

June 14th: The Gift of Queerness

Good morning again my friends, and welcome to our series, Mosaic–this is a series devoted to exploring the intentional diversity of our Bible, Jesus’ ministry, and the world-wide church. We believe that diversity was always God’s plan–so we’ve been taking a closer look at how we can appreciate that diversity, work towards equity for a wide variety of individuals and groups, and make inclusion a core tenet of our faith and practice. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are not bad words in God’s vocabulary–they are in fact essential to the love and transformation that God promises us as part of our personal and the renewing of our world.

We are now a couple of weeks into Pride month, and so it seems fitting that we are going to close out our Mosaic series with a text that celebrates the queer community. As many of you know, Bremerton UMC has been an opening and affirming congregation since we first voted to join the Reconciling Movement of the United Methodist Church under the leadership of Rev. Earl Rice–a milestone which occurred more than two decades ago now. During that time, our congregation has been the spiritual home of many members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and they’ve been essential to our mission and ministry. They have brought individual gifts to our church that have brought us joy and powerful leadership, and they have helped us strengthen our commitment to being a safe place for all of God’s beloved children. We would not be where we are today if it weren’t for these cherished members and friends, and I wanted to remind us of that so we can fully acknowledge and appreciate their contributions to our mosaic family.

With all that said, let’s take a moment to pray before we take a closer look at our passage for this morning.

God of mosaic encounters, you invite us into relationship and there is nothing that can get in the way of your love. You draw near to us, and there are no forces that are strong enough to keep us from your presence. When we receive your transforming embrace, we know that our entire being is welcomed and accepted.

We place our trust in you, because you have shown us that the gift of new life is for everyone, no exceptions. Refresh us now with your holy word and offer of liberation, may we carry this grace with us as we begin a new week. Amen.

A few weeks ago, in mid-May, one of the songs of my evangelical childhood was re-released, this time with a twist. Originally from the band Avalon's 1997 album, *A Maze of Grace*, the song "Testify To Love" was an absolute megahit. It played on every Christian radio station and even won many mainstream awards in the pop and gospel categories. I remember it from a CD that my youth pastor burned for a youth group retreat, and I think we wore out the CD because we listened to it so much. But back in the late 1990s or early 2000s, one of the main singers of Avalon, Michael Passons, was forced out of the group because he came out as gay and refused conversion therapy—which at the time, was the predominant evangelical response to members of the queer community, and in some ways, still is. The group continued recording and performing for many years, but my copies of their CDs ended up collecting dust—I could no longer stomach listening to the lyrics and melodies that meant so much to me. They suddenly seemed hollow and artificial.

But in a surprise musical reunion, a couple of members of Avalon recently rerecorded "Testify to Love", including Michael Passons, now proudly singing this song as a happily queer, happily married man. I've cried many happy tears over the past few weeks as I've listened to this new version, and my fellow formerly evangelical friends have had a similar response. I've seen it all over social media, as kids and teens raised in purity culture and strictly heteronormative spaces have reclaimed the message of this song, turning it into an anthem for queer pride and inclusion. Now that we're hearing it with older ears, it seems impossible that it could be anything but radically affirming—the first verse goes:

*All the colours of the rainbow
all the voices of the wind
every dream that reaches out,
that reaches out to find where love begins*

*every word of every story
every star in every sky
every corner of creation
lives to testify!*

C'mon, how could this not be a celebration of queerness! Right?! And so, with this song on my heart, I invite us to turn to our scripture for today.

In this passage from Acts 8, we meet a man named Philip, who has been sent on a journey by an angel of the Lord. He is a follower of Jesus in the first century, one of the apostles of the early church tasked with spreading the gospel throughout the multicultural communities of the Mediterranean world. As part of this mosaic mission, he is directed, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." Philip immediately receives this instruction, and off he goes!

It's not long before the purpose of this trip becomes clear, starting in verse 27 we read, "on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means 'queen of the Ethiopians'). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet."

