fell asleep. That was powerful. I never thought that this thing could be used not just for a trite thank you to God, or asking when I needed something desperate or even a centering exercise, but way to bridge this gulf that had opened up between our hearts, if only for a night, but when I really needed it.

Matthias: There's a line in your introduction that says, you're talking about this, "Prayer can work in ways that other forms of communication simply cannot. Prayer can gird us and heal us and say to an oppressor, no, I answer to a higher power than you." When I read that line, that gave me chills. That way of thinking about prayer as a wholly empowering event, wholly in both ways, W-H and H, the power within that is incredible. It feels like a way of claiming truth, speaking truth to power.

Kenji: Yes. I think at its best, prayer does just that. You and I have seen prayer on social media from white Christians after uprisings in Baltimore and Ferguson and St. Louis and the Facebook and social media posts say, "I pray for a return to calm streets and that we can just be at peace again, and that everything would just calm down." We've seen prayer operate as a sort of anesthetic, sort of forced drugging, opiating effect, like, calm it down, just go back to your homes. We've also seen it, and actually for me that night with my father, it operated as a needed opiate.

We've also seen how prayer, like you said, can let us tap into this undergirding electric spiritual current underneath each of our lives and say, no, there's something above you that I'm going to answer to and that I'm going to draw from, and in that sense, be used as adrenaline to fuel social movements and protest and taking a stand for dignity against forces of empire that are saying no, no, no.

Matthias: I have chills right now, because I think that it's that acknowledgement of, I grew up in churches where we talk about how God stands on the side of the oppressive or [inaudible 00:18:27], whatever, but primarily white churches, and I had no, there was no context for, in Sunday school it was like, if your sister hits you, that kind of ... no real conscious awareness of what that actually means in a world like ours. To claim the very real power of that, of God standing with the marginalized, God standing with he oppressed, and not just in a trite way, or in that kind of Sunday school way, but God is with you, with us.

Kenji: Yes.

Matthias: I keep saying the word power, but there's a lot of power in that.

Kenji: Yeah, I think you're right.

Matthias: I'm wondering if you can maybe read some of your prayers.

Kenji: Yeah, sure. I would love to. I have a couple in mind, or was there anything you were really drawn to?

Matthias: I would love whatever you feel ...

Kenji: Absolutely.

Matthias: Yeah.

Kenji: Let's see. I have a couple. Yeah, okay, here's one for the protection of the body.

Holy God, architect of creation, you've breathed out the galaxies and the seas, and every inch of this universe, from the folds behind our ears, to the neurons in our minds, it's yours. In calling our world very good, you have called our bodies to be living sacraments for you, bringing justice to bear truth, in life and in death. Teach us to not fear the unknown, but to celebrate your life in our skin and bones. Guard our flesh from rubber bullets, tear gas and piercing metal, and protect us from being separated from our bodies, your temples of life, that Jesus's resurrected flesh may be alive in our midst. Amen.

I wrote that thinking of the violations that happen routinely to and in the human body. This book was originally drafted in the fall of 2015, so a good year before 2016 election, but definitely still in a season in which we were having public conversations about violence against bodies and against certain kinds of bodies in particular, against trans, women of color, against black folk, against indigenous and other people of color.

I wrote this prayer thinking about how these acts of violence that we see is constantly documented and inundating us on the news, often committed by members or agents of the state against black people and other people of color. There's unmaskings of what's already happening in the US, just sped up very quickly, meaning the calm streets that my friends from Campus Crusade were praying that, or even from the Episcopal Church that were praying that people return to, instead of protest in Ferguson, well, those calm streets were really an already racist and violent state.

If you just collapsed everything that was happening, for instance, indigenous people in the US having around a 30 year less life expectancy than white Americans, like, that's already happening. If you just speed it all up into one brief conversation or confrontation, that's how you get a Mike Brown, a Freddie Gray. We're just seeing this assault on the body collapse into a very short period of time.

I wrote that prayer thinking about how the assaults on our communities are very related to the attacks on the land, but also our bodies, because they're not belonging to the dominant identities that we named at the beginning of our conversation.

Matthias: Mm-hmm (affirmative). This is interesting, because that idea of an embodied spirituality, an embodied faith practice, paying attention our bodies in very particular ways in their particularity, that's something that I feel like has come up a lot on this podcast, over and over and over again. I also think, how can it not when we're talking about faith and sexuality as a general topic.

