

Homily – Our Journey with the Bible

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Well this morning I did something I haven't done before. I deviated from the normal Scripture readings. Dcn. Susan was scheduled to preach but Friday evening she threw the ball over the wall to me since she has had a hellish week. Her brother's bladder cancer has metastasized and he is in a lot of pain. Dcn. Susan didn't have time to prepare a sermon and didn't have the energy to stand up front. I am grateful that she is here today so that we can all give her hugs and send her many prayers. At our best that is what we do. We walk with each other, and over the last eleven years there are many times that Dcn. Susan has lifted us up, and now can do the same for her.

Be that as it may, I had a last minute opportunity for me to figure out what message I wanted to reshare with you. Some of you will have heard this message about the Ethiopian eunuch and for some of you it will be brand new. So, let's do a deeper dive into the good news we have about God as it is revealed to us in today's reading from the New Testament book of Acts.

"Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury."

Let me pause in the reading for a moment to examine the term "eunuch".

Many of us equate the term "eunuch" to be the same thing that happens to our male pets when we want to ensure they will not reproduce. And, that is certainly one way to look at it.

Another way to look at the term "eunuch" is to equate it with trans-gender. That is someone who is in the process of or has completed the journey from being physically a male to physically a female, or vice versa.

So, equating eunuch with trans-gender is a second way to think of this person that Philip meets on the road.

Finally, some scholars have made the case that the broader meaning of "eunuch" can be thought of as anyone who is a sexual minority. In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah refers to eunuchs that are born and eunuchs that are made. Thus, we could equate the Ethiopian eunuch from the court of Queen Candace as someone who is

lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, or queer. In this broadest sense we have a story in the New Testament that depicts and celebrates an LGBTQ person.

And, the eunuch is shown as a very important and powerful official of a foreign Queen. Not an evil foreigner, but someone who is seeking to know God. As we heard, *“He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah.”*

The eunuch is seeking God, and our story shows that the Holy Spirit of God responds to the eunuch by actively reaching towards the eunuch. God doesn't reject a sexual minority but uses the Apostle Philip to reach out to the eunuch and draw him in. How many times has the Bible been used to eject sexual minorities from our churches, and here is a New Testament story that does the opposite. For those of us that have been slammed by misuse of the Bible, this is powerful stuff.

Now, one of the things that I think we are reasonably good at here at St. Barnabas is to welcome people into our community. We work to make people feel comfortable and appreciated. And, one important thing that we do is to watch for those that are new and come alongside them. At the right time, we tell them our stories and allow them to tell their stories. This is what we will do in our newcomers' brunch in two week. And this is exactly what Philip does with the eunuch. Philip sees a seeker and shares his story. *“He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The eunuch replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him....Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.”*

We all have our stories to share, and Philip told the eunuch about the story of Jesus. As Christians we are convinced that the story of Jesus is central to our spirituality. And as Philip shared the story of Jesus with the eunuch, the eunuch decided he wanted to become a follower of Jesus, and he was baptized. The life of this unnamed eunuch was changed forever, and by including his story in the New Testament Book of Acts, the author Luke has ensured that the story of the eunuch can be used by all of us that want to celebrate sexual minorities.

And here is another story from the Old Testament book of 1st Samuel. This is a story about King David, before he was king, and the son of King Saul, Jonathan. This is a story that does not show up in our three year cycle of Sunday morning readings.

“When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David,

because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.... Thus Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, "May the LORD seek out the enemies of David." Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him; for he loved him as he loved his own life.... Then Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace, since both of us have sworn in the name of the LORD, saying, "The LORD shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, forever.""

And then, after death of Jonathan, David says, "Jonathan lies slain upon your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women."

That is quite a stunning story about a life-long commitment between two men. You probably remember that David also had many wives, so I think it is safe to say that David and Jonathan were, what we would say today is bi-sexual.

Now, many of us are used to having the Bible used as a weapon against same-gender relationships, and we are not as used to having the Bible used to lift up and celebrate these relationships. I have to admit that I am a little in awe of the effort of the many Bible scholars who have worked to take back the Bible from misuse. I feel indebted to those that have been re-discovering the ways that the Bible can be used to celebrate lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, and queer individuals, rather than push us away. This retaking of the Bible is a more recent continuation of the work that has been done over the last 100 years to stop the denigration of women, to stop the support of slavery, and to remove the barriers to inter-racial marriage.

Today's reading has become an important story to me as a married, gay man, for I can see that my story is also one that is in the Bible. Isn't that what we each want? My prayer is that you all may see yourself in the Bible stories as the beloved of God. The Bible tells each of our stories, though throughout the centuries that is not the way we have used it.

Now, I have found it easy to tell my story and to talk about my sexual orientation here at St. Barnabas. You have welcomed me as I am, and you have welcomed my husband, Jeff, as well. You have walked along side us for the last eleven years, and allowed us to do the same with you. We have been richly blessed by our time here at St. Barnabas.

But, the story is not done. I think we are all aware that some churches do not yet welcome and celebrate LGBTQ persons. There are some churches here in the South County that still use the Bible to push down women and push down LGBTQ folk.

However, you may not be aware that the pruning has even taken a bit of time in our own Episcopal Church. Eight years ago when I first preached about the Ethiopian eunuch there were still eight of our ninety-three dioceses, or regions, that did not allow same-gender weddings. Today that number is zero. Same-gender weddings are allowed in all the dioceses of the Episcopal Church.

We pride ourselves on being a big tent in the Episcopal Church, and I certainly think there is value in staying in community with people who believe differently from one another. We try to do that here at St. Barnabas. We have many things in common but we also allow differences. Here's an example of a different way of thinking.

My ex-wife used to make the argument that Princeton University should never have gone co-ed and admitted women. My ex-wife is a graduate of Princeton, and she loves her alma mater, but she felt that boys and men should still have the option to be part of an institution of higher learning that was just men. By extension perhaps some of our churches can still exclude women and LGBTQ folks. That is certainly one way of thinking. But it breaks my heart when people think this exclusion is of God. Jesus reveals a God to us whose love is unbounded by our human foibles and biases. And, it breaks my heart when we use the Bible to justify this exclusion of women and sexual minorities. Conversely, my heart sings when we use the Bible to lift up and celebrate women and sexual minorities. My heart also sings when we better embrace the expansiveness of God's love to all. Again, I am convicted that each of us, no matter who we are, has our own stories told in the Bible.

Immigrants can see their story in the Bible.

Widows and widowers can see their story in the Bible.

Children and seniors can see their story in the Bible.

The poor and the rich can see their story in the Bible.

The outsider can see their story in the Bible.

The dying can see their story in the Bible.

The lame, blind, and deaf can see their story in the Bible.

The farm worker, carpenter, and merchant can see their story in the Bible.

Those whose lives have been torn apart by war can see their story in the Bible.

Those who make war can see their story in the Bible, though those parts has a lot of woes and warnings.

The earth and the creatures can see their story in the Bible.

All of you, all of us, can see our stories in the Bible.

Our work is not done with the Bible, especially when the Bible is misused. Our journey, both as individuals and as the Church, our journey with the Bible continues, and I personally think it moves in an upward trajectory as it brings us closer to Jesus.