

We're continuing a series in which we're discussing topics that have two things in common. First, they're contested in our culture. Second, they involve our embodiedness as human beings.

This week and next week we're talking about transgender identities. And I want to begin by emphasizing the same thing we said last week: we're not just talking about a topic, we're talking about people with names and stories, hopes and dreams, and all too often, unbelievable hurt and pain, especially at the hands of the church.

Trans people are some of the most marginalized and vulnerable people in our society. According to one study, 57% have family members who won't speak to them, 50% have experienced harassment at school, 65% have suffered physical or sexual violence, and 69% have experienced homelessness.

They experience higher levels of anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges. On top of that, suicidality is also very high among trans people.

Another challenge about this conversation is that even though trans people have existed throughout history, it's only within the last few decades that it's become a national conversation. Which means there's just a lot we don't know. So we need to be humble and careful.

An even bigger challenge is the radioactive nature of this conversation. I'm an old Gen Xer. In all my decades on this planet, I have never seen a conversation generate so much division, bitterness, hatred, and fear. It seems like everybody's talking about it. But do you want to talk about it? I don't want to talk about it.

But we need to talk about it, because again, these are people. And that points us to one of the most important questions for this conversation: What does it mean to be a human being? How would you answer that question? Your answer is what's called your anthropology. Anthropos is the Greek word for human.

Even if you've never thought about it, you have an anthropology, because you have beliefs about what it means to be a human being. Friends, this is the reason we've been going so slow throughout this series.

In the first week we talked about our faith assumptions. We tend to believe in things like the personal dignity of every individual. And in justice, especially for the oppressed. But why? If human beings are just a bag of chemicals, what basis do we have for those beliefs?

We also talked about the body. The Bible has a unique proposal. That we are not just bodies only. Nor are we eternal souls with only a temporary body. We are embodied souls. And we can't tear those things apart without doing great damage to ourselves.

Third, what is identity? We use that word all the time. But what do we mean? Is our identity based on an essential design? Or is it something we construct on the basis of our internal desires? The Bible says yes. In other words, we are designed desirers. Unique individuals created in the image of God with a call to steward our desires in light of our design.

Full disclosure: I'm approaching this conversation as a Christian minister. But not only are there diverse views outside of Christianity. There are diverse views within Christianity. I want to interact some of this diversity. Let's ask three questions today. What is this about? What does Jesus say? What do we do with it?

**What is this about?** Remember last week we said that we all have a frame? One of the biggest challenges in the trans conversation is that there are so many frames. I want to talk about some of them. But first, there are a few terms we need to understand just to enter this conversation.

First, biological sex refers to the physical, biological, and anatomic dimensions of being male and female.

Second, gender refers to the psychological, social, and cultural aspects of being male or female. Sex and gender used to be synonymous. Now they're used to describe different aspects of human experience. But even so, they're not always used consistently, which creates a lot of confusion.

Within gender, there are other categories. One of them is gender role, which describes social expectations for how males and females are supposed to act in a given culture. Different cultures have different expectations. And even within a culture, expectations change. In our culture, pink is for girls, and blue is for boys. Duh. But 100 years ago, it was the exact opposite.

Gender identity describes "one's internal sense of self as male, female, both, or neither.

Transgender is an umbrella term for the different ways people experience and express their gender identity when it doesn't match their biological sex. This includes people who still identify within the male/female binary. But it also includes people who don't fit the binary. They may identify as genderqueer, gender-fluid, or some other nonbinary identity.

Lastly, gender dysphoria describes the distress that some people feel when their internal sense of self doesn't match their biological sex. Gender dysphoria can be anywhere from mild to severe. Andrea Long Chu is a transgender woman who described it like this:

"Dysphoria feels like being unable to get warm, no matter how many layers you put on. It feels like hunger without appetite... It feels like grieving. It feels like having nothing to grieve."

Now the question arises: What causes the transgender experience? There are many theories. Some people propose a biological cause. Others propose a psychological cause. And still other people see it as a sociological phenomenon.