Kenji: Yes. For me too, the other side, however you want to define that, they're already acknowledging the importance of their bodies. By that I mean, the marches that we saw in Charlottesville, these are histories of confederacy being quoted in the flesh, like Darren Wilson is a confederate flag quoted in a human body, being enfleshed into a person. Their bodies are being established as what is normal and what is dominant, and has every advantage in society and every institution on the side of them.

I'm with you. It's absolutely crucial I think that those of us coming from a different angle can talk honestly about what it means to try and enflesh and quote our Christian and our spiritual values in our own bodies.

Matthias: Mm-hmm (affirmative). That is a very different practice than that kind of trite thoughts and prayers that I think we all are starting to get annoyed with.

Kenji: Right. Yeah. I think I write somewhere in the book, after a public tragedy, these thoughts and prayers appear from every street and tweet corner, like, online and in person. This has just become our trite currency as you said. Even our president at the time, Barrack Obama I think after a shooting in California perhaps or maybe Colorado, hard to keep track, said, "Our thoughts and prayers are not enough," sort of naming the futility of this gesture without actually incarnating any sort of public change.

Matthias: Yeah. I'm trying to think of who said it. That idea, and it's such a "simple idea", like, the prayer must move us to action, but that's a very real thing. It has to be both.

Kenji: Yes. Part of the project of this book and how I've been thinking of prayer for the past couple of years is that, I wouldn't even so clearly bifurcate prayer and action. Sometimes prayer is an action and the action, and sometimes it's not, but sometimes it is, in the instance of the Walmart protest or even the conversation that my father and I had in prayer. If prayer can be a way of being present and growing solidarity with other people and creating healing in that moment, in some ways the action has already been done. Of course, prayer divorced from those contexts is not enough, and it may motivate us I hope towards physical actions too.

Matthias: I'm thinking about how you were, and you write again in your introduction that you attempted to avoid employing gendered language in these prayers, but you've also included references to the feminine maternal aspects of God and maintaining the historic understanding of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, of bringing all of those things together.

Thinking about that, thinking about embodiment and what just popped into my mind was, I've been seeing a little bit on my Facebook feed from some people who continue to claim that fights for LGBT rights, for trans rights, they argue that these are inherently gnostic things, which I 100% disagree with. I'd be curious if you have thoughts about that idea of gnosticism and embodiment, that same conversation that we were just having. You're someone who's been deeply trained within theological traditions. I'm wondering if you have thoughts about that.

Kenji: Yeah, sure.

Matthias: I put you on the spot.

Kenji: No, no, no. I think it's an interesting ... I mean, this whole gnosticism thing, you have people from the right accusing the left of being gnostics, I'm thinking of Andy Crouch's article in Christianity Today, where he says that trans identity is a form of gnosticism. I'm thinking of N.T. Wright's recent comments where he sort of levies this at trans folks and people who celebrate non-binary gender as gnosticism.

Then gnosticism is also sort of cast from the left to the right sometimes, sort of how the more conservative factions in the church want to spirit away suffering or ignore our bodies. Then I'm also starting to see some from the left sort of reclaim gnosticism as an alternate knowledge.

I think it's definitely for the past 2000 years been the hot word in Christianity. I would say, to throw my own hat in the ring on this conversation, by doing this sort of body naming celebration reclamation work, as people of color, as queer folks, as people with other marginalized identities in a society and in a church that really is dedicated to stamping out difference in identity, it is a sort of defense against gnosticism.

If gnosticism is falling into secret knowledge or spiriting away the flesh and the body into a desiccated separate existence from the flesh, that's not what we're about. We're trying to resist dissolving into whiteness. We're trying to resist being forced into heterosexism and cisgender identity.

These moves all strike me as postures that point us away from the kind of gnosticism that I think some of your friends are talking about. These are actions that are asking us to get grounded in the dirt under our fingernails and our skin, and in the bodies that we move and live around in every day. There's no us without our body. That's an ancient Christian value. I think that celebrating the crooks, rather the nooks and crevices and crannies of the body and what it means to have a body is sort of going against what your friends are suggesting.

It's a tough conversation, though. I hope I've expressed a gem of something that makes sense, but it is confusing.

