

## Queerology 68

### Bishop Gene Robinson on the Wisdom of Our Elders

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Matthias: Hey friends, this is Matthias Roberts and you're listening to Queerology. A podcast on belief and being. This is episode 68.

Gene: Liberation movements need to understand how they got where they are.

Matthias: I remember going home for summer break when I was an undergrad, between my freshman and sophomore year. And that was the first summer that I started to wrestle with the idea of, "What if it's okay to be gay and Christian?" I mean, even, "What if it's okay to be gay?" And I started looking everywhere for resources. And one of the first resources I found was this documentary on Netflix called *For The Bible Tells Me So*. And I, like late at night, put my headphones in and pressed play on that documentary and watched so many people's stories of reconciling of their faith, with their sexual orientations.

Matthias: And one of the people that was prominently featured in that film was bishop Gene Robinson. At the time I thought all of these people were heretic's. I was like, "There's no way these people are actually Christians." And I had the pleasure to spend some time with Gene in New York City a few weeks ago, and realized very quickly that he might actually be way more Christian than I am. And he has always been an incredible person, and I'm so excited to have him on the podcast today.

Matthias: Bishop Gene Robinson is the first openly gay man to be elected bishop in the high church traditions of Christendom. He was invited in 2009 by president Barack Obama to give the invocation at the inaugural ceremonies at the Lincoln Memorial, and he was elected bishop of the episcopal diocese of New Hampshire on June seventh, 2003 ceremony to which he had to wear a bullet proof vest, because of the death threats.

Matthias: But more recently he presided over the interment of Matthew Shepard's ashes in the Washington National Cathedral last fall, and he's the author of two books. *In The Eye of The Storm: Swept To The Center By God*. And, *God Believes In Love: Straight Talk About Gay Marriage*. Gene is currently the vice president of religion at the Chautauqua Institution in New York, and spends his time advocating and writing for human rights all over the globe.

Matthias: So, with that, welcome back to Queerology. We're off to a great start in 2019, and let's just go ahead and dive in. Gene, hi, welcome.

Gene: Hi, and happy new year.

Matthias: Happy new year. It's so good to have you on the podcast today. Thank you.

Gene: I'm delighted to be here.

Matthias: So, to start, this is a question I ask everyone, but how do you identify? And then how would you say that your faith has helped form that identity?

Gene: I guess I would initially identify in a couple of ways. One would be with my pronouns he, him, and his. And of course, we know about that and we care about that because of our transgender brothers and sisters. And I would also identify as gay among the many, many, many letters that we are accumulating. In terms of my faith relating to that, really relating to both of those identities, with respect LGBTQIA and who knows what new letter we added this morning, you know, it comes out of my faith, the understanding that human beings are infinitely complex.

Gene: And in our effort to make reality a bit more manageable, we started lumping people into categories. And I think what we are learning, and we've certainly learned it I think in the LGBTQ community is that, sometimes stuffing people into boxes in which they don't really fit does violence to them. And, my faith tells me that, "We don't want to do that. We don't want to do violence to anyone."

Gene: I think, for a long time that was because we just didn't know, our consciousness had not been raised to a point to be more sensitive to this, and now there's no excuse not to know it. And so, I think both with ... In terms of our gender identity, but also our identity on those many letters that we use to describe our community, I think my understanding of God's diversity and God's complexity, and the complexity that God built into the creation, it makes me care about those things.

Gene: I also ... You know, I guess I would also say that ... I mean, you know, sometimes when I'm speaking to a heterosexual audience I'll inevitably get the question like, "Why all those letters?" And, "Seems like you just keep adding to them." And I always say, "Well, that's true actually." But I think where we are headed, I hope, and this would also come out of my faith. I think we're headed to a place where we understand that there are as many sexualities, plural, as there are human beings.

Gene: In the sense that no two of us have had the same history, emotional history, a physical history, romantic history, sexual history. And in that sense each of us is a unique sexual being. So, it would be really nice if we didn't have to use any labels, but as long as we're going to use them, I think we need to keep expanding that list for as many people as identifying themselves as being something different.

