

Affirmation

“And on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch”

Reflection 30 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

The transcript of a sermon preached here at the Stamford Church of Christ April 26, 2015 and still available on our website under that date.

This morning we pick up on our series of talks on “A New World in the Morning,” in recognition that change is happening all around us; that more and more people when asked to state their religious affiliation are choosing “None – none of the above” and this is especially true of those under 30; and that more and more young people see the church as judgmental, hypocritical, out of touch and politicized.

Specifically they see the church as anti-gay. And more and more of them will not go to churches that are anti-gay. Some of them are LGBT. Many, many others have friends who are LGBT; that is, they have friends, family, colleagues and co-workers who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. And they know their stories, stories of prejudice and discrimination, of misunderstanding and misrepresentation, of shaming, ridicule and rejection. They know that people have been killed in our nation simply for being gay. They know that many gay people, feeling the rejection of family and friends and church, have taken their own lives. They know the suffering of being LGBT. Increasingly we all know the suffering.

And so this morning I want to talk about this and I want us to open up our hearts and minds to consider what is kind and loving and compassionate and caring, and to consider – with such time as we have – what Scripture really says about this. And as I thought about this I began to hear a resonance from Scripture, a word from God, a sense that the early church had been here too. And I started thinking about a very familiar text in Scripture, Acts 8:26-35, and it became my text this morning.

This is the story. An early church leader named Philip is leaving the region of Samaria. He is directed by an angel of the Lord toward the desert road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza. “So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch,” sitting in a chariot reading, it turns out, a scroll of Isaiah the prophet. And something tells Philip – he realizes it to be the Spirit of God – to go to the chariot and “Stay near it.” So Philip listens as the man reads Isaiah. People back then always read out loud so medieval cloisters, for instance, were not the still, silent places of our imagination. In addition to the laundry hanging out, there was always the steady hum of people reading to themselves out loud.

Anyway, Philip hears the eunuch and asks him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” which leads the eunuch to reply, “How can I unless someone explains it to me?” And he invites Philip to come up beside him and sit. So, in verse 35, Philip began with the very passage the man was reading, which turned out to be Isaiah 53, the Song of the Suffering Servant, and told him the good news about Jesus – how he was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, and how his punishment brought us peace and his wounds healed us. And they came to some water, and Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.

But who was this man? This Ethiopian? He was, we are told, an important official in the service of Candace, queen of Ethiopia, “in charge of all the treasury.” Ethiopia then was that region along the upper Nile from Aswan to Khartoum, much of it in The Sudan today. So the Ethiopian was black. Luke’s audience would have been fascinated with this man because he was, to them, so exotic! Homer’s *Odyssey* speaks of “far-off Ethiopians the furthestmost of men” (1:22-23). They come from the edge of the world. Their blackness is a source of wonder and astonishment and perhaps not a little fear.

This man was also a eunuch, that is, he was castrated, as was typical of high officials in the court of the queen for her security. That means he was probably not a Jew or a proselyte. According to the Torah (Leviticus 21:20; Deuteronomy 23:1), as a eunuch, he could not enter “the assembly of the Lord.” So here he was, having “gone to Jerusalem to worship,” traveling hundreds of miles across deserts, in blistering heat, by “covered wagon” without shock-absorbers. Let that sink in. It’s the reason Philip keeps up with him on foot. But he travels all that way only to stand on the fringe of temple worship, as an outsider, an excluded one, looking in. He cannot enter “the assembly of the Lord.” And now he’s reading Isaiah 53. Of all texts, he’s reading Isaiah 53.

Now consider this text, and see it again. Maybe see it for the first time (as Jack Miles in his book *Christ* once led me to see it). An Ethiopian eunuch had been on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. And now the passage of scripture he is reading is this [Listen closely. Hear it as he heard it.]: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.” Can you hear what he heard?

Listen carefully to this man’s question, this eunuch’s question, this castrated man’s question, this man who cannot enter the assembly of the Lord, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” His own castration still scars his soul as it mars his body. Was he castrated when he was just a lamb? Did he open his mouth before his shearer? In his humiliation was he deprived of justice? And who can speak of his descendants? Hadn’t he, in fact, been pierced for the transgressions of others, crushed for the iniquities of others, the sexual fears of others? So when he asks (in what tone of voice?), “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about?” whom does he have in mind? “Tell me, please, is he talking . . . about me?”

And so this eunuch sees that there is one who understands, one who knows what he’s experienced, one who fully identifies with him. And now he need feel humiliated no more. So in our time we consider our brothers and sisters who are LGBT, who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. They’re not eunuchs, but for a long time they’ve not been able to enter “the assembly of the Lord,” at least not openly in most places.

Here’s some of my own journey on all this. I grew up straight. Gave it no thought. Never chose it. It just was. I heard all the gay-bashing anyone growing up in the 60s and especially the 70s heard. As I studied Medieval History at NYU I learned of the tragic and horrifying record of the historical church against same-sex behavior. And as I thought and listened and learned, I realized that most gay people could no more be straight than I could be gay. Some argue otherwise; the evidence does not support them. And so I came to understand what a terrifying time in life it must be when “Jim” in his adolescence walks down a High School hallway and realizes he likes

“Jack” and not “Jill.” As a father I knew that I would unconditionally love my sons whether they were gay or straight. And as I started to look at Scripture again I began to see that we were using Scripture selectively to condemn certain behaviors and not others. I came to see that when we pick and choose from the same texts precepts we will use to oppress or exclude certain people while disregarding precepts of equal seriousness directed at other people, it is not exactly Scripture that is driving us. It is culture that drives homophobia, not Scripture. Otherwise we would take a text like 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and exclude from our assemblies slanderers and greedy people.