Ultimately, though, we don't know. Which is huge. Because if we don't know what causes it, how can we support and care for people who experience it?

I think Preston Sprinkle - I've mentioned his books - has a great question that helps us think through this. Remember we said our approach to trans identities is guided by our anthropology. What does it mean to be a human being? In his book *Embodied*, Preston Sprinkle helps us think through this. Here's his question:

If someone experiences incongruence between their biological sex and their internal sense of self, which one determines who they are - and why?

In other words, we may not know what causes gender incongruence. But our anthropology can guide us as we seek to care for people who experience it. Throughout this series we've been talking about a Biblical anthropology. Or a Biblical frame for what it means to be a human being.

There are other frames. And the one that dominates head and shoulders above any other frame in Western culture is the authenticity frame. Here's one way of describing it from an author named Jonathan Grant:

“Modern authenticity encourages us to create our own beliefs and morality, the only rule being that they must resonate with who we feel we really are.

The worst thing we can do is to conform to some moral code that is imposed on us from outside—by society, our parents, the church, or whoever else.

It is deemed to be self-evident that any such imposition would undermine our unique identity.”

This frame dominates Western culture and much of our world. Can you take a guess at how it would answer Preston Sprinkle's question? If someone experiences incongruence between their sex and their internal sense of self, which one determines who they are? Authenticity says your internal sense of self wins hands down. There's no contest.

One of the best recent pictures of this is in the movie *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. It's about a Chinese immigrant family who don't just live in a meaningless universe. The setting for the movie is a meaningless multiverse. Throughout the film, different characters keep saying, “Nothing matters.” In a meaningless multiverse, nothing matters.

Therefore, the husband Waymond says, “The only thing I do know is that we have to be kind. Please, be kind.” So there's a big battle scene at the end, where the wife Evelyn is fighting all these meanies. But Waymond says, “Fight them with kindness.” And she does.

So instead of physically crushing them, she liberates them into fulfilling their deepest desires. She helps one guy crack his back. She maneuvers two others into a kiss. She even helps another person reengage some sexual fantasies. The message is that in a meaningless world, kindness means liberating others to be their authentic selves. Whatever's in your heart, that's the real you.

This is a powerful frame. And I think it's impossible to deny its impact on the trans conversation. That said, I think it's really important that we don't turn authenticity into a bogeyman and say, “That's the culture, and the culture is bad, so we reject it.”

First, like we said, trans people have existed for centuries throughout the world. We can't just say this is only happening because of our cultural emphasis on authenticity. Second, our culture's emphasis on authenticity and honoring our internal sense of self actually comes from Christianity and its influence on the world.

But there's a big difference between honoring our individual sense of self and enthroning it. And in our culture, we have enthroned it. In our culture, it's almost impossible to resist this frame that says whoever you feel yourself to be on the inside, that's who you really are. And that leads to our next point.

**What does Jesus say?** There really is no place in the Bible that directly speaks to the transgender experience. But this passage gets some attention. When some religious leaders ask Jesus about divorce, he says,

“Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'?”

Jesus is quoting Genesis 1-2, which talks about God's creation of human beings in the image of God as male and female. It appears that Jesus is affirming the male/female binary as normative for human experience.

However, remember last week we talked about Christians with a high view of Scripture? A high view of Scripture means you believe all of the Bible is God's word, and you want to submit to its authority. Christians with a high view of Scripture believe different things about what Jesus is saying here. What are the differences?

Mark Yarhouse is a highly regarded Christian scholar on gender and sexuality. He's written several very helpful books. He says there are three lenses or frames through which Christians see the transgender experience. Here they are:

First, what he calls the "integrity" frame "tends to respond to gender identity with reference to the integrity or sacred-ness of sex differences established by God at creation. Cross-sex identification is often framed as a moral concern."

Second, the disability frame says "Transgender experiences generally reflect variations that occur in nature. Gender incongruity is a non-normative, non-moral reality deserving of compassion. Tends to emphasize the effects of the fall on creation, including sex and gender."