Matthias: Right. It's a word that gets tossed back and forth as you were saying-

Kenji: Absolutely.

Matthias: Everywhere. I also feel like a lot of times I don't even know, because it's been used so often in so many different contexts, I wonder if we're all just working with the definition of gnosticism, of kind of whatever we want it to mean. I feel like I have an idea of what it means, but it's probably not rooted in a good reading of what gnosticism truly is/was. Anyway, that's ...

Kenji: I think if there's one caution for maybe people where I sort of place myself theologically, which is more towards the left perhaps, it's that gnosticism is also about in addition to and aversion to incarnation. It's also about an attraction to gnosis, to secret knowledge that only a small group of people are entitled to. Just think of a very esoteric hidden away secret truth. I think this is found maybe in a lot of new age-y spaces too, but that only a small slice of the population will get, and everyone else is hopelessly lost.

I think just thinking of my own personal areas for growth, there have been times when I felt like that, because I have an understanding of things such as critical race theory or postcolonialism or other kinds of discourse that allow me to really interrogate questions of race, gender, sexuality, I think there have been times that I've fallen into the trap that this knowledge could not be known by everyone or would not get a wider hearing.

Actually, we shouldn't be secreting and storing away this special knowledge, but trying to share it with other people and further decolonization more widely. I suppose that would be a sort of caution to a kind of gnosticism that sutures up this kind of understanding and doesn't want to share it with folks for whom it would be life-giving and life-changing news.

Matthias: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I feel like, to bring it back to your prayers, I feel like that's one thing that you're doing within this book, of sharing a different way to pray.

Kenji: Yes.

Matthias: I mentioned the language that you use, your very intentional language. I'm curious if you'd maybe be willing to talk about that a little bit, of the role of language in our prayers, and how we think about God and language, and maybe even broader than that.

Kenji: Yeah.

Matthias: You were very intentional in these prayers.

Kenji: Right. As you named, I was trying to find a balance between staying grounded in the resources of the Christian tradition, and also I think recognizing that the Christian tradition has chosen to seep itself in patriarchal images and really preference these kind of ways of talking about God.

It was sort of different to thread my way through that, and so I tried some things that ultimately, I don't think all of the language things I was playing with worked, for instance, I think I omitted Lord from this collection of prayers, just trying to be sensitive to feminist theologies, concerns that this is a patriarchal term in rendering.

I tried to do some new and old things with the language, and ultimately, I probably would've done some things differently in that realm, but I was motivated overall by the understanding that language is life. John Boswell talks about the power of word, and of the word incarnated in Jesus as that which changes minds and convinces people to join God's path.

I think it's perhaps Maya Angelou who says that, words are not just words, but they stick to surfaces, and so you use them, and then they stick to the rugs and the curtains and the walls of the room, and then they eventually stick to you and into you. There's a real power around language. It's this thing that we can speak life or death to others with simultaneously.

I was trying to balance that understanding with an admission in my own life that I really wasn't praying to God about the things that I cared or struggled with most. I sort of noticed taking into account the way I was praying both in church and in private that I was presenting a sanitized or idealized version of the things that were going on in my life when I would talk to God in prayer.

That began to really make me uncomfortable, because in prayer, especially in conversation between you and the divine, this should be the time when you can be most unclothed, and I really wasn't allowing my anxieties and concerns to look directly in the eye with the way that I was talking to God. Part of this motivation was to place the things that I was worried about and I cared about, murder and incarceration of trans people in our society, the internalized racism and white supremacy I feel as a person of color, how heterosexuality tries to break off our limbs and contort us into its image.

These things that I'm thinking about, family troubles, depression, loneliness, I wasn't actually praying about them. Then I came to a point where I thought, well, if I act like or believe that prayer is important for these sectors of my life, why am I not bringing these wider social concerns to bear on prayer? Why am I not talking about the environmental destruction that is being reeked around us? Why am I not praying for a resistance against people who say things like all lives matter or for solidarity between different communities of color, and then to sexism in the church, for victims of different kinds of assault, and for families healing from shootings?

That sort of approach made me want to try to come up with a framework for talking to God in that way, and that was the kind of seed for the book. A lot of the prayers are structured in the style of collects, which use very specific frameworks and language, often drawn from Anglican or Roman Catholic traditions, to sort of collect people's prayers and present them to God.