This unnamed Ethiopian eunuch has also been on a journey—just in the opposite direction. He had gone north to the Temple in Jerusalem, and is now traveling south to return to his native land. And he has a souvenir from his visit—he's sitting in his chariot with a scroll from the Old Testament, specifically the writings of Isaiah, one of the most revered prophets. Philip observes that this eunuch is reading the text, and so he goes to him and asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

The eunuch is not offended by this question, and in fact, he welcomes Philip's question, saying in response, "How can I, unless someone explains it to me?" Philip gets into the chariot with the eunuch and begins to read with him—together they open the scroll and take in Isaiah's words. Within this passage of Acts, we have the exact verses of Isaiah that Philip and eunuch are

reading—this text comes from Isaiah 53, a passage that speaks of a future leader, the “suffering servant,” who comes to save God’s people. This servant leader, despite his sacrifice and humility, is not received well by humanity—verse 3 of that passage writes, “He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.”

This prophecy is later applied to Jesus, whose own public humiliation and torture resulted in his death. So Philip takes the opportunity to explain to the eunuch who Jesus is and what his death and resurrection mean for humanity. Philip must have been a good communicator, because it is not long before the eunuch is captivated by the gospel. On their journey, they come to a body of water, and the eunuch immediately asks to reenact one of the scenes from Jesus’ life and ministry. He says, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” He literally asks, “is there any reason why I would not belong? What could keep me from being part of this family?” And Philip responds by getting down from the chariot and baptizing the eunuch in Jesus’ name. Together, they get into the water, and then when the baptism is complete, Philip vanishes, and the eunuch continues on his way home.

Beyond the mystery of the vanishing disciple, why is this encounter so noteworthy? Why are we including this story as part of our Mosaic series?

Well, our modern ears might be tempted to treat this eunuch like any other character, specifically any other male character in our Bible. The text uses male pronouns, and even refers to the eunuch as a man, but that’s not necessarily how the ancient audience would have seen him, and that’s probably not how the early church would have perceived him. Sure, our eunuch would have been what we now call “assigned male at birth,” that is, he was born with all the markers and characteristics of a male child. But at some point, this changed. At some point, this male child or adult became something different—when they became a eunuch, they took on a new identity. We don’t know exactly what happened to this eunuch or when, but we know from ancient historians and biblical scholars that eunuchs were common in many

cultures of this time period. These castrated men, now eunuchs, were usually slaves or servants, and they occupied an in-between space in society.

When I say “in-between,” what do I mean?

Well, there’s the physical reason: eunuchs were no longer considered to be completely male, but they weren’t female either. They occupied a kind of middle ground, a non-binary identity centuries before that term entered our contemporary vernacular. And then there’s the social reasons: they were not able to reproduce biological children or enter into marriage, so they were seen as separate from the traditional family structure, but they weren’t outcasts either—they were very much a part of the fabric of society. Their identity and roles were in contrast to many traditional expectations for men and masculinity, but they often held positions of importance and honor, filling roles and responsibilities that put them in proximity to wealth and power. That is the case for our Ethiopian eunuch, who our text tells us is a high ranking official at the Queen’s treasury. He is clearly trusted by his monarch, seen as a person of integrity and influence, and is someone who has the freedom and ability to travel beyond his empire’s borders.

But still, this eunuch is somewhat outside of our familiar categories, somehow separate from what we might perceive as culturally normal. This eunuch is queer in its original sense—strange, unfamiliar—a sexual minority in his time and ours. It is possible that he understands what it is like to be rejected and despised by others who do not understand him or his unique identity and purpose.

