


# Holy families

Erica Lea-Simka

The Holy Family is a Queer family, and Queer families are holy families—not because Queer families are perfect but because our very existence communicates radical belonging.<sup>1</sup> One of the most powerful magnetic forces in society is the need to belong. My family belongs in Mennonite circles, Jewish circles, Queer circles, and more—all at the same time. With the power of belonging comes also the power of othering. Queer families are relatively common as more people than ever are out.<sup>2</sup> We are prophetic, truth-telling witnesses to the upside-down *kin-dom*.

## Holy families in the Gospels

In Matthew 1, most commonly read during Advent, the annual anticipation of a new reality birthed from Jesus's life, Joseph receives a divine

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message telling him: “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”<sup>3</sup>

By naming Jesus, Joseph becomes his adopted father, claiming Jesus as his kin. Jesus becomes socially legitimate by Joseph claiming him and is messianically legitimate by being from the line of David.<sup>4</sup> However, as Matthew includes some women in the listing of Jesus's genealogy and writes that Mary is pregnant “by the Holy Spirit,” he signals that this Jesus and this

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1 Parts of this essay are inspired by a sermon I preached at Albuquerque Mennonite Church December 18, 2022, “A Very Spock Nativity.” By *queer* I mean non-conforming, unexpected, counter to social norms, especially related to people with gender and sexuality minority identities.

2 See Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. LGBT Identification Steady at 7.2%,” *Gallup*, February 22, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/470708/lgbt-identification-steady.aspx>.

3 Matthew 1:20b–21 (NRSV).

4 Matthew 1:1–17.

family are doing things differently. “Doing things differently” is a simple definition of *queerness*.

Scholar Warren Carter writes this: “I read Matthew’s gospel as a counternarrative. It is a work of resistance, written for a largely Jewish religious group. It ‘stands and/or speaks over against’ the status quo dominated by Roman imperial power and [religious] control. It resists these cultural structures.”<sup>5</sup>



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It is precisely in Jesus’s alternative empire that men like Joseph are celebrated. Joseph acts honorably because of his faith, not in spite of it. He lives into what scholar Amy-Jill Levine calls

“higher righteousness.”<sup>6</sup> She also identifies the women in the genealogy as having something in common: they lived with higher righteousness too because so much was working against them, yet they had the courage to do the surprisingly right thing. Perhaps the genealogy signals where Joseph is coming from with his decision to marry Mary and raise Jesus. Joseph comes from a long line of righteous courage.

Amy-Jill Levine also says this specifically about Joseph: “Like the unconventional figures in the genealogy, he does what he considers proper even though his action is neither legally necessary nor socially expected.”<sup>7</sup> In my mind this makes Joseph Queer—non-conforming, unexpected, counter to social norms. A public model of masculinity in his day is Herod, with his cruel domination, yet Joseph chooses gentleness and service instead.

When we recognize the nonconformity of Jesus’s origin story and Joseph’s uncommon courage, we are more likely to recognize the legitimacy of other people and parents and families who are nonconforming as part of God’s larger family, too. When we recognize the legitimacy and holiness in nonconformity, we are more likely to act for justice, resisting the toxic and dangerous heteropatriarchy that keeps us all under its oppressive thumb.

5 *The Queer Bible Commentary*, edited by Deryn Guest et al (London: SCM, 2015), 491.

6 *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed., edited by Carol Newsom, Sharon Ringe, and Jacqueline Lapsley (Louisville: WJK, 2012), 340.

7 *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 340.

Matthew's early listeners then and readers today are invited to see the Gospel of Matthew, literally from the beginning, as a counternarrative, an upside-down making reality that differs from the contemporary, mainstream, empire-oriented experience. Matthew sets the tone for the Gospel from the beginning and sustains this theme of unexpected non-conformity through to the end.

As Jesus is executed, Matthew describes darkness at noon and then the temple curtain torn vertically. Jesus is buried in a rich man's tomb and then returns to life. This Jesus and his people—family, disciples, and otherwise—are not like everyone else.