Third, the diversity frame says "Transgender identities reflect variations of gender experiences that should be neither condemned nor viewed as "less than," but rather be celebrated."

Each of these frames takes Scripture seriously, but they come to different conclusions. The integrity frame and the disability frame both tend to see sex difference as part of God's normative vision for humanity. For 1,960 years, this has been the historic Christian understanding of Genesis 1-2 and of Jesus here in Matthew 19.

However, over the past 50 years or so, other Christians have come to different conclusions. Megan DeFranza is a counselor and writer. Along with other scholars, she acknowledges the many binaries we see in Genesis 1: light and darkness, land and sea, male and female.

But then she correctly points out that Genesis 1 "does not list other forms regularly seen in creation: rivers, amphibians, dusk, dawn. Few would argue that these 'hybrids' are a result of the Fall, or that they stray from God's creational intent."

It's a good point. Just because Genesis 1 doesn't talk about frogs, or rivers, or dusk, or transgender people, doesn't mean they aren't wonderful parts of God's creation and worthy of celebration. Do you feel the force of this?

Megan DeFranza also points to Jesus' words here in Matthew 19: "There are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom."

A eunuch could refer to someone who was born with missing or ambiguous genitalia. It's very likely that Jesus is talking about what we call intersex people, or DSD (differences of sex development). Anywhere from 0.022% to 1.7% of people are born with atypical features in their sex chromosomes, reproductive organs, anatomical sex, or any combination of those three. There are at least 16 different conditions that classify as intersex.

Megan DeFranza says Jesus doesn't talk about them as a result of the fall or as being in need of healing. Instead, Jesus affirms them as shining examples of people living for the kingdom of

God. In fact, many Christians within the diversity frame say that because Jesus mentions intersex people, therefore he affirms the goodness of gender variance and a diversity of transgender identities.

They might be right. This is a new conversation for everybody. I want to be open and cautious. But I'm not yet convinced, for a few reasons.

First, eunuchs in the ancient world - whether intersex or castrated - were still considered biological males. Jesus isn't talking about their gender identity. He's talking about their body.

Second, the larger context here is the disciples' comment that if marriage is so serious, maybe it's better not to get married. Jesus' main point is, "Yes. In fact, some people might choose to forsake marriage and children - in other words, might choose to live as a eunuch - for the sake of the kingdom." His main point is not about gender identity, but singleness and celibacy.

Third, differences of sex development (or DSD) is different from the transgender experience. Many trans people find great comfort in the reality of DSD. But remember in our culture we make a distinction between biological sex and gender identity, which is your internal sense of self. Often, people merge these two things together and basically say, "because of intersex, therefore transgender."

However, Accord Alliance is an organization devoted to the care of people and their families affected by DSD. On their website is an FAQ, and one of the questions is: "Does having DSD make someone transgender?"

"No. "Transgender" means a person feels the gender assigned to him or her at birth was not the right one. DSD is about atypical development of a person's body, not about how a person feels about herself or himself.

Most people with DSD are not transgender, and most transgender people have no identifiable DSD."

This doesn't invalidate the experience of transgender people. But I do think we need to be careful about making too quick a jump from DSD to the transgender experience. They're two different things.

All that to say, as best I can tell, I see no reason to doubt that Jesus is affirming the male/female sex binary as normative for human experience. And yes, I recognize that in our culture's frame, that sounds incredibly transphobic. And that leads to our last point.

**What do we do with it?** As we mentioned, our culture says your internal sense of self determines who you are. And listen, if there is no God and there's nothing outside of this world, then I would agree.

But in the Biblical frame, we are not just bodies only, which is what a purely secular frame would say. Nor are we eternal souls with only a temporary body, which is what most religions and most spiritual-but-not-religious people would say. In the Biblical frame, we are embodied souls. Both our internal sense of self and our bodies matter.