Here’s how I think we should approach this eunuch and his newfound faith:

The Franciscan friar, Father Richard Rohr, often writes about the black and white categories of our culture and western religion. He calls this mindset “dualistic thinking,” and in many of his books and interviews, he invites Christians of all backgrounds to go beyond the binary and live in the tension between two realities or truths. In a recent blog post for the Center for Action

and Contemplation, he writes, “The dualistic mind cannot deal with the biggies: love, death, suffering, God, infinity, and the very notion of grace... To balance what I see as our overreliance on dualistic thinking, we have to find ways to practice thinking in a different way, where we can receive the moment as an open field. I call it the nondual or contemplative mind. In that space, we don’t have to divide the field or reject anything we don’t yet understand as wrong. We don’t have to eliminate everything that’s mysterious, negative, painful, or problematic. With the contemplative mind, we can leave the field open.”¹

I love this invitation to open ourselves to what is mysterious, to begin to contemplate what is unfamiliar or strange to us without the need to push it away. I love this willingness to sit with the tension of what can be found in the “in-between.” As we study the story of the eunuch and Philip, Fr. Richard might ask us to reflect on what is “queer” in our lives or our communities, and then meditate on how we can respond to that queerness with curiosity and love. We might find that what is strange and unfamiliar to us, invites us to reimagine what is possible. We might discover that what is “in between” invites us to reimagine the boundaries and rules that have previously defined us. We might be surprised to learn that what is new to us opens the door to even more freedom and joy than we thought possible. We might come to know that queerness is a gift—both for ourselves and for others. Not only does it break down our own walls, it reminds us that those walls were unnecessary in the first place. Without those obstacles, we can live into a greater sense of love and purpose that transforms ourselves and our communities into spaces of radical acceptance and hope.

And I think our eunuch and Philip can be our guides for this journey, so let’s return to this encounter with fresh eyes and ears.

When our eunuch questions Philip about Jesus, asking to know more about this servant who died for all of God’s beloved children, he demonstrates a radical openness to a faith that is outside of his own culture and life

¹ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/moving-beyond-our-binary-minds/>

experience. When he stops the chariot and inquires about being baptized, he shows an intense desire for God without any regard for the barriers that might have been in place. Philip, our apostle, embodies this same radical openness. Philip is carrying a gospel that is so expansive that he sees no reason for it to be kept from people who might otherwise have been kept out or kept away. He is willing to share it with anyone and everyone who God puts in his path because he is confident that this good news is for all people. Together, their words and actions testify that there is nothing that can keep us from God, especially not human categories, boundaries, or binaries. Together, they testify to a love that is more inclusive and free than anything we could ever create or control.

And together, we might do the same thing. In fact, I believe we must. I believe we must share this ancient message: our LGBTQIA+ siblings are dearly beloved and welcomed by God, just as they are. There is nothing that could separate them from God's invitation to a life in Christ, and it would be sinful to stand in their way of being fully part of our community and God's Kingdom. How could we be the gatekeepers to something that God has already revealed to be for everyone? How could we build walls or make restrictions, when God put Philip in the path of this eunuch specifically to share the good news of Jesus? How could we say who belongs, when this story proves that only God has that power? How could we act like any of this mystery is only available to straight and cisgender people, when it is freely offered to the whole world?

I think any kind of separation or exclusion would be a travesty. I think that would betray our mission to be a mosaic people, united in body, mind, and spirit.

To close, I'd like to share a poem that I found recently, and it brings us back to the very beginning—the dawn of creation, and the passage that started this series. This poem comes from a poet named David Gate, and can be found in his book, "A Rebellion of Care." It's called "They/Them", and is dedicated to Nex Benedict.

Here it is:

They/Them

*If God created night & day
& dawn, of course
& dusk
& the tangerine rosepink sunset
& the deep amethyst twilight
& the infant bright of morning*

*then to perceive the world in binary
is to forgo knowledge of the divine.*

My friends, our queer friends and neighbors have so much to teach us about God's beauty and the awe inspiring complexity of creation. They have so much to teach us about boldness and bravery. They give us the gift of seeing the world beyond our preconceived notions and limited perspectives. They remind us that walls have no place in God's kingdom, and that there is so much joy to be found in the "in between."

So Happy Pride, Bremerton UMC! Let us testify to love together.

Amen.