That's been a cool and helpful tool and framework to use also thinking that there's not just unmitigated oppression and languishing violence in the Christian tradition, but there are resources there that we can draw from to address pressing social issues in our context today.

Matthias: I'm sitting here and thinking about, I think for those of us who ... I really dislike the word triggering, but that's the only word that's coming to mind right now, of where prayer can be ... There's a lot wrapped up in it. It's something that I think sometimes for me, you move away from some of those practices that remind you of things, of environments that were not healthy or beneficial.

Kenji: Yes.

Matthias: I know so many people, myself included, of where prayer is one of those things.

Kenji: Yeah.

Matthias: For someone who's trying to in a way reclaim prayer as being something that us queer and marginalized and oppressed people can find solidarity in. For someone who's skeptical, who's hurt, who's maybe wanting to dip their toe back into prayer, do you have thoughts or ... I don't know what your story is around prayer. Was that a journey for you to come back into prayer? Has that something that's always been with you? For people who are on a journey like that, what would you say to them?

Kenji: That's a great question. It has been a journey for me. I grew up in sort of Roman Catholic tradition that gave me a lot of really structured frameworks for prayer, which I used and still use, but I didn't and don't always feel that I can crawl into the cracks of those and make them mine. I think that the resources I have for my catholic background have been more strict in some ways.

Then like you alluded to, in Evangelical spaces such as those that I also grew up in and participated in as a young adult too, prayer was a weapon at times, an emblem of spiritual abuse, something that was turned against others and against me with really devastating consequences. I think abuse is evil and spiritual abuse has the potential to cause such harm, because in prayer and in church community, I don't know, it affects us on a very deep level.

I remember praying one time at a parachurch ministry conference, we were praying in a new year together with my campus ministry, hundreds, hundreds, hundreds of us, and I asked for prayers for the Catholic Church. This was an Evangelical group I was with. Our prayer leader started praying and he said, "Father, God, we ask for your prayers for the Catholic Church, which is going to hell."

My eyes shot open. You know that feeling, like, somebody's praying and your head's bowed, your eyes close, and then pop. You snap up and you look around, your eyes are darting. You're like, "Did anyone else hear that shit," but no one, you're the only eye popping around.

I've come from those kinds of prayer too, and it made it really hard to talk to God or to pray with others for a really long time. I was on a retreat for seminarians of color in my denomination a few years ago, and I was sort of expressing that I wanted to take some time this retreat to dive into prayer a little bit more.

One of the other attendees said, "Here's a simple exercise I do." It was more akin to that centering meditative, like, beautifully liberating kind of prayer that you also described at the beginning of the interview, but she just said, "You spend five minutes, maybe you start with one minute, maybe you start with three, and then you go to five and 10, and you just think about how loved you are by God, just how much God loves you."

I tried it that night, and I felt flooded after a few minutes with this heat in my body and this knowledge that this couldn't stay a secret knowledge. It was powerful. I hadn't experienced that in a really long time. I think that was a sort of reminder that this is a power that's available to you at any time, but often I think has to come through other people.

For me, it's hard for me to pray very often. It's even harder for me to ask people to pray for me or to pray with me. I've started making it a practice to ask friends to, not just like, "Pray for me later," but like, "Hey, would you say for a prayer with me," or, "Would you say a prayer for me?"

Obviously I think that's easier to get away with in a seminary space like I'm in or in a church environment, but even if you have friends and connections online and you're struggling with something, and you think that it's bigger than just you, or bigger than you and the person you're talking to, ask them to send a prayer to you when you don't have the words.

I love the idea that, I've heard I think Rachel Held Evans and others talk about the liturgy breathes for you when you don't have the air in your lungs to breathe yourself, and I think prayer can be used for a similar purpose. It's been to cool to see how prayer has functioned in a sort of healing sense in that way.

I write prayers at my church as well, and I got an email from a parishioner just last week who ... I used the prayer from my book, let me see if I can find it. It's called For Mental Health and Emotional Wellness. It opens, "God, rupture in us the false bravery that teaches us that we alone are enough, that without you and your gifts we can even survive." Then it goes on to name things that I needed and didn't receive when I was younger, a therapy treatment, medication, community.