Gene: Here's what I say to that same heterosexual audience is, "What letters should we use for you?" Like, "You're not just one big blob of heterosexual energy. There has to be

diversity within your community. So, what letters do you want me to use for you? What letters would describe the various parts of people who would identify themselves as heterosexual?" And then I remind them that for the most part heterosexual people don't have to do that work. They don't have to stay up late at night figuring that out in order to make a go of it in the world.

Gene: And it's something that those of us in the LGBTQ community having done that, some of that work, we actually might be helpful to them, in doing that work for themselves. So, all of that relates to my faith in the sense that you know, growing up I certainly was scared to death that I was attracted to people of the same sex, the same gender. And was incredibly fearful that it was not a passing phase, and did everything I could to change that. And so, being able to embrace gay as a descriptor of me was really a faith journey, and I actually ... You know in 1986, that's what? 30, almost 33 years ago now when I came out. It felt like I was called out by God. That I could no longer walk into a pulpit and call people to a life of authenticity and not try to live a life of authenticity myself.

Gene: So, it very much felt like a call from God, and the story I love to ... We tell about that is, the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead and Jesus calls into the tomb to Lazarus, and the words he uses are, "Come out." And most people think that means coming out of the tomb, and coming out of denial of being gay is like coming out of a tomb. So, very much rooted in my faith journey.

Matthias: I mean, you've been in ministry for the majority of your life, so you've kind of been holding these two tensions together of where like, I feel like a lot of us think that this faith and sexuality conversation is like a recent conversation that's come up within the last 10 years or so, which is completely not true. We've talked about that on the podcast before, but you've lived this life of ministry and working with your sexual orientation. And I'd be curious like, what has ... Like, tell me more about that journey. Like, what has that been like being, I mean, a pioneer of sorts in this world.

Gene: You know, it's honestly hard for me to remember a time when I wasn't trying to span those two worlds. Literally from the very beginning ... I grew up really, really poor. My parents were tobacco share croppers in Kentucky. About as close to slavery as white people have come in this country, and I didn't live in a house with running water until I was 10. And yet, from the very earliest age I was involved in the church. My family was very, very religious, and I can't remember not hearing from the pulpit and from others in my church that people who were like what I was afraid I was were an abomination to God.

Gene: And that word, because we don't use it very much, has a really potent ring to it. I mean, it's as if God is disgusted with us. It's not just that God thinks we're doing the wrong thing, but that God is literally revolted by us. So, from the very earliest that I was aware of these two worlds I have felt like I had a foot in each one. I think once I finally laid claim to my being gay, I was already ordained by that point, and frankly, in 1986 when I came out and I was ordained, the only thing I was actually sure about was that my life as an ordained person in the church was over.

- Gene: I mean, I just ... That was an assumption that I didn't even agonize over. It just seemed clear to me that you know, I could be a part of the church, I could sit in the pew, but I would never function again as an ordained person. And so, talk about an experience of grace. The fact that, that has turned out not to be true is one of the most powerful experiences of grace that I know.
- Gene: I also want to just tell you a quick story. You may be aware, and your listeners may be aware that it was my great honor to preside over the burial of the ashes of Matthew Shepard some 20 years, and the 20th year anniversary of his killing. And if you watched that service that was live streamed from the National Cathedral, you'll know that I barely got through it. I was so emotional. Now, part of that was just the honor of it, and so on, but a piece of it was that I have felt like I've had one foot in the church and one foot in the LGBTQ community my whole life. And on that day for an hour and a half those two worlds came together.
- Gene: And we had LGBTQ people coming back to church and I say that in the ... Not to that particular building, but back to the church that had horrifically hurt most of them, and called them despicable names, and has treated them with disrespect. And I started out that service by saying to LGBTQ people who were there, "I want you to know, that I know what an act of courage it is for you to come back to the church like this today. The church that has hurt so, so many of you."
- Gene: And I think I was so emotional because I've had to live with one foot in each world and on that day for one brief moment those two worlds came together, and that was such an overwhelming experience. And maybe a foretaste of heaven.
- Matthias: Yeah. I just watched that right before we hopped on this call, and I was getting teary. Like, it was such an emotional experience.
- Gene: You know, interestingly, someone tweeted to me afterwards, a very nice thing and said, "Thank you for giving me the closure I didn't know I needed." And I think that was true for lots of us. I didn't know I needed it either, but in doing it I realized that it calmed and soothed this place inside of me that was still painful and causing me anxiety, and discomfort, and pain. And so, I think it turned out to be emotional for so many of us, because we didn't know that we were carrying around a burden much as Judy and Dennis Shepard, Matt's parents were carrying around his ashes. And in their decision to finally bury those ashes and in our finding a safe place at the Washington National Cathedral to [inaudible 00:16:36] those ashes, they laid that burden down and I think ... I specifically asked them would they be willing to do a public service. They were going to do something private.
- Gene: And I said, "You know, I just have this sense that a lot of us need to be a part of that movement that you're about to make. And if you could just be generous with us yet one more time, I mean, you've shared Matt with us for 20 years. If you could share him with us one more time in a public service, I think it would be incredibly healing." And I think it turned out to be a very healing moment.

