

Title: We Choose Self-Welcome
Text: Acts 8: 26 – 38
Date: April 29, 2018

In this Easter season we should be reminded that the book of Acts begins with the assertion that the Good News will be spread in ever expanding circles, beginning in Jerusalem, then on to Judea, and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8) This story in the eighth chapter is just one such barrier-breaking story. I do want to reflect on that, but first I want to share a related story from my own life.

During my last two years of college in New York City I said goodbye to dormitory living, and moved into the Broadway Presbyterian Church. There I took up residence with Paul (a Black man), married to Melody (a white woman), and Mark (a grad student at the School of Visual Arts). I did 10 hours of work for the church each week in exchange for living quarters.

Mark grew to be one the closest friends I've had in my life, so this is a bit of a tribute to him. He was raised in a Mennonite family in a small farming community in California where he didn't feel like he fit in. He was a committed Christian, a fabulous artist, and had a heart and fascination for Africa. Oh, and did I mention that he was gay? Being the bright, articulate, animated guy that he was, we would have long discussions about what it meant to be a disciple of Christ, about our aspirations in life . . . and about his struggles with his homosexuality. You see, rather than embracing his sexuality, he saw his orientation as something to keep a lid on. He was not open to most people about his orientation, and would periodically have prolonged struggles with God about wanting to change who he was.

I grew up in a nice Presbyterian church that thankfully never said a bad thing about homosexuality. As a matter of fact they artfully never said a darn thing about homosexuality, good or bad. So I grew up ill-equipped to have thoughtful, meaningful discussions about sexuality in general, let alone these dimensions of expression that we now know as just a fact of life. So ill-equipped as I was, my discussions with Mark on this matter were marