

## THE JOURNEY FROM FEAR TO LOVE, FROM EXCLUSION TO INCLUSION

Isaiah 56: 1-7; Acts 8: 26-39

Jonathan Williams is a pastor of a growing church in Brooklyn, New York. Everything Jonathan learned about building a church, he claims, he learned from his father Paul. Paul Williams headed up an organization which helped established new churches and then grow them. He would travel across the U.S and around the world preaching and coaching on church development. A number of churches sought out his expertise. Paul raised \$400,000 to help establish his son Jonathan's new church and he provided the coaching required to grow it. Paul was a hero for Jonathan and the larger evangelical church world.

But for Jonathan, Paul was much more than just a hero and mentor. He was a father and more. Paul was Jonathan's best friend, his role model, someone he wanted his children to get to know and learn from as grandpa. But all that would change.

It all began with a phone call. Paul wanted to fly to New York and discuss something important with Jonathan. There was urgency in his voice. He was also bringing along Jonathan's mother and two sisters. Wow! A family meeting. It had to be serious. Something must be wrong. Jonathan's mind started racing. His heart started beating a little faster. Was it a fatal diagnosis of some kind? Were his parents getting a divorce? Was one of his sisters in crisis? Was his dad's organization in financial trouble? Could they no longer fund Jonathan's new church just months off the ground?

The family arrived. After greetings and hugs, they all sat down. Jonathan's dad, Paul, began to speak: Jonathan... I am transgender... What? Jonathan didn't know how to respond. What's transgender exactly? Well, his father explained: From the time I was a child, I knew that I was a woman. Even though my body parts are male, my brain tells me I'm a woman. All these years, Paul felt a deep mismatch between the physical sex of his body and the gender of his mind. No wonder the inexplicable bouts of depression and panic and all that. For all his talents, gifts and success, Paul was carrying a secret inside, a secret he could keep no longer. He was now approaching 60. He wanted to live more authentically. He wanted to live openly who he was inside.

So what happened next? Before I tell you the rest of the story, let's flesh all this out a little more. The acronym: LGBTQI has many letters. Each letter stands for something outside what we call the heterosexual and cisgender norm. To be heterosexual is to be attracted to the

opposite sex. Most of us would identify as heterosexual. To be cisgender is to be at home with the gender you are assigned at birth. Most of us would identify as cisgender. But there are a lot of people who are neither heterosexual or cisgender. And some do not identify with only one gender either. That's some of us too. That's a family member. That's a good friend, a neighbour, a colleague at work... We're not all created the same. Does that scare some of us? Or is it an invitation to listen and learn and get to know others in all the truth of who they are rather than who we judge they should be?

Well, but doesn't the bible establish certain norms of behaviour and identity? Doesn't the bible say it's sin to be anything but heterosexual in your attraction and anything but man or woman according to the body parts God gave you? Well, but what if God made you different? And who defines God and what God thinks anyway? Are we so sure that our way of thinking and of reading and interpreting the bible are the only way? Do our ideas about God's will and law come from fear or from love? Do we read the bible out of fear of anything and anyone who is different than the majority? Or do we read the bible from a place of love? Do we risk trusting where love will take us if we open our hearts to others in all their difference from us?

Let's ponder our scripture readings in search of revelatory answers. What do we discover? First of all, if we read the bible passage by passage and verse by verse without any context and without understanding the larger story it tells from beginning to end, we will run into all kinds of contradictions. The bible was written thousands of years ago and the biblical writers, for all their inspiration, were human beings living within particular cultures with perspectives and prejudices deeply embedded in their psyche. How God inspires the reader of scripture and how we discern divine revelation through scripture is a journey that requires a whole community of interpretation. But it also requires something else. To read the bible and to discern in it past its many contradictions something of God's word requires a heart full of love.

Sadly, though, parts of the bible have been written and read with hearts full of fear. Fear of what? - Being threatened by others, losing power and control, losing our identity if we open ourselves up to others in all their differences. So, rather than include others and open our hearts to them, we exclude others and condemn them. We condemn them with our ideas and we create societies that shame and harm them.

The first five books of the bible tell the story of the people of Israel, the story of liberation from slavery, and the high ethical standards of the 10 commandments. But there are also many other laws and rules that emerge from fear. Israel was a nation under threat and in exile. Laws and rules create identity and boundaries of protection. The problem with boundaries, though, is that they exclude as much as they include. Those who don't fit the majority norm are excluded and condemned.

The other problem with biblical laws and rules is that readers of the bible often pick and choose the ones that work for them. So, one law says that it's an abomination for any same-sex activity, but another also says that anyone who has any deformity or disability, anyone who has a disease like leprosy, anyone who wears clothes with mixed fibres (that's all of us here, by the way), or anyone born from mixed racial lines (that's many of us too), and those who don't have recognizable male or female organs... all such are flawed and deficient and can never be admitted into the assembly of the Lord. And there's more, but I won't get into it here and now. The point is, you either accept it all or reject it all. You can't pick and choose what works for you and what you can use as a hammer to knock over the head of someone else who doesn't fit your norm.

The people of Israel in exile were so afraid of losing their distinct identity, of being totally conquered by their oppressors, that they created strict laws of purity versus mixture of any kind, perfection versus a blemish of any kind, and righteousness that was focussed on protecting boundaries. There was little room for difference. The terrible trauma and fear of conquest they carried left little room for hearts open to difference. Fear won out over love.

