

QUEERING BOUNDARIES

Isaiah 56: 1-8. Acts 8: 26-39

How many of you like to have things clear in your lives? How many of you like to know where everything fits? As human beings we don't like ambiguity. We want clarity. As human beings we don't like things fuzzy. We like things to fit neatly into different categories we can understand.

So what do we do when things are not clear? What do we do when things are ambiguous? We judge. And this is what we have done as human beings when it comes to gender and sexuality. It is men and women who are supposed to go together sexually. That's what the majority do and that's how we make babies and populate humanity. Men are men and women are women and we know that by the body parts they come with. You can't be both and you can't be part of one and maybe part of another. That's what we have been taught traditionally.

But what if that's not true?... Well, the bible says... Oh yeah? What does the bible say? Does the bible say the same thing throughout? Or does the bible declare something in clear terms, then become ambiguous over time, and then come to a different conclusion later on? Does the bible change over the thousand years it's various books have been written down?

As Protestants, the bible is our highest authority when it comes to divine truth. Unlike Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, tradition has value but it cannot carry ultimate authority like the bible. And yet, how do we as Protestants read the bible? If we are evangelical or Pentecostal, we believe that every verse of the bible carries the authority of the whole. The larger context is helpful but not ultimate. This verse and that verse, this passage and that passage... the bible is the same throughout, no contradictions and no change, and all of it carries equal authority.

As Presbyterians, however, who are Protestants going all the way back to the 16th century Reformation, we feel this kind of approach does disgrace to the bible and treats it too simplistically. To read the bible simplistically is to make it say whatever you want it to say and fool yourself into believing it's actually the bible saying it rather than your own wishful thinking. To read the bible properly you have to do some work. You have to examine how a particular verse or passage of the bible fits into the larger story being told throughout the bible. To just stick with the one verse or passage, interpret it as you like and then presume this is what the bible with a capital B says, disgraces the bible.

Also, in humility we recognize that we read the bible as Christians, not as Jews or Muslims. Jews incorporate what we call our Old Testament into their scriptures. Muslims take pieces of our Old and New Testaments and incorporate them into their scriptures. We Christians need to be aware that we tell the biblical story in a particular way with Jesus Christ at the centre. So

then, how does this larger story we read in the scriptures, with Christ at the centre, shape how we read particular verses and passages.

Let me give an example that is especially relevant on this Pride Sunday. One of the books I read recently was by a young biblical scholar named Sean Burke. One of the things Burke does in his scholarly book is reflect on the word: "Queer." As many of us know, the word queer is shorthand for anyone identifying as 2SLGBTQ+. At one time, being called queer was considered an insult. To be queer was not to fit into the category of proper humanity when it comes to sexuality and gender identity. If you love someone of the same sex you are queer and flawed. If you don't look, dress and behave like a proper man or woman as our majority culture defines such, you are queer and flawed. So, queer had to do with blurring the boundaries and transgressing the categories of where human beings should fit in as men and women.

But rather than get rid of the word altogether as an insult, the queer community has embraced the word and made it their own. We all know now what it means when someone identifies as queer. They don't fit into the traditional categories of men and women only loving the opposite sex or identifying as either man or woman and behaving accordingly. But what Burke also does, in dialogue with what's called queer theory, is see the word queer itself as an intentional blurring of boundaries. What if boundaries and categories of what is a man or woman or a boy or girl and how they should behave is itself something flawed, oppressive and therefore wrong, to be discarded. What if gender and sexuality are things to be explored and discovered over time rather than things to be pinned down and categorized in human beings from their birth onwards?

Burke then, goes on to apply this understanding of queer as a blurring or queering of boundaries, to help explain where God wants to take God's people through the scriptures over time. And to spell this out, Burke focusses on the category of human being in biblical times called a "eunuch." What was in biblical times identified as a eunuch today we would identify as non-binary or transgendered. A eunuch was someone who, by birth or through surgery called castration, had the male organ that produces male hormones, cut. The result over time was the appearance of persons with unique features, neither male nor female in any typical sense. From the growth of their body and facial hair, their voice, their anatomy and size, and their movement, a eunuch would be seen as living in two categories at once - both man and woman.

So how were eunuch's treated? If they were not serving in some official capacity in the royal court as mystical-type advisors or servants to royalty because of their unique appearance, they were judged as sub-human and no better than animals. In the third book of the bible - Leviticus - a book of religious laws, eunuchs are condemned as defective men not fit to serve as priests or to enter the holy places in the temple. So, if you want to quote scripture and verse you would see this as God's word and condemn non-binary and transgendered persons as sinful and condemned. Chapter and verse are clear. Eunuchs don't fit the traditional categories and ways

of being a man or woman. They are an abomination. This is scripture. But what about the rest of the biblical story? Does the story evolve or change? Yes it does!