And yet doesn't Scripture still condemn homosexuality? So I looked more closely: at Genesis 19 and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah; at the prohibitions in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13; at Romans 1:26-27 and its distinction between natural and unnatural; and at the list of sins in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. Here's the first problem. “Homosexuality” is a pretty modern construct. The word shows up for the first time in 1869. It's a nineteenth-century umbrella term that covers all conceivable forms of same-sex behavior and desires. Prior to then, the focus was on specific same-sex behaviors. Society disapproved of certain kinds of behavior but it had no class of people called homosexuals.

So what Scripture condemns, and rightly so, are certain same-sex practices prevalent in those times – promiscuity, pederasty when an older man would initiate a boy into his manhood including sexually, prostitution, power-down relations, that is, exploitative relations, for instance, between masters and slaves, between older and younger, and between victor and vanquished on a battlefield, as well as behaviors that were just lustful or practiced in pagan cultic circles. Scripture rightly condemns all this, as we would and should. Of course we condemn it for both gays and straights.

What Scripture does not condemn, what it does not address, are life-long, monogamous, mutual and loving gay relationships. Such relationships do not seem to have existed back then, or were kept very, very private. The historical record is essentially silent. Again some claim otherwise, but on closer look their evidence breaks down which is not surprising; it was a decidedly hierarchical, top-down society. Such relationships were, as far as I can tell, beyond the horizon of possible meanings for Biblical writers and their audience.

It should not surprise us that on some things people 2000 or 3000 years ago thought in very different ways than we do. There was, for instance, no real sense of sexual orientation. Pretty much everyone supposed that we were all the same except that some badly misbehaved by becoming so lustful that they sought titillation in same-sex behaviors. And then there was this one other matter. It was a hyper-masculinized culture. So the great shame of same-sex behavior in the ancient world was that one of the men was acting like or being treated “like a woman.” Nothing could be more shameful than a man taking on, or being forced to take on, the passive feminine role. It was this that was “against nature.” Likewise it was “against nature” for a woman to take on the active role, to act “like a man.” But since the concerns of society were almost entirely masculine, this comes up less often. In any case, it's all wrapped up in premises very different from ours today.

O.K., you still want reassurance on this. Do your homework. ☺ When you go back to the texts in question, in brief this is what you will find. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 is about rape; it's about man's inhospitality and inhumanity to man. Leviticus 18:22 ("Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable") and 20:13 are about the need for procreation and for cultic purity. The same section of Scripture prohibits planting different kinds of seeds in the same field (19:19), wearing garments with mixed yarn (19:19), and tattoos (19:28). It also demands that anyone who curses his father or mother be put to death (20:9). In Romans 1:26-27 what's "against nature" is a man ever taking on the sexual role of a woman, or vice-versa. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 some word studies come into play, but most scholars assume that the references are to male softness (which was very shameful) and to exploitative same-sex behavior, possibly pederasty or prostitution or sexual slavery. None of these texts, however they may be mistranslated in some English versions, refer to "homosexuality in general." We only started thinking that way 150 years ago. And none of them refer to life-long, monogamous, mutual and loving gay relationships.

In the last book I read on this I wrote on the back page, "O.K. The truth is in. All that's left is a clean-up operation against prejudice and discrimination." But of course that's what makes this so challenging. On race, gender and sexual orientation prejudice still runs deeply. Well, that book was written in 2013. But then I went back and scanned a book I'd read in 1998. It said all the same things, maybe even better. The truth has been in for a long time.

The issue is not "homosexuality in general." The issue is between responsible and irresponsible behavior. It's between loving and exploitative relationships. It's between promiscuity and fidelity. It's between living with integrity and not living with integrity. As it is with straight people. And it's between what's kind and loving and caring and compassionate and what's not. It's between what enlarges circles of care and compassion and what keeps them small.

And so I go back to our text this morning and the God who knows what it's like for many to be appalled by him, who knows what it's like to grow up as a tender shoot but be despised and rejected, who knows what it's like to be oppressed and afflicted yet to not open your mouth, who knows what it's like to be led like a lamb to the slaughter, and who knows what it's like to in humiliation be deprived of justice. "Please, sir, tell me, who is the prophet talking about? Who is it who knows me so well?"

And so the call comes to all the oppressed and afflicted of the world; to all who have been passed by on the other side; to all who have been humiliated by society often for society's own transgressions, the sexual fears of others; to all who have been rejected on the basis of birth or what might have happened to them when they were lambs: There is one who was led like a sheep to the slaughter, like you. There is one who in his humiliation was deprived of justice, like you. There is one who was pierced for the transgressions and fears of others, like you.

May we all affirm that the God we worship is always inspiring expanded circles of care and compassion.

– Dale Pauls