And this is exactly the battle Jesus is fighting in his conflict with the authoritative interpreters of scripture of his day. They want to arouse fear in the people. Fear generates compliance and obedience. It also generates hate and hate directed in the right way against enemies is a great tool oppressors use to build their power. We will protect you against enemy outsiders, they claim. We will build walls to protect you. Jesus is a threat because he wants to generate love in people. He wants to take down the walls. He wants to empower the downtrodden and forgive people who have been shamed and put down. Forgiveness opens the doors of the heart closed because of hate and condemnation.

Jesus embraces the very people excluded by the law and claims that God's heart is really love. It's human beings who have turned God into an exclusivist judge who incites fear. Jesus embraces the disabled, the sick, those labelled sinners, unclean, impure and foreigners. He does this because being already excluded they are hungry for love. They are thirsty to let go fear. They have nothing left to lose. Jesus embraces them and demands nothing from them but that they open their hearts to love and practice love. Sin is redefined as anything that opposes love. Sin is not about right behaviours or excluding anyone. Sin is about mistreating, abusing, neglecting, condemning, mocking and excluding others for any number of reasons we come up with. To love is to open doors and take down walls. It's not easy. But this is what God has always desired from the beginning of creation. That's what Jesus teaches and lives even though it will cost him his life.

OK. Now we're ready for our scripture readings. Both readings introduce us to a term: eunuch. In the ancient world a eunuch was someone who, either through external

interference or from birth onwards, didn't have bodies that would identify them as acceptable male or female. They couldn't produce or bear children either. And so they were flawed and deficient. But even from the older testament, there are signs of the good news of a new vision for the people of Israel. Isaiah's prophecy is an example. The people are returning to the land after long exile. In exile, they have become mixed with people of other races. In exile some have been made eunuchs or made to come out as eunuchs.

And so, while many are enthusiastic about returning, those who don't fit the acceptable norm are scared. But here's the word of the Lord Isaiah proclaims out of love: "Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his 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 shall not be cut off. And foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord and to be his servants... 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... Now that's inclusion!

And Jesus not only follows this prophetic tradition, He proclaims that this was God's intention in creation and in calling the people of Israel all along. And so, the apostle Philip in our New Testament reading is following this very same revelation of Jesus when he encounters a eunuch who is also a foreigner on the road. The eunuch is a worshipper of the God of Israel and clearly attracted to the faith of the 10 commandments. But being both a foreigner and a eunuch, they will always remain an outsider. They cannot enter the inner sanctuary of the temple. They are flawed and deficient.

But how providential for them to encounter Philip while returning back home to Ethiopia, and how revelatory that they happen to be reading a passage from the prophet Isaiah about one who experiences injustice, exclusion and public humiliation: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter... In his humiliation justice was denied him..." Here's the thing: early Christians were learning that this prophecy of Isaiah was actually a revelation about Jesus and a way of understanding what happened to Jesus in his death. Just like those most excluded, abused and mistreated, Jesus suffered too. He came to be with those most oppressed in order to lead them from death to resurrection. Those who were the cause of oppression were being offered the hand of forgiveness on the cross and those most excluded and crucified were being met by a God who would never abandon them.

And so, Philip not only embraces the eunuch as a full person, but guides them to encounter a messiah and a God who fully enters their rejection and humiliation because God loves them and will resurrect them into full inclusion into the people of God. To embody and enact this

full inclusion, Philip baptizes them. Baptism means full welcome into the body of Christ which is the church. The eunuch is no longer an outsider or flawed and deficient in any way. They are fully a child of God as they are. And so, it's no surprise that the story ends with the eunuch continuing on their journey home full of rejoicing. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ my friends.

OK. Fast forward to our opening story. What happened to Paul and to Jonathan? Paul changed his name to Paula, to acknowledge the woman she always was. She talked to her church organization. How did they react? They fired her. She was an abomination. She needed therapy and help. She was deranged. She was a sinner. And her son Jonathan? He was angry at her and refused to think of her or address her as anything but his father. He was scared to let go his attachment to the church world he knew and depended on. He would lose his job, his congregation and his career.

But Jonathan came to personal conversion over time. He repented his rejection of his father. He reintroduced his father to his children. There was grandma and now there was grandpaula. To Jonathan's surprise, his children had little trouble embracing grandpaula. They loved their grandpaula. And what about Jonathan's church? Well Jonathan spoke to his staff. They were inspired to become an inclusive church within the evangelical world. In fact, they discovered that there is a growing movement in evangelical America for churches that are becoming fully inclusive of LGBTQI people. Initially, they lost a big chunk of the congregation and the support of their sponsoring organization, the same organization that fired Paula for coming out. But eventually, they started rebuilding again. The church is in Brooklyn, New York and it's called "Forefront."

And what about Paula? She is on the front cover of our bulletin. After being fired and losing a whole network of colleagues and friends, she rebuilt her life. Paula Stone Williams is now a ministry and personal coach at the centre for progressive renewal. She is also a minister of "Left Hand Church" in Boulder, Colorado. Wow. What a story. You can look it up. The world is changing. Some change is bad. But other change is liberating. It depends who you are and what you've experienced. But where is God in all this? There is fear and there is love. We see things and live things very differently depending on where the energy in us is coming from. Christ calls us to live out of love. By joining ourselves to him we can be energized, baptized and renewed in his love. And love becomes real when it challenges us again and again to overcome our personal obstacles of fear and exclusion toward greater and greater inclusive love.

May we here, as members and friends of Armour Heights church, commit and re-commit ourselves toward a journey of greater inclusion – for ourselves, each other, and the larger world in desperate need of our love; Amen.