

## GOD'S LOVE INCLUDES EVERYONE

Isaiah 56: 1-8; Matthew 19: 11-12; Acts 8: 26-39

Among the millions of refugees the world over seeking shelter, safety and a new home are those who identify as LGBTQI2S (queer). Besides race, culture, religion and gender, sexuality and non-traditional gender identity are big reasons people are abused, tortured, imprisoned and killed. Canada is one nation where people can make a refugee claim for asylum. Here are a few stories from refugees.

Yeraldine fled her native country Venezuela. Besides having a health problem that was being treated poorly at home, Yeraldine is lesbian, and she and her partner had to face continual discrimination because of their sexual orientation. Even as their children accepted them as they were, both women were laid off work, their landlord continually harassed them until they had to give up their apartment, and finding any other place to live was a challenge. "We didn't have food, we didn't have jobs and we didn't have a place to live," Yeraldine says. And besides all this, she couldn't get the medications she needed to treat a chronic medical condition. And so they made the difficult decision to leave their native country and the rest of their family in search of better lives of safety, acceptance, freedom and stability.

Then there's Warren (who prefers not to provide his last name). Warren was studying in the UK, when another student wrote a letter to his father back in their home country "outing" Warren as a gay man. His father not only threatened him. He disowned him as his child. If he returned he was sure to be arrested. Warren couldn't go back. He needed asylum.

Then there's Lincy, a transgender woman from Honduras. Lincy faced constant abuse, violence and persecution. At first she sought asylum in neighbouring Mexico, but after threatening situations culminating in an all-out assault, she knew she had to leave. Eventually Lincy found support through an organization that is part of the North American Rainbow Railroad. Lincy has now started a fashion business, something she dreamed of doing since she was a little girl. "My inspiration comes from diversity and my life experiences," she says of her work. "I give a piece of myself to each design."

Recently, the Rainbow railroad in Canada has petitioned the Canadian government to provide support for its commitment to resettle refugees from Afghanistan, threatened by the Taliban regime. 3,300 Afghans have reached out to the Rainbow Railroad for help to resettle in Canada. It also expects there to be at least 10,000 requests for help this year. Many are persecuted for various reasons. Being queer and being found out, is a death sentence for many. So how can we help?

Before we get to the practical, we need to address the biblical and theological. For many of us, whether we ourselves identify as queer, or have family who identify as queer, or have neighbours, friends and colleagues who are queer, or have simply opened our minds and our hearts to change, we know that we have had to be on a journey. Change, discovery and self-discovery don't happen all at once. Traditional ideas and judgement of what's right and wrong are very deeply entrenched. Change takes time for all of us.

Do you realize this is also the case with the bible? Sadly too many of us have been taught to read the bible in a fundamentalist way. We just locate certain passages outside their context and outside the larger story being narrated throughout the scriptures, and we take these verses as the Word of God with no further questioning. The deeper truth, however, is that the story the bible tells is one where perspectives on God and what's right and wrong shift over time. It's not God that changes. God is always love. It's human imaging of God that changes as God is more deeply discovered as love. What do I mean?

Our scripture readings this morning are wonderful examples of how views of gender and loving openness to the rich diversity of creation change over time. And in this regard let's begin with the prophecy of Isaiah.

The people of Israel were liberated from slavery and guided into a new life and a new land. They were called to build a society of justice and love. But just like their neighbours, Israel became a society of injustice, where some were treated with greater privilege and worth than others. If you were a foreigner seeking asylum, you were welcomed but treated as a second class citizen. Even as Israelites experienced slavery, soon, they were enslaving peoples they were conquering in battle, and those enslaved were treated as less human.

Finally, there were those who didn't fit acceptable gender definitions or expression. They were called "eunuchs." Even in Jesus' day, it was recognized that some people were born with genitalia that were mixed. Today we identify such folk as "intersex." But Jesus also points to the fact that sometimes people choose to express their gender in a non-traditional ways, and sometimes, and especially in times of war, men and women were mutilated as a form of punishment or further enslavement. Men in particular were made eunuchs. But however people came to be so, the traditional view dictated they could never be accorded the status of full citizen. They were somehow deficient in God's eyes.

And even though in earlier sections of the Older Testament foreigners, those enslaved and those identified as eunuchs were seen as deficient humans, by the time the people have been in exile in foreign lands, abused, humiliated and decimated themselves, there is a fresh search for God and fresh reflection on what it means to be worthy in God's sight. The people experienced exile as a judgement on their lack of faithfulness before God. Was God calling them to rethink what faithfulness was about? If God would forgive and accept them,

should that not also expand their capacity to accept those excluded by traditional religious law?