I got an email from a church member who heard the first line of that prayer and said, "When I heard the phrase false bravery, I broke down, and knew that I needed to go to healing prayer and talk to someone after the service." This was prayer being used in a way that caused both of us healing, but without other people praying for each other and challenging one another to be more centered in prayer and honest about our needs, that might not have happened.

Matthias: Yeah. It feels like an invitation to a shared vulnerability that is stepping from the bravado that I think sometimes prayer can often encourage, especially when you have one person praying corporately. I think of Jesus talking about spiritual leaders who pray loudly, of the bravado that can be in that. This is a shift into that mutual recognition of need and naming it.

Kenji: Yes.

Matthias: It's a beautiful thing.

Kenji: There's something very false and metallic about the kinds of prayer that happen on those street corners or the tweet corners like I call them. I created a small group at my church this last spring, and we spent a few weeks together looking at different examples of prayer and how it's been used to sort of foster energy or oppression.

We delved into prayers given by political leaders, so like the Republican National Convention benediction in 2016 cracked open what is referred to as a slave catechism that the Episcopal Church used in the years before the Civil War, a sort of call and response given to an enslaved person, the catechumenate, and their instructor, their spiritual status before God and place in society.

Reading that with my small group, I mean, brutal. This is the kind of prayer that people who have gone through reparative therapy so-called are familiar with, and yet there may be another way and other kinds of entering into that vulnerability that you named. I really liked that. I think I see this sort of reclamation of prayer as a part of these very needed campaigns to say to the factions of the Church that have claimed them for far too long, like, no, this doesn't belong to you, this was never yours, and you're not even using it in the right way.

I see some of the work of The Reformation Project, which you know that I work with, as sort of reclaiming the wing of the Church that has used scripture in a dehabilitating and dishonest way to sort of seed oppression in the marginalization of LGBTQ folks.

I see this as a sort of tandem venture into the realm of prayer, saying that no, this is not this steely assured way of forcing smiles and clamping down on marginalized, this is not what prayer has been used for in the past always, and it's not what it should be about. I think there are so many areas and arenas in which we can and should be plugging in and questioning how the Church has conducted itself in these ways.

It's exciting to be a sort of conversation partner with other people who are rethinking, like your podcast and you were talking about the way that our bodies have been rendered and understood, or the way that scripture or tradition or other values have been sort of misaligned by the church.

Matthias: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I'm wondering if you have a prayer you could share to close this out-

Kenji: Yes

Matthias: To maybe put you on the spot.

Kenji: No, no, no. No worries. Yeah. I think this is an example of reappropriating tradition. I wrote A Prayer for Justice, which was inspired by the prayer attributed to Saint Francis. I think it's a prayer for peace, sort of trying to couple justice and peace, right, no justice, no peace. This is called A Prayer for Justice.

God, make us instruments of your justice. Where there is a false and untenable peace, let us sow dissent. Where there is injustice, fury. Where there is oppression, hope. Where there is false fluorescence, profound darkness. Where there is social depression, life. Where there is crime and poverty, a sustainable economic infrastructure. Grant that we may not so much seek to be uplifted as to uplift, to be seen as to see others, for it is in protesting the sin of the system that we can more fully acknowledge our own sin. It is in demanding justice of the powerful that we live out God's demands for us, and it is in rejecting the American dream that we are born into God's dream. Amen.

Matthias: Amen. Thank you so much, Kenji.

Kenji: Thank you, Matthias.

Matthias: You can pick up a copy of Kenji's book over at Evangelicals for Social Action's website, EvangelicalsForSocialAction.org. You can follow Kenji over on Twitter and Instagram, @AFreshMind, that's @AFreshMind. Queerology is on Twitter and Instagram, @QueerologyPod, or you can tweet me directly @MatthiasRoberts.

Queerology is produced with support from Natalie England, Tim Schraeder, Christian Hayes, and other Patreon supporters. To find out how you can help support Queerology, head over to MatthiasRoberts.com/support.

A really easy way to help support Queerology is by leaving a rating or a review. Do that right in your podcast app, or head over to MatthiasRoberts.com/review, and it'll take you right there.

As always, I'd love to hear from you if you have ideas about what you want to hear in the podcast, or just want to say hi, reach out. I'll get back to you.

Until next week, y'all, bye!