

«Yes, I'm Bisexual (but I still won't date you)»

Sermon by Julia Eckard, October 18, 2009

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When I was asked to give a talk about what it's like to be bisexual, I thought, "What am I going to talk about for 15 minutes?" The organizers said, "Just talk about what bisexuality is, and what does it mean, and what is it like to be one." And I thought, "Okay, how do I keep this to just 15 minutes AND refrain from telling embarrassing personal stories from high school to a room full of strangers?"

To prepare for this talk I had to think about when I was younger and wondering why I was attracted to both men and women, what do you call it, and what did it mean both to be and to the rest of the world. I wanted a name for it so I could understand it.

Our culture does that: we look for labels, names for things. Labels give us a sense of control over the labeled thing. On the TV show *Queer as Folk* the character Justin's mother had a hard time with him coming out as gay, and one of the other characters reassured her, saying, "At least you know that what's up with your kid isn't drugs or mental illness. It's penis." I paraphrased there: he didn't use the word "penis." My mother's going to be upset enough that I said "penis" three times in a church.

But labels give individuals a sense of control over their feelings and help us deal in social situations. If a person is a female heterosexual, I know in conversation I can ask if she's got a boyfriend. If a person is a gay man, I know that wearing something low-cut will have *no tactical effect* on him. If I know what your labels are and what they mean, I know how to deal with you.

So let's talk about definitions for a moment and what I mean when I say "bisexual."

Bisexual is a sexual orientation where a person is attracted to people of one's own sex and the opposite sex. It's one of three main classifications of sexual orientation, along with heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Some people don't like the word "bisexual" because it indicates there are only two genders, male and female and that's it. Even zoologist Dr. Alfred Kinsey, whose work revolutionized how we study human sexuality, wouldn't call people bisexual because its original scientific context was "hermaphroditic." Other words have been invented to more specifically describe who we are attracted to beyond heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual, including pansexual, polysexual, anthrosexual, omnisexual, heteroflexible, and homoflexible. The last two sound like yoga instructors. The word "bisexual" is one of the more well-known and the one I use to sexually identify.

There's no real consensus about why an individual develops a lesbian, gay or bisexual orientation. Most theorize it's a combination of genetic, hormonal and environmental influences.

This is not a new idea: In 1886, Richard von Krafft-Ebing suggested that bisexuality is the original state of human sexuality. Sigmund Freud later postulated that everyone is born bisexual and goes through a period of bisexuality, and as they develop people become monosexual with latent bisexual tendencies. Freud thought deep down, we're all bisexual and as adults we just deal with it in different ways.

From what the research indicates, people deal with it by having all kinds of sexual encounters. In 1948, Dr. Alfred Kinsey reported in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* that "46% of the male population had engaged in both heterosexual and homosexual activities, or 'reacted to' persons of both sexes in the course of their adult lives." A 2002 survey in the United States by the National Center for Health Statistics found 1.8 percent of American men and 2.8 percent of American women ages 18-44 considered themselves bisexual.

So if there is such a prevalence of people who've had sexual experiences with both the same sex and opposite sex, how do we know if we're bisexual or not? That comes down to sexual identity: how do we define ourselves? And that may be very different than how others would define us. One example is men who are on the "down low": a subculture of men, often black married men with families, who secretly have sex with other men. Society may define these men as bisexual or possibly homosexual, they sexually identify as heterosexual. Sexual identity is what we call ourselves.

It's one of the big questions people ask themselves as they grow up. It's part of the bigger, "Who am I?" question. The answers we come up with are affected by what labels are available to us in the culture at the time. The world has changed a lot, even since I was a teenager and trying to figure out just what the heck was going on with me.

I knew from a young age that I found both the male and female forms appealing. I always thought women were pretty. Not in a "wow, I wish I looked like that girl on the cover of Cosmo" but in a "wow, she's hot" way.

As I went through elementary school, I found that females -- while beautiful and the object of most of our art and literature-- had very strange ways of communicating. I saw that girls say one thing while meaning another, and usually it was meant as a trap from which there was no escape. Girls weren't trustworthy. I liked the way boys talked and dealt with each other. They said what they thought. If they didn't like you, they said so. Boys weren't complicated. I'd sit with the boys at lunch and watched them checking out girls and silently agree or disagree with their assessments. Only a couple of the guys saw me checking out the girls too. "Are you checking her out?" "Yeah." "Okay."

When I came of age, "bisexual" wasn't a widely known option for sexual identification. I was in junior high in the mid-1980s at the height of the AIDS crisis. There was "gay" and there was "straight," and a lot of people in the straight culture were having a hard time adjusting to having gays in it. When I was in high school, mainstream culture was not aware that Melissa Etheridge was a lesbian. Gay people were to be feared because of AIDS. Bisexuality wasn't even

mentioned except in the context that having multiple partners increased your chances of catching AIDS and dying horribly. This idea that someone could be attracted to both males and females wasn't something the general population was ready for. They were having a hard enough time dealing with the idea that shaking a gay man's hand wouldn't give you AIDS.

Two things happened in the early 1990s: one, a lot of gay and lesbian celebrities came out and put their sexuality in the mainstream culture, and two, I started college. Bisexuals commonly start to identify as bisexuals in their early- to mid-twenties, and like most people, college gave me a chance to explore my sexuality in ways that I hadn't been able to before. My first openly gay friend presented the idea to me that I might be bi. At that point I'd never even heard of it. But the more I learned about bisexuality and reflected on my feelings I realized that bisexual was the word that best described the feelings I was having.