This is certainly one way to read and interpret the prophecy of Isaiah in this last section of the book. Isaiah is proclaiming God's word to the people as they return to their land. What society are they called to build now? The prophecy is very specific. God is calling the people to justice and faithfulness. And what is justice and faithfulness about? It's about the Sabbath, about worship and about love of God and neighbour. But it is also about including those specifically excluded before: the foreigner, the enslaved, the outcast and the eunuch. In very tender and comforting words, the prophecy promises to welcome all peoples, and that the temple of God "shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

Eunuchs who cannot produce or bear children and who may feel bereft of family or community are promised to be given: "a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall never be cut off." The idea here is that children give continuity to our lives into future generations. What God is promising through the prophecy is that those who are childless for whatever reason will have their names inscribed in God's temple, land and heart forever, and need not fear they will be forgotten. Refugees will be welcomed without fearing enslavement or mistreatment. They will be granted full equality and full citizenship.

So then, is this a contradiction of earlier parts of the Older Testament that categorize eunuchs as flawed humans and legitimate slavery and inequality toward foreigners? Or is it an evolution and growth in discovering what God as love requires of God's people? Is it about recognizing that the way we image God and God's laws reflect the racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia in our own hearts? Changing our view of God requires a change within our own hearts and understandings. In my reading of the larger narrative of scripture there is a clear trajectory that leads to Jesus. Jesus the Jew is already part of a wave of prophetic evolution that sees in the people's own experience of exile and suffering a growth in compassion and acceptance of others in all their suffering and diverse humanity.

And this is only further revealed in our New Testament reading from Acts. Here we encounter a person who is identified as both a foreigner and a eunuch. Clearly he has come to Jerusalem to worship in the temple as one attracted by biblical faith. But he also knows that as a foreigner and a eunuch, he can never get close to the temple. He has to remain in the outer section. That's the way it was.

But the story being told in Acts is about how the Holy Spirit is creating a new community under Christ's inspiration where those traditionally outcast are being welcomed and included within the sphere of God's people. Philip who himself is escaping persecution, encounters the eunuch who are on their way back to their home country.

What is really revealing here is the passage from the prophet Isaiah they happen to be reading. Early Christians saw in this passage an early prophecy about Jesus "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter... in his humiliation justice was denied him..." The eunuch asks Philip who the prophecy is referring to. This is the perfect segway for Philip to tell the eunuch about Jesus... a Jesus who himself was also rejected, humiliated, and even tortured and crucified. Yet the love in him and above him was so powerful that he rose again. This is the Jesus who not only understands those outcast, but welcomes them into his body as his hands, feet and heart. Even though the eunuch is a successful person in their native Ethiopia, they will have experienced much suffering, humiliation and rejection in their life. This Jesus and the God Jesus reveals and embodies, is a God for them.

And so, without hesitation, and against all traditional religious laws, Philip not only embraces his new sibling in the faith but baptizes them, making their inclusion into the faith public and official. No wonder we're told that the eunuch "went on their way" back home, "Rejoicing!"

Isn't this a powerful story about God's inclusive love? This is the story the bible tells, from exclusion to inclusion, from a God who is primarily threat and judgement, to a God who forgives, to a God who in Jesus and the Spirit welcomes and includes all those long rejected and excluded.

So then, what's the message for us here and now today who seek to become faithful followers of Jesus, inspired by his Spirit and empowered to take up our call as his hands, feet and heart? Are we still resistant to including those created by God to be who they are in all their colourful diversity? Do we accept ourselves welcomed in all our colourful diversity?

We at Armour Heights have not only committed ourselves to be fully inclusive a community of faith. We are also, today, dedicating our rainbow benches installed some time ago outside, but because of Covid, only now making it public. And we are also committing funds to an organization based in Toronto called "the 519" which has a program supporting refugees persecuted because of their sexuality and gender identity and expression. The 519 work with organizations across Canada and with hundreds of individuals providing practical and legal support. For this year, the elders of the congregation have approved a grant of \$5000. The cheque has been written with a letter and given to the 519. They desperately wanted to be represented here today but with June being Pride month, all their staff are involved this weekend in activities hosted and run by the 519. And so they have sent us a Thank you letter and a special video which we will show in the hall after the service today. You will not want to miss it. For us, this is also a step in our partnership with the 519 in our ongoing commitment of learning what inclusion truly means for us.

Praise be to God. God's love includes everyone. If you have always felt included, this statement may not mean very much to you. But if you have ever felt othered or rejected because you come from a foreign place, or because your sexuality, your gender or cultural identity don't fit what traditional norms demand, then this statement means the world. "God's love includes everyone" is also the message on the signs we will carry in the Pride march next Sunday. Praise be to God, indeed, for God's love has opened our eyes and our hearts.

Amen.