Matthias: I'm curious Gene, because I get this question all the time from ... Especially from queer people who've left the church, and there's so many people who have, and for very, very good reason. The question I get is, "Why have you stayed?" And I know I have my answer for that question, but I'd be curious for you, why have you stayed in the church your whole life?

Gene: Well, a couple of things. I mean, so, let me give you sort of, a public answer and then a private answer. The public answer, because when I'm speaking inevitably someone stands up and it's usually a young gay man Roman Catholic who says, "Bishop, should I leave my church?" And what I say to that young man is, "So, look, if a church is there to facilitate your relationship with God, and if the Roman Catholic church is still giving you that, is still helping you with your relationship with God, then by all means stay and help with whatever change you can bring about. But if your church has ceased to do what it promises to do for us, both individually and as a community, which is to bring us closer to God, then run for your life. And only you can answer that question."

Gene: So, for me personally, privately, I've never lived without the church. I mean, I cannot remember a time when I wasn't in church, or singing in church, or reading in church, or ... I mean, I had ... I grew up with records like, I think they might have been ... This will really freak everybody out whose listening. I think they were like ... I think the speed was 78? Remember the records before 45s? So, those big old heavy records, we had them of somebody preaching. And I memorized every word and preached along with them. You know, when I was like five years old.

Gene: So, I have literally never been without the church, although I've questioned it plenty. And I'm constantly fighting with it, but leaving it has almost been unthinkable. I think the thing that has allowed me to stay, is that I never confuse the church with God. God never gets it wrong, and the church often, very often does, or takes a very long time to hear what God is saying about something.

Gene: And so, I've never had a problem with God, and I fight with the church all the time, but until something comes along that is able to better connect me with God, than the church, and the churches sacraments, and rituals, and so on, then I'm sticking with it.

Matthias: I feel like that's a really beautiful picture of what church is supposed to be. And I think as a lot of queer people return to communities that are affirming, and that do celebrate us, we re-find that richness of who God is within those walls.

Gene: Yeah, I absolutely agree. It also helps me connect with a whole bunch of people in the bible. So, imagine what it was like to be a leper, forced to leave your family and whatever community, go live with other lepers in a cave, or in a graveyard, or somewhere and to have this guy from Nazareth who seemed to be gaining in reputation, to come up to you and not only speak to you, but put his hand on your shoulder and make you feel like a human being. I know what that feels like. Don't you?

Matthias: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yes.

Gene: I know exactly what that feels like, and every affirming church congregation, every Jewish congregation, every Muslim congregation who welcomes a queer person in that way is doing exactly what Jesus did when he reached out to all those on the margins.

Matthias: Speaking of margins, I think one thing that I haven't touched on, on this podcast and that I have wanted to for a while, is this idea of ... This is a complete shift.

Gene: Okay.

Matthias: But, is this idea of ageism within the LGBTQ community.

Gene: Wow, have you come to the right place? You have come to the right guy.

Matthias: Yeah, because I know we had a small conversation about this in New York a few weeks ago.

Gene: Yeah.