So it's precisely because the Bible has such a high view of the body, and precisely because Jesus affirms the goodness of being created male and female, that I would say our body determines who we are. But the gospel is even more amazing and counter-cultural than that. Our body doesn't just show us who we are. Our body shows us whose we are.

Remember, Jesus says we're created in the image of God, male and female. Your body is a sacred site, a thin place, where spiritual and physical reality come so close that they overlap. When Jesus talks about the one-fleshness of male and female coming together, that's a sign that we were created for spousal union with God.

This is actually a very ancient way of seeing the world. It says when you look at a lion or an eagle, you're right to see royalty because there's a real King on the throne of the universe. Or when a man and a woman close the doors to make love, you're right to see something sacred and intimate, because those closed doors are a sign pointing to the sacred intimacy woven into the heart of the universe.

The ancient way of seeing the world says, "Everything means everything." But our modern way deconstructs it all and says, "Nothing means anything." Like the movie says, "Nothing matters."

If that's the case, then physical matter, including your body, is a tool, a piece of flesh for you to use however you think best. It has no inherent meaning. In that frame it makes perfect sense to say sex is assigned at birth. Because in that frame, not just gender but even sex has no meaning. It's an arbitrary category assigned by human beings.

But in the ancient, Biblical way of seeing the world, everything means everything, especially your body. Your body holds a significance, and a meaning, and a reality that points far beyond itself to the God who created it for himself. Or we could say it like this. Your sex is not assigned by humans. Your sex is a sign of God.

There's a wonderful place in the *Chronicles of Narnia* where two children, a prince, and a marsh-wiggle named Puddleglum get trapped in an underground world by an evil witch who wants to enslave them. They keep talking about Narnia, the Overworld they come from.

But the witch wants to disenchant them of such foolishness. She says, "Tell me about this overworld." The prince says, "You see this lamp? It's round and yellow and gives light. In our world, the sun is like this lamp, only much bigger. Or, do you like cats? In our world, Aslan is like this cat, only he's much bigger and he's the king of everything."

The witch laughs at him and says, "You see what you're doing? You've seen lamps, so you imagine a bigger lamp and call it the sun. You've seen cats, so you imagine a bigger cat and call him your king. You can put nothing into your make-believe without copying it from this world of mine, which is the only world. There is no Narnia, no Overworld, no sky, no sun, no Aslan."

But then Puddleglum, the marsh-wiggle, gets really mad and says, "Suppose we have only made up all those things. Then all I can say is the made-up things seem a good deal more important than this black pit of a kingdom of yours. We're just babies making up a game, if you're right. But four babies playing a game can make a play-world which licks your real world hollow. That's why I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia."

Listen, maybe this world is the only world. If that's the case, then what we do with our body literally doesn't matter. But the gospel says there is a world beyond this world, and there really is a King who created us for himself. And everything in this world is whispering his name, telling his story, and singing of his love, including your body.

Not only that, this King Jesus came to earth and took a body, became a human, died on a cross, and rose physically from the dead, to redeem and restore our bodies. Nothing is more affirming of both your internal sense of self and your body than the crucified body and physical resurrection of Jesus Christ.

If that's the case, then what we do with our body matters tremendously. Preston Sprinkle puts it like this:

“Part of discipleship is learning to embrace our bodies as important aspects of our identity, learning to see them as gifts from God and part of how we bear his image in the world.”

Discipleship involves embracing our bodies and seeing them as gifts. There are a lot of people whose bodies don't feel like a gift, but an unbearable burden.

Next week, we're going to explore some of the questions all of this raises. How do we support and care for people who experience incongruence between their body and their internal sense of self? If that describes you, how should you respond? What about pronouns? What about bathrooms? What about all the other things we fight about?

The questions matter because our bodies matter. So does our internal sense of self. So does our lived experience. But this world is not the way it's supposed to be. We experience that every day in our own bodies. Our trans friends experience it at an even greater level. So let's keep showing up for each other so we can learn how best to love each other.