



4 Bible stories to encourage LGBTQ+ Catholics

The Bible has far more to offer queer Catholics than judgment or proof texting.

OUR FAITH

👤 Jim McDermott 🕒 Published August 15, 2024

Virtually every time LGBTQ+ people get mentioned by church leaders or in church documents, there's some kind of scriptural reference used to justify a position. Our sexual activity is sinful because God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. We can't get married in the church because God created Eve as Adam's partner, not another man.

Positive arguments, too, are often clothed in scriptural references and allusions: LGBTQ+ people should be accepted and welcomed because God created us in his image (Gen 1:27) or because Jesus made it a priority to spend time with those considered impure or sinful. Seeing texts used for or against us in this way, I can easily begin to think of scripture as primarily a set of rules or proof texts to be wielded.

But the Bible has so much more to offer us as queer people than that. At their foundation, the Old and New Testaments offer a myriad of challenging, tragic, inspiring, contradictory,

ambiguous, strange, and occasionally very funny stories about God and humanity. Each one invites us to ponder, to dream, and to wonder about God and ourselves.

As some try to reduce scripture to a set of principles or texts to be applied, it's good for us to ask ourselves, "What are the Bible stories that speak to me, that help me to know God and understand my life?" Each of those texts is a gift that God gives us, a little temple in which God dwells for us and to which we may go to draw strength, insight, and comfort. And often they also provide a meaningful image of or guide for what the church can be.

Whether we might recognize it immediately or not, I think we each have touchstone stories like this. Here are a few of mine.

Jacob Wrestles the Mysterious Stranger, Gen 32: 22–31

A little more than halfway through the book of Genesis, which begins the story of how God became the intimate friend and partner of the Jewish people, we suddenly get this very mysterious moment in which Jacob—the descendant of Abraham and patriarch of a growing family—is accosted in the night by a mysterious man. The two wrestle with one another in silence all night until finally the man gives up after knocking Jacob's hip out of joint. The man never identifies himself, but he blesses Jacob with a new name, Israel. Jacob will later say he saw God face-to-face that night and lived.

As strange and existential as the story is, the tale of Jacob wrestling this mysterious man always brings me a lot of comfort. It makes me feel better about the wrestling that I often deal with inside myself both around my sexuality and other things. Seeing Jacob go through that and come out the other side gives me hope that my struggles, too, are not fruitless but ultimately will be life-giving.

It also suggests that differences within the church are not inherently a sign of God's absence, evidence that we've veered onto the wrong path. Instead, conflict can be understood as an indication that we are on exactly the right track. I take comfort in the idea of a church that could encourage people to stay true to their experience and insight, insisting if we do so we will all truly meet God.

The Valley of Dry Bones, Ezek. 37: 1–6

At one point in the book named after him, Ezekiel is led by God into a valley filled with human remains so old that there's nothing left but desiccated bones. God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?"

How often in my life have I asked, “Will I ever be able to overcome the things that hold me back, particularly the sense of shame that so often prods me to hold back or hide myself away? Will I ever allow myself more than that? Truly, can these dry bones live?” Just to hear God asking the question in my heart is such a help.

I appreciate how specific God’s response gets, too. At some point in Christian history the human body became a site of spiritual warfare, something we were told to be afraid of. But in Ezekiel, God shows none of those concerns. Answering his question to Ezekiel, God describes creating the very tendons and muscles which stretch across our bodies, the flesh which is a source of delight for us. It’s a reading that reminds me that not only my life but my body is a gift that God has given me.

God’s words also offer a fresh model for the church’s pastoral approach on matters of sex and sexuality. Rather than proceeding from a starting point of judgment or instruction, God’s first instinct is to bring life, to heal, and to nourish. What would our church look like if its first response to us, queer and straight, was to ask, “How can I help you to know greater life spiritually and physically?”

Jesus and the Canaanite Woman, Matt. 15: 21–28; Jesus and the Bleeding Woman, Mark 5:25–34

Among the many New Testament stories in which people ask Jesus to intercede for them, two speak to me deeply: the tale of woman with the horrible ailment that has left her bleeding for 12 years, and that of the Canaanite woman who begs Jesus to help her possessed daughter.

In part I find it inspiring that these women insist on what they need. The bleeding woman, who because of her illness almost certainly was not allowed to make physical contact with anyone, in her desperation still reaches for Jesus’ garment. Meanwhile, even after Jesus dismisses the Canaanite woman because she’s not an Israelite, she won’t stop asking him for help. I admire their courage and self-respect. In the face of their own actual needs, they refuse to be silent to suit custom or law.

It’s equally striking to see Jesus put aside both Jewish law and his own sense of purpose in the face of others’ expressed need and simply help them. Again, what a powerful testament to what church and discipleship can be.

Jesus Cooks the Disciples Breakfast, John 21: 9–14

After Jesus’ resurrection in the Gospel of John, the disciples come back from a night of fishing to find him fixing them breakfast on the shore.

Obviously, I adore the idea that Jesus loves a Sunday brunch! But I also find the gesture of making them breakfast to be a deeply physical and intimate act. You can't make breakfast for someone you don't really love. And the meal he offers is not simply nourishment. He offers a real feast for the disciples' senses—the crackle and charred cedar scent of the fire, the flavors of the fish. Like the reading from Ezekiel, it bespeaks the degree to which God appreciates and wants us to relish our physicality.

Sunday pancake breakfasts, Friday fish fries, or even just donuts and coffee after Mass are everyday parts of parish life. But when I sit with that image of Jesus making breakfast, I wonder whether those everyday moments are not also offering us an experience of church as a place where we are seen in our fullness and loved.

Image: Wikimedia Commons/Jacob wrestles with the Angel, Eugene Delacroix

About the author

Jim McDermott

Jim McDermott is a freelance screen and magazine writer living in New York. He writes a weekly Substack on pop culture and spirituality called Pop Culture Spirit Wow.

ALSO ON U.S. CATHOLIC

<p>People with long COVID feel the church has ...</p> <p>a month ago · 12 comments</p> <p>Those with chronic illness due to long COVID bear prophetic witness. But is ...</p>	<p>What does the church teach about ...</p> <p>2 months ago · 1 comment</p> <p>If protecting innocent life were the single highest moral value, then using ...</p>	<p>Grandparenting: The best parts of ...</p> <p>6 days ago · 1 comment</p> <p>Spending time with grandchildren gives you a chance to savor what you ...</p>	<p>For : Catl</p> <p>a mo</p> <p>If the advo med</p>
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------------------------------------------------