

GENDER CREATION IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

Isaiah 56: 1-7; Matthew 17: 1-5, 19: 12; Acts 8: 26-39

One of the best theology books I've read over the past few months is entitled: "Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God." The author is: Megan DeFranza. The book is based on a thesis DeFranza wrote for her PH.D at a Roman Catholic university. Can you imagine how this topic would be accepted there? And on top of that, DeFranza's religious background is conservative evangelical. To talk about intersex and the image of God when gender is not clearly defined along traditional views of male and female would make conservatives, whether Roman Catholic or evangelical Protestant, very upset.

And yet, DeFranza graduated with honours. Why? Because she wrote a very compelling thesis. Her goal is to defend the affirmation that all humans are made in the image of God, even if they do not fit a clear male - female gender identity according to traditional understandings. The challenge for both conservative Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants is this: how can you judge same-sex relationships as sinful or gender transition as sinful when you have children born with anatomies that have both male and female parts? If gender is fluid, and if some humans may be both male and female anatomically and genetically, than any relationship where two people genuinely love each other should be treated as sacred regardless of gender. And any person may be on a journey of discovery and growth in how they understand and live their gender regardless of their anatomy. Diversity within gender in the animal kingdom of which we humans are a part, is much more prevalent than the limiting gender boxes traditional understandings have imposed on us all.

OK, I've just given you a lot to absorb. Let's break it down in bite sized pieces and then let's reflect on what the scriptures actually have to say. And in this regard, let me offer up some introductory comments before we dive into our scripture readings.

First, the letter I in LGBTQI is intersex. And like the T for trans, intersex is not about sexuality. No. Intersex, like Trans are about gender identity. Did you know that official numbers suggest there are 50,000-100,000 persons in the U.S. who identify as Intersex? No doubt there are many thousands in Canada too. And this is just official numbers. The real number is probably much higher.

Second, then, what is intersex? There are infants born who don't have the typical genetic sequence that would render them strictly male or female. XX is typically female and XY is typically male. What if a person is born with an extra X chromosome making them XXY? Are they male or female or both? There are also infants whose internal anatomy include both male and female parts. And there are those whose external anatomy is also mixed. In a few moments

we will address the category of the eunuch referred to in the bible and Jesus' comments as well. But the point I simply make here is that this is the way a number of infants are born; a small minority to be sure, but nonetheless, healthy in every way, unless, of course, those parents and medical folk who bring intersex children into the world judge them as unhealthy, needing to be 'fixed'.

And this is where, thirdly, many more ancient and indigenous cultures have been more accepting of intersex children and adults than the modern world. Modern medicine, like modern science, has presumed to play God in many ways, and one of those ways is by deciding to intervene medically through surgery and hormone therapy to shape gender from infancy onwards without the child having any choice in the matter. And this has caused much hurt and harm to children who become adults and feel both shame and disconnection from their bodies and the genders assigned them through medical intervention.

Among the many books touching on this theme is: "Middlesex" by Jeffrey Eugenides. The novel addresses various decades in the medical establishment's approach on trying to "fix" what they saw as the abnormality of intersex infants. Until a child is given a chance to grow into themselves, they do not always know how to claim who they are, and this identity includes their gender. Regardless of their anatomy, will they identify as man, woman or both? Why must others decide for them? Is their creation a mistake or is it part of God's creative diversity at play? Should gender not be treated as a gift rather than a curse? And does gender have to be either-or?

Let's dive into our scripture readings in search of some revelatory insight. Even though the bible begins with a creation story which is highly inclusive of the rich diversity and multiplicity in creation, human civilization quickly takes over to dominate, segregate and impose hierarchies of superiority and inferiority. Unless people fit into the roles and behaviours assigned to them by the dominant culture which rules, they will be judged and persecuted. And so, even though the world as we know it is a fall from a creational vision more inclusive of diversity, throughout the rest of the biblical story, people of faith are discovering a God who is trying to inspire healing, repair and a return to the original creational vision given us in Genesis.

In our scripture reading from Isaiah, the message is as clear as ever. The vision of the prophecy is the return of the people to their land after years of suffering in exile. This return also envisions returning to a more original creational vision of God rather than the kind of society Israel had become – highly unequal, segregated and hierarchical, just like the nations around them. Exile was seen as a punishment for having embraced injustice rather than the just ways of God.

The two groups of folk mentioned in this prophecy represent two kinds of people who were especially mistreated as inferior and flawed. Foreigners who were not born and bred Hebrews

were treated as less human. Racism has been a problem throughout history as it is a problem today even in a progressive nation like Canada. Just think about how we have treated and continue to treat certain people, be they indigenous to the land or refugees and immigrants, people of various colours and cultures, and people who live, pray and dress in ways we interpret as suspicious and problematic.

And then there is the eunuch, someone who blurs the lines of what traditional society deems acceptable male or female gender identity. Not only does the eunuch blur the lines of gender, but they are often refused the option of marriage or the birth of children. Against these multiple curses of rejection and isolation imposed by society, the vision of God through the prophet is of those most marginalized becoming most honoured. A society most reflective of God's creational vision is one where those most vulnerable to persecution and segregation are brought into the centre of the circle and celebrated as most precious.