Queer Theologian Thomas Bohache writes, "Queer readers strike a balancing act between the straight world, which colonizes our daily lives, and our own queer imaginings, in which we are free to dream of the world as it should be, which is precisely what Matthew's community did as they came together to read or listen to stories of Jesus' alternative empire."<sup>8</sup>

Each of the four canonical Gospels depict Jesus as exceptionally nonconforming. Unique to the Gospel of John is the story of Jesus on the cross bringing together his mother and the "disciple whom he loved," creating a family of choice in chapter 19. Jesus reaffirms Mary and the disciple's belongingness to each other. Queer theologian Robert E. Goss compares this scene with gay men dying during the AIDS crisis. Many of these men were cast out of their families of origin, so family of choice was an absolute lifeline.<sup>9</sup> Goss writes, "The Beloved Disciple and the mother of Jesus create a new family of choice, accepting responsibility for continuing the ministry of Jesus' coming out in the moment of death. Here in the last moments of his life, Jesus establishes a family of choice, based on his homoerotic relationship with the Beloved Disciple. Many mainline and fundamentalist Christian churches play the role of the Romans, crucifying Christ, and attempt to destroy [queer] families of choice."<sup>10</sup>

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8 *Queer Bible Commentary*, 492.


9 *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, edited by Robert Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 212–14.

10 *Queer Bible Commentary*, 562–63.

## Holy families today

Today, the church local and global is invited to be family of choice in the Cosmic Christ family rather than perpetuating hostility against holy families of any variety. All people, especially Christians, are invited to become supporters as surrogate aunts and grandfathers, siblings and children, to one another. Any family that belongs to God's family is to be welcomed within the church family.

Forming familial bonds by simply saying so, claiming one another, was enough for Jesus and the Holy Family from beginning to end and should



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be enough for all Christians. When people say they belong together, others are not to question the commitment but to respect this truthful reality. To belong is sacred, and to be claimed is divine.

Unfortunately, most Queer people and families do not experience belongingness in the church, especially in local congregations that are charged with being family to those who need a sibling, a parent, or a faith partner. Christians are invited to approach the Holy Family with wonder—wonder at the ever-expanding possibilities of family and belonging. So it is with Queer families in the contemporary church.

To be Queer is both to question conformity and exist in nonconformity. Are not Christians exhorted to avoid conforming to the pattern of this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds?<sup>11</sup> As Queer families push the church's imagination of family and belonging, everyone is invited to what Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney calls "sanctified imagination."<sup>12</sup>

Rather than perpetuating a WASP-y Standard North American Family idealized model of families, the Bible itself recognizes and in some cases elevates a much larger range of family than contemporary American mainstream imagination.<sup>13</sup> Contemporary faith communities that call

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11 See Romans 12:2.

12 Wil Gafney, "Of God, Men, and Kings, *Womanists Wading in the Word*, February 6, 2018, [www.wilgafney.com/2018/02/06/of-god-men-and-kings/](http://www.wilgafney.com/2018/02/06/of-god-men-and-kings/).

13 WASP stands for White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. Feminist historian Stephanie Coontz discusses the term *Standard North American Family* at length in her work—referring

themselves Christian have a divine imperative to enthusiastically welcome diverse types of families.

Diversity comes in the form of gender configuration (adults of any gender combination), orientation configuration (adults of any sexual orientation combination), generational configuration (grandparents raising grandchildren, multi-generational households, etc.), various abilities and disabilities, families that include children of any age or no children, and multi-racial and intercultural families. Family is a particular group of individuals who are committed to doing life together—whatever life looks like and whatever family looks like.

## Conclusion

In the Gospels, New Testament epistles, and throughout history, Christians have been encouraged to see the local and cosmic faith community as a type of family, especially during times of trouble. Lord knows we live in a troubling time, which is all the more reason for receiving the wisdom of previously suppressed voices and lives.

Love, commitment, courage, and humility make a family—whether a nuclear family or kin-dom family. While this runs counter to the logic that egg plus sperm equals child and therefore the providers of those parts are parents, the logic that love makes a family is sound in experience and in practice, not least of which is Joseph’s love for Mary and Jesus, Jesus’s love for the Beloved Disciple, and the Beloved Disciple’s commitment to Mary.

The church is invited to say yes to love, yes to non-conformity, and yes to participation in the liberating work inspired by Jesus who lives on in us, especially through our courage to resist injustice and to respond to vulnerable people. What a witness to rigid empire the church could be if we celebrate holy families alongside the Holy Family.

## About the author

Erica Lea-Simka is a Christian minister with over ten years of experience serving as a missionary and pastor. She has served primarily Baptist congregations in Wyoming, Texas, North Carolina, and Washington, DC. She currently serves as pastor of Albuquerque Mennonite Church in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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to one man and one woman, married with children, sharing one household and following normative North American gender roles.