

## Let Us Go On Our Way, Rejoicing

Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

I love this story from Acts. It's the story about how the Ethiopian Christian church got started, according to that church's tradition. I bet it's a story from our scripture that you have only rarely or perhaps never heard, probably because it tells us that that church was started by a queer black man.

So let's follow the story: First, it's important to understand what both our Old and New Testament scripture mean by the word "eunuch." The answer is, this is an ambiguous term. Now, the word certainly did refer to men who had been castrated. In ancient Israel and the surrounding area, priests of some religions, magicians, and court officials who served queens were sometimes castrated men. But the word "eunuch" seems to have also been used more broadly. In ancient Israel, sexual reproduction was considered very important, as genetic lines were passed down that way. You may know several stories in the Old Testament where people, especially women, are praised for having many children or where they grieve and are ostracized for not having children. Many scholars believe that the Hebrew word "eunuch" used in our passage from Isaiah and throughout a lot of the Old Testament may refer to any person who could not have children—men or women.

In the book of Matthew chapter 19:12, Jesus offers a very vague statement about eunuchs, saying: "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can." Many scholars suggest that when Jesus mentions those who are eunuchs from birth, he is referring to intersex people and/or people experiencing gender dysphoria. A eunuch who has been made so by others may refer to castrated

people, but can also refer to those who have willingly undergone transition surgery. Those who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of God may be those who are choosing to be celibate, but can also refer to anyone who has chosen to transition and serve God. So Jesus seems to imply that the word eunuch is used somewhat broadly. Womanist Biblical scholar Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney says, therefore, “Eunuchs can then be seen as those who do not fit into our neatly constructed gender paradigms as neatly as we might wish....[they are] social and sexual outsiders whether born or made.” It’s an ambiguous term, used to cover many body types and genders. This is why many queer theorists regard eunuchs in the Bible as gender queer.

Second, it’s important to understand that Jewish culture excluded eunuchs and many foreigners from worship, despite our Old Testament reading for today. Indeed, our Old Testament reading was written in response to religious traditions that the prophet found problematic. The reason for this exclusion is partly because of Jewish views of reproduction, but it was also to exclude priests of other religions who they were afraid might defile their religious rituals. This same sort of thing still happens today, as we are so very sad to know. Our LGBTQ+ siblings are often excluded from churches, told that they are not worthy. Refugees, immigrants, people of color are often made to feel uncomfortable in our churches and are flat out excluded from many parts of our society. We still have many of the problems that they had in ancient Israel.

So in our New Testament story, we have a black foreigner who the writer of Acts does not name. I can’t help but wonder if the writer thought his name was unimportant, or if he couldn’t be sure what it was. And, again, in the face of our Old Testament lesson, I find this lack of a name to be disturbing—a way that our church has tried, somewhat, to erase or exclude this person. So let’s hang on to this as we think through this story.

Now, despite the fact that our hero was prohibited from worshipping in the temple, they had just come from there at the

beginning of our story and was now reading scripture from the book of Isaiah. As Rev. Emily MD Scott notes, they clearly had a deep longing for God and spiritual sustenance.

That longing and love for God seems to be so strong that God then sends them one of the disciples to teach them and guide them. And their reaction to the disciple is pretty sassy. Philip asks, do you understand what you're reading, and they reply, well how can I unless I have a teacher? This is awesome! Philip seems to be talking down to them, implying that they can't understand what their reading. How often do we do this in our own culture—talking down to immigrants, foreigners, people of color, assuming that they can't quite understand our language when, in many cases, it's our own rules and social structures that might prevent that understanding in the first place. But the hero of our story won't put up with that. They call Philip out, basically saying, look, your temple and culture exclude me, so how can I fully understand scripture? No one will teach me!

To Philip's credit, when he's called out, he doesn't get angry and he doesn't continue to exclude. He accepts this chastisement, sits down, and tells our hero about Jesus. But again, our hero's longing for spirituality leads them to be more challenging. Upon hearing about how people become Christian, they say, "Well, there's water here. There is nothing to prevent me from being baptized." Nothing, indeed. And so our black, queer person is baptized on the spot by Philip, becoming one of the first Christians. And once this happens, Philip is magically whisked away by God, having done what he was called to do, and the eunuch goes on his way, rejoicing.

So I love this story because it is a story of the profound faith of a strong-willed queer black person who refuses to give up on faith, no matter what the world tells them about who they are. And God seems to reward that faith and sassiness not only with the baptism that they so powerfully desire, but with a mission to found the Christian church in northern Africa. Despite the fact that our

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scripture does not tell us this person's name, their story is still remembered and told, sharing a message that is critical to us still today: We must pursue justice by including the foreigner and the gender queer.

For thus says the Lord GOD,  
    who gathers the outcasts of Israel,  
I will gather others to them  
    besides those already gathered.

Like Philip, when we're called out on our exclusive practices or when we talk down to others, we need to listen and accept our chastisement, and then joyfully welcome those that we have excluded in.

And, like the hero of our story, we must remember this: We are right to yearn for our God and for spiritual sustenance. Know that God yearns back for you and welcomes you. There is nothing that prevents you from being part of this community of faith. For you are loved fully and totally for who you are. So let us all go forth, rejoicing, knowing that we are so welcomed, accepted, and loved!  
Amen.