And what is also fascinating in this prophecy is that it overturns earlier parts of the Old Testament. It's as if the people are discovering the deeper heart of God, and perhaps their earlier understanding of God as judgemental and hierarchical was more a reflection of their own fallen hearts rather than a true reflection of God the creator. You see, unless we understand the larger story of scripture and where it's heading, just quoting our favourite bible verses here and there can miss the larger message.

If we follow the prophecy at the heart of Isaiah here, we must also declare that 2000 years of Christianity that judged those who were not "like us" but foreign, or those who did not look or behave as proper men or women according to our understanding... such judgementalism has been terribly sinful. We have caused terrible suffering for so many throughout history who have been created to be who they are. We played God and declared they were an abomination. And we misused scripture to do so!

Anyhow, unless we internalize a prophetic vision as Isaiah declares it boldly, we cannot understand where Jesus comes from in what he says. For Jesus doesn't just refer to the eunuch as one kind of person gender-wise. Rather Jesus uses the category of eunuch to refer to a diversity of persons who don't fit traditional gender roles. Last week we reflected on the eunuch as one who chooses to be single, just like Jesus and Paul, a number of women in their circle and many others in early Christianity too. Given the expectations of marriage in their world, this was quite a radical gender option.

But then, Jesus also refers to two other kinds of eunuch. He says this: "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others..." Clearly the first kind of eunuch would be someone we would today call intersex, and the second kind of eunuch would be anyone who gender transitions because of physical intervention, which can also affect the hormones moving through their bodies, changing their

physiology. Is this a choice? How you are born is not a choice and what it done to you is often not a choice, but it can be and sometimes was in the ancient world as it is a choice for many today. And Jesus could just as well have said that how someone chooses to express their gender is part of that diversity too. Just because we're talking about a minority of persons it doesn't make it less part of the wonderful diversity and multiplicity that is part of the colourful creation of God. Jesus is saying very clearly in a context where gender roles are very fixed and hierarchical that there are many options for people and that diversity is good. What is not good is how we treat people as inferior or flawed, as the religious authorities are doing as a way of keeping people under fear and control with shame.

And in case we need further convincing that Jesus is the living word of God through which we need to interpret and reinterpret the written words of scripture, we have the well known account of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain, an account found in all the gospels. Here, we have the voice of no less than God who declares: This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased listen to him!". We listen to Jesus to understand better what God wants and wills for us humans and our relationships in the world.

And finally, we also have the wonderful story in Acts. We're told about a certain Philip, who is an early church evangelist, who is led by God to encounter a foreigner who also happens to be a eunuch. How does Philip know the person is a eunuch? Clearly, their gender expression would reveal something about them non-traditional. But rather than be dissuaded from the encounter, Philip is inspired by the Spirit, we're told, to go to the eunuch and connect with them.

And what happens? The eunuch is clearly a high profile foreign official with an entourage and a chariot. But they are also just returning from the temple in Jerusalem where they had gone to worship. Clearly they are attracted to the Jewish faith. But they are also troubled. In the temple they would not be permitted to enter certain areas. Why? Because they are a foreigner, and because they are a eunuch – two strikes against them. The temple establishment are stuck in more traditional readings of scripture and have not internalized the vision of Isaiah!

But Philip sees the perfect opportunity to present gospel good news to the eunuch. They happen to be reading another passage in Isaiah just a few chapters before the one we've already read this morning. The reference is to some person who is persecuted, "like a lamb led to the slaughter", one who is also denied justice, humiliated and rejected. Clearly, the fact that this very scripture passage is quoted and is being read by a eunuch is no accident. They clearly resonate with this mysterious figure being referred to in the prophecy, one who has experienced rejection, humiliation and persecution for being who they are.

Well, for Philip, and early Christians, this is very much a prophecy about Jesus. Jesus was rejected, publicly humiliated, tortured and killed, and yet God's love in and through him opened

a door wide open to the kind of love that embraces all people. If anyone would embrace a person like the eunuch it would be Jesus. Jesus suffered and in his suffering all those who have suffered rejection, humiliation and injustice, have a home... The message is very clear. Even though the eunuch has experienced rejection and humiliation for being who they are, being baptized into Jesus and his all-inclusive body, they can feel totally at home. Jesus is like them, has suffered like them, and yet manifests a love that can heal and embrace even the most broken.

Philip has no hesitation baptizing the eunuch, and we're told, "the eunuch went on their way rejoicing." Isn't this one of the best stories in all of scripture? And it's a wonderful story because it encapsulates the gospel message so powerfully. Where traditional understandings exclude people or force them into boxes, the gospel of Jesus is about returning to the original creational vision of God welcoming diversity and multiplicity. Those who are intersex should not live in hiding or shame. Their gift to us in being who they are is reminding us that gender, like sexuality, and like many things in life are not either this or that, but both-and in their diversity, and this is beautiful.

So much more can be said, but I will bring this whirlwind of biblical commentary to a close. Many of us have struggled to fit in. Many of us have felt disconnected from who we truly are or are made to be. God did not create us to be ashamed, but to flower into our full personhood. Our gift to each other is to be the unique persons we are in all our colourful diversity in how we express ourselves and how we love. May we here continue to discover the beauty of our uniqueness and celebrate the oneness of love we share with each other. This is a very fulfillment of God's creational vision and Jesus' all-inclusive love for which he gave his life... Amen.