Our first scripture reading this morning comes from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is part of scripture just like Leviticus is. But Isaiah comes much later after the people of God have learned many lessons with terrible mistakes made, suffering endured, and now anticipating the opportunity to return to their homeland and rebuild their communities and relationships after generations of exile in foreign lands. What can be restored? What has to change?

One thing that has to change, according to Isaiah, is people's openness to those who have traditionally been excluded by their laws – foreigners and refugees on the one hand, and eunuchs on the other. Let's hear from the prophecy again: "Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely separate me from God's people," and do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree." For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off. And foreigners who join themselves to the Lord... all who keep the Sabbath and do not profane it and hold fast my covenant - these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel..."

In other words, where foreigners and refugees and also eunuchs were once condemned and treated as outcasts, not fit to enter the temple of God, now they will be welcomed and treated just like every other person of the people of God. And not only that. God will compensate them for the pain and hurt of what they have suffered in being excluded. The eunuch by their anatomy and biology cannot have children. To be unable to seed or birth children in the ancient world is a death sentence. There is no future generation to carry your name. But according to this prophecy, God will establish a name and monument for eunuchs that will be publicly recognized and exist for generations, to outlast even multiple generations of children within a family. God will give to eunuchs an honour greater than the pain of their mistreatment and exclusion.

Isn't this beautiful? Isn't this powerful? So what about Leviticus? It's past. It no longer stands. In a time when the people of God had to define themselves over existing cultures around them so as not to be erased and assimilated, they came up with many laws to make themselves distinct. But many of these laws were exclusionary and racist. Now the people are being called to rebuild their nation with compassion and inclusive love especially directed to all those once excluded.

And in case this is not clear enough, we have the wonderful story in our New Testament reading that comes many centuries later. And this story comes within the larger context of the

book of Acts which is all about the breaking down of boundaries and barriers of exclusion. And this breaking down or queering of boundaries is all the work of the Holy Spirit. There are two people in this story - Philip and a person identified as a eunuch. Philip is a boundary breaker because he is stepping outside the Jewish people and people of Leviticus by reaching out to someone who is both a foreigner and a eunuch. He is fulfilling the prophesy of Isaiah and it is the Holy Spirit who is inspiring him to do it.

But what Burke does in his scholarly book, is also show how the eunuch blurs multiple kinds of boundaries in the ancient world. Is the eunuch rich or poor, someone with status or a mere servant and slave? They come with a chariot and horses and possibly a retinue of servants. So, clearly someone with status. And yet, being a eunuch, they would be treated as less human. They are not white but black - from Ethiopia, and therefore visibly foreign. They are neither male nor female. And Philip has not official authority to talk to them about the faith let alone welcome them into it. And yet, what happens? The eunuch asks Philip about a passage from the prophet Isaiah. The passage is all about one who represents God but also suffers rejection, humiliation and exclusion. Philip and early Christians saw in this passage from Isaiah a prophecy about Christ who was also rejected, excluded and humiliated. Imagine that! This eunuch who blurs multiple boundaries of status, nationality, gender and more, is welcomed as one with whom Christ is especially identified.

And so, the eunuch is the one who asks whether they can be a legitimate candidate for baptism. Philip, full of the Spirit, embraces them, and through baptism, welcomes them fully into the body of Christ. The eunuch, full of the Spirit, continues their journey back home rejoicing, while Philip goes off on another adventure.

And this story is positioned in this book at a critical point. In the next part of the story in this biblical book, the Spirit is taking the gospel not only to foreigners and eunuchs, but even to Israel's enemies - the Romans. The larger story is that the gospel of God's love in Jesus is aimed at bringing people together past their differences, past the obstacles and barriers of race, status, gender and sexuality, and past the obstacles and barriers of friend or foe. The kingdom of God is coming to earth wherever people are welcomed, included, loved and befriended. Justice is love seeking solidarity and friendship on a foundation of truth, comforting the victims and welcoming the offenders into repentance, forgiveness and community.

Isn't this a powerful message? And it is the core message of Christ at the centre of the scriptures. You can't just read one chapter and verse of the bible and assume this is what the bible says. You have to read the whole thing and then see how a chapter and verse fits into the larger story. The power of love who is God moves and changes the people and calls them to evolve and grow, leaving behind old hatreds, racism, homophobia and transphobia. This is the bible I read and it is wonderfully inspiring and relevant for our world here and now too, a world that has to change. What do you think? Amen.