Matthias: But I would love to talk about this, because it's a big issue. Especially for gay men, but I think throughout our community it's ... We don't have intergenerational friendships.

Gene: Well, so, you know, I'm thinking about this in a more pressing way than I have before. I'm 71 years old, and despite the fact that my dad is 93 and healthy as a horse, I'm also very aware of being older, or just point old, old I suppose. So, this is really interesting. So, I think first let's put it in the context of, the entire American culture doesn't do well with old people. Right? So, it's not like the queer community is somehow deficient in a way that the rest of the culture isn't. It's that, that's the context, which is that, we pay precious little attention to the needs and aspirations of older people. But it takes on, for me, it takes on a broader and deeper question, which is, "Why in particular, should queer people nourish their relationships with older queer people?"

Gene: You know, well, for starters it might be nice for those who so causally call themselves queer to have an older queer person tell them how long it took to feel comfortable with calling themselves queer and why. Because, it was the word of choice to hurt someone when people my age were growing up. But even more deeply I think, especially for liberation movements however described and going by whatever name, I think liberation movements need to understand how they got where they are. And I think it's probably the case that sort of early pioneers, whether it be in the civil rights movement for people of color, or the gay rights movement for queer people or whatever, it's really important to those who were there early on to get to share that history with those who are the greatest beneficiaries of it.

Gene: And what you say about the relationships between the generations being somewhat few and far between in our community, is a source of both concern for me, because I think there are real ramifications of it, and also great sadness. And it goes also, for people who are my age, let's say in their 70s, or 80s, or whatever, who don't correct someone who says, "Wow, in the 15 years since Stonewall we have come a long way." And the correction that needs to be made is, "Look, you young whippersnapper, there were

people doing this work who put themselves in more danger than you have ever thought of putting yourself. In doing this work in the 40s, and 50s, and 60s when we didn't even have the word yet. We didn't have the word gay to describe ourselves yet, and yet there were people underground at great risk to themselves, and their careers and so on. Laying the groundwork for what eventually turned into Stonewall, and eventually turned into marriage equality and all of the benefits that we enjoy today."

Gene: I just think that we are diminished, or we lack the kind of grounding that knowing our history gives us.

Matthias: This may be too broad of a question, but when you think about just the history that you've even lived yourself, what is the snippet of the history that you wish younger LGBTQ people knew, just from your own experience?

Gene: Yeah, and let me relate it to just something that is a bit in everyone's experience. When the movie Milk came out I heard a, kind of, a person on the street interview that NPR did with young LGBT people. In Los Angeles of all places. I mean, we're not talking about Keokuk Iowa, we're talking about Los Angeles on the streets. And about half of them who identified as LGBT had no idea who Harvey Milk was. Now, that's in the same state, in very liberal city. They had no idea who Harvey Milk was.

Gene: The interesting thing I think, and the important thing both in that movie and in real life is that, Harvey Milk made all of his activist staff come out to their parents, and to everyone. And there's a wonderful scene in the movie where he makes one of his right hand staff call his parents and come out to them. Right there, on the phone, with everybody listening. Because, because what Harvey Milk kept saying was, "Until we come out, they have no idea who we are, and that we have always lived in their midst. And once they know us ..." I think he went on to say this, "Once they know us, they will love us."

Gene: Well, that's ... You know, that's ... For the most part I think that's true. There's some of us that aren't terribly likable, but most of us are and I think if you ... And we know with unbelievable data behind it, is that knowing someone gay is the greatest indicator of how positive a person will be around our issues.

Gene: So, my personal take on that is, you know, at the time I came out, as I mentioned before, I was ready to give up my ... Not just my career, but my calling as I would understand it, to the ordained ministry. I knew that if my wife chose to try to preclude me from seeing my children, that the courts would completely back her up and that I would not have a piece of ground to stand on, because in 1986 virtually every court in America was reticent to give visitation rights to gay men, to their children.

Gene: And in some cases they were only allowed to see their children with another adult ... You know, another adult present, a chaperone. So, I think what I would like younger LGBTQ people to remember is that, they enjoy these remarkable benefits and an astounding, and surprising level of acceptance on the backs of a whole bunch of people who came out at very great risk. And for me, there is not an elder LGBTQ person that doesn't have that particular story to tell.