Let me tell you, there is no better place to realize you're not heterosexual than at a small, private religiously-affiliated college in the South. On the surface, the school was conservative. However, the students were somewhat liberal, but ignorant of LGBT issues. If it was suspected a student was gay, we did what all good Southerners did: we had the good taste not to mention it and quietly applauded ourselves for being so "open" and "accepting." Despite the conservative attitudes that surrounded me, I managed to date. A lot. And have several relationships with women, including two serious ones.

But while at school I discovered one of the greatest advantages a bisexual person has is our ability to hide.

Rumors began flying that the president of my sorority was having a lesbian affair with her roommate. The president was engaged to be married at the time. It caused an uproar on the tiny campus. The religious leaders used it as an excuse to preach against immorality; the faculty used it to discuss attitudes towards homosexuality in society; the students used it as an excuse to gossip mercilessly about the sexual activities of two young women. To me it didn't matter whether the rumor was true or not, but I was secretly relieved that no one had "outed" me as bi. I laid low, no pun intended, dated guys and women who lived very far away from campus, and waited for the dust to settle.

Bisexuals have that tactical advantage in society; we blend in really well. Some people are good at sensing, detecting, or spotting non-heterosexuals. Some of us make it pretty easy; we're either really obvious about it, or we stand up in front of large groups and tell you. But we don't have to. We don't have to put it on our Facebook profiles or walk up to people and introduce myself with, "Hello, I'm Julia and I'm bisexual." But some people do. Younger generations are extremely comfortable with putting intensely personal information on the internet, and student groups like Gay-Straight Alliances provide support for people to be out of the closet in high school. The times are changing. It's way safer for us to be out, but the reality is that unless we tell you about our sexual orientation, you probably wouldn't ever know. When people see me holding hands with my partner, who looks a lot like a man, people guess that I'm heterosexual. If I'm holding hands with a woman, they assume I'm a lesbian. No one has ever assumed I'm bi. And

unless I tell you, you'd probably never figure it out.

Let's talk about the other common myths about bisexuals:

You have to be equally attracted to both males and females to be bisexual. Although we are attracted to both sexes, many bisexuals who identify as bisexual have a preference for one sex over the other. My partner and I are attracted to the same female type. I don't get mad when he looks at other women because the chances are I'm looking at the same one too.

Bisexuals are promiscuous or non-monogamous. Woody Allen once said, "Bisexuality doubles your chances of a date on a Saturday night." Statistically that's true, but just like heterosexuals and homosexuals, a person can be bi and be monogamous. Some think that bisexuals are promiscuous or more willing to have a threesome, an open relationship, be into swinging and/or polyamory. Studies have shown that bisexuals tend to have a higher sex drive and more sexual fantasies than the average person. You're welcome. However, we still have morals and ethics, some of them quite stringent against non-monogamous behaviors. Just because I like both men and women doesn't mean I'll jump into bed with anyone who rings the doorbell. Some ask me, "Well, doesn't that mean you're giving up a whole way of having sex? Aren't you giving up a big part of yourself by not having a relationship with a woman, too?" Yes, that's what being monogamous means, just like any other person does when they're monogamous. Bisexuals are the same as heterosexual or homosexuals in that regard.

Bisexuals are really homosexuals who haven't admitted it to themselves yet. or, a variant:

Bisexuals are questioning their sexuality and will eventually "become" something else. Or, the most common variant:

Bisexuals are just confused. For some this is true, however, for many it isn't. A 2006 study published in the Journal of Sex Research found that of youths who identified only as bisexual at earlier assessments, 60-70% continued to identify as bi while 30-40% identified as gay/lesbian later. So for some bisexual is a transitional identity on the way to something else. I'd like to point out that the study focused on young people, so if you meet an older bisexual person that their sexual identity may be pretty well founded. I'm thirty five, I've identified as bi over half my life, and even if there's a more accurate term for what I am, I'm probably still going to identify as bi. My advice is never assume that when people say they're bi what they mean is they're gay. Accept the person where she is today. I acknowledge that people are always changing and tomorrow I may identify as something else. But today I identify as bi, and it's appreciated when people accept that as my truth and refrain from making up what they think I really mean when I say, "I'm bi."

Bisexuals are sexually attracted to everyone. No, we definitely have types. We may be attracted to certain types of men and a completely different physique in women. As my transgendered partner has begun transitioning from male to female, I've had to deal with that reality. Typically, I like tall, muscular, broad shouldered dark-haired men, and petite blonde women. My wife is neither petite nor blond, so I've had to shift a little to make our relationship work. I'm happy to say at

after twelve years of marriage to my husband I've had the great fortune of falling in love with my wife.

Those are probably the most valuable things that being bi has taught me: it's taught me to avoid making assumptions, and to accept people where they are today, wherever that is, however that happens to manifest. Being bisexual reminds me that life is not an either/or proposition. There's more than heterosexual and homosexual. There's bisexual, and pansexual, and polysexual, and omnisexual, and heteroflexible and, and, and. There's plenty of room in the world for "and". And that is good news indeed.

Blessed be.

Heteroflexible and **Homoflexible** are two of the new buzzwords instead of bisexual.

Polysexuality – people who are attracted to more than one gender or sex but who don't identify as bisexual because the term implies only two (2) binary genders or sexes.

Pansexual (anthrosexuality or Omnisexuality) – a sexual orientation whose individuals see the potential for sexual attraction, romantic love, or sexual intimacy regardless of a person's gender identity or biological sex.