Matthias: This is so interesting. I feel like as I've been realizing how little history I actually know, I think about like, so many of us grew up in conservative Christian households. At least people who listen to this podcast. That we were taught history from a certain perspective and so of course, we didn't learn anything about LGBTQ history, which means that then the responsibility now falls on us at this time, to learn it.

Gene: Right.

Matthias: Which takes effort, but I mean, I'm working on that and trying to learn about history that isn't even that far back.

Gene: Right. Right. Exactly.

Matthias: It's not that long ago.

Gene: Right. Like I say, and there is not an older LGBTQ person who doesn't have that story to tell, and literally, all it takes is to say, "Gosh, tell me what it was like for you growing up knowing or suspecting that you were gay." And generally speaking, those older LGBTQ people will start to talk and you will learn all sorts of things. And you know, there's some ... You know, recent history ... I lived with death threats for two and a half years. Daily death threats. For two and a half years when I was elected and consecrated a bishop. And as recently as 2009 my then partner and I were at home, we lived out in the country west of Concord New Hampshire, and we got a call from the Vermont State Police who said, "Bishop Robinson, we just arrested a man here in our little town in Vermont, who came through our town in a rage and shot the windows out of an empty parked police cruiser. And when we caught up to him he had beside him in the passengers seat MapQuest maps ..." Remember MapQuest?

Matthias: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gene: "Had MapQuest maps to your home, had printed out a picture of you and your partner from the internet, and had scrawled across it, "Save the church, kill the bishop." And he had a sawed off shotgun and tons of ammunition. And we're pretty sure he was going to ring your doorbell and blow your head off."

Matthias: [crosstalk 00:34:32]. Wow.

Gene: Now, that's 2009. Right? Literally just 10 years ago. I had two weeks before that, and I had been in the news for this of course. Two weeks before that I had been asked by Barack Obama to give the invocation at the opening inaugural event at the Lincoln Memorial, and every time I was again, in the news, these kinds of threats would come up. So, that's only 10 years ago. So, yet, we have come a long way, but it took a lot of us taking extraordinary risks to get us where we are today.

Matthias: I'm curious, like, looking forward. For people who are kind of wanting to pick up this torch and join you in the work that you've been doing for so long, and so many other people have been doing so long, like, I'm hearing one, like, learn the history.



- Gene: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Right.
- Matthias: But two, like, what advice would you have for people who are wanting to carry this work forward?
- Gene: You know, I think it's a largely unanswered question. It's a question that the LGBTQ group known as Sage, organization known as Sage, which are advocates for gay elders, LGBTQ elders. And one of their issues that I think is a way in for any who might be interested, what those of us my age are facing is the fact that it's greater than 80% of elderly housing, nursing homes, and continuing care facilities, over 80% of them are either owned or related to a religious group. And what we're finding is that many queer elders are having to go back in the closet if they want to live in such a place.
- Gene: They're not welcomed there as an openly gay person. If they have a spouse who is not yet in need of that kind of care the spouse may very well have trouble visiting, or visiting at particular times, because, "Only close family can come." Or if two gay elders happen to be married most of these facilities won't let them share a room. I mean, there are just extraordinary circumstances that many elders, gay elders face, that it's heartbreaking to think that they would have to go back to pretending to be someone they're not to get the care they need.
- Gene: So, it would be quite remarkable if younger queer people could get involved in that rights movement. You know, the queer elder rights movement. Not to mention, going to visit some folks who fit into that category who are already in nursing homes, and other similar facilities. The other thing is, I guess, I think all of us in the queer community need to look at how, still after all this many years our community seems to be youth obsessed.
- Gene: And you know, when I became single six years ... Five or six years ago, and I ... You know, I said to my therapist, "You know, I go to gay bars and everything, but nobody seems to be you know, looking to meet anyone there." And he's like, "Oh my goodness, you've been out of circulation for way too long. That's what Grindr, and Tender, and all those things are for."
- Gene: So, you know, I tried that, but for the most part you get messages from people who think you're on there to pay for sex. Pay money for sex. And so, it's a whole new world out there and there's a gay elder living near you somewhere who's trying to figure this out. And part of it is recognizing, I think, that we are, as a community I think it's still fair to say, fairly youth obsessed. And, I think we would be better off not.
- Gene: You know, when you have a dinner party for six queer friends, you know, invite two older queer friends as well. I think ... You know, it's hard to talk about this without like, sounding like a charity case, or you know like, you know, "You're sad and you don't have any friends." I've got tons of friends, but I love nothing better than to be in the company of younger LGBTQ people. I'm fortunate in the sense that you know, I speak to a lot of younger gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer people, and am often invited places where they are, but I'm unusual in that way. Just because you know, my particular history and my availability to speak and so on. But for a lot of older queer folk, I think that's a tough slog, and it would be a lovely thing for younger queer people to reach out.

Gene: I also think that some of our LGBTQ organizations are probably the best intergenerational experiences that we have as a broad community. So, you know, if you go to a Lambda Legal fundraiser, or you go to the HRC National dinner, or you're raising local dollars to erect a monument to some gay hero, those are places where the folks who are interested cross all of the, age lines. And those are often a great way to meet people from other generations.

Matthias: Yeah. That feels like a challenge for all of us. Let's do this. It doesn't take that much more effort.

Gene: Right.

Matthias: Or even much effort at all to bridge those gaps. If we choose to do that.

Gene: Yep. Let me just tell you one other quick thing yet, that sort of points to the exact problem that you're pointing to. A few years ago I was doing a lot of writing for The Daily Beast and Huffington post, and so on. And my editor at The Daily Beast said to me ... It was pride week here in Washington DC where I live. And he said, "You know, I think it would be very interesting if you just circulated on gay pride [inaudible 00:43:00] day of the gray pride march and ask people what they thought pride celebrations meant."

Gene: And it turned out to be very discouraging for me, because the younger I got in the people that I interviewed, the more I heard things like, "Well, it's a day to have fun, it's a day to be with my friends, it's a day [inaudible 00:43:30] drink a little too much, it's a day to have a great party, blah, blah, blah." And, the older the person interviewed was, the more likely it was going to be, "It's a day to remember our history, it's a day to remember all those whose shoulders we stand on." It was all very much related to ... Almost like a Veterans day you know?

Gene: And so, I was wondering how to write that up and the next morning I woke up to news of the Pulse night club massacre. That very next morning. And I so wish that I could go back to all of the, people that I had interviewed to say, "Now what does pride mean to you?" And of course, I couldn't do that because I hadn't kept track of who I had interviewed. But it really gave me pause. And you know, there was much to celebrate about it. Instead of the revolutionary act being two men kissing on the street in open, and openly, everywhere you looked there were two men with a baby, or two women with a baby. And so that, you know, that's fantastic. That's a sign of the progress we have made, but on the other hand, it feels like we're losing something too.

Matthias: Gene, thank you so very much for joining. This has been such a pleasure.

Gene: Thank you so much. I'm just a good example of you know, you try to talk to an older gay man, and he'll talk back.

Matthias: Imagine that.

Gene: I'm proving my own point. I am my own illustration.

Matthias: Well, I'm so grateful. Yeah, thank you very, very much.

Gene: Well, thank you. It's been a pleasure.

Matthias: You can find Gene on Twitter @BishopGRobinson. Pick up a copy of one of his books wherever you find books, and be sure to catch him at the Chautauqua Institution. Their 2019 season is happening June 22nd through August 25th. For more information check out [chq.org](http://chq.org). Queerology is on Twitter and Instagram @queerologypod, or you can tweet me directly @matthiasroberts. Queerology is supported by its listeners 100%. To find out how you can help keep Queerology on the air head over to [matthiasroberts.com/support](http://matthiasroberts.com/support). A really easy way to help support Queerology is by leaving a rating and a review. You can do that right in your podcast app, or head over to [matthiasroberts.com/review](http://matthiasroberts.com/review) and it'll take you right there. 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 try to get back to you, and until next week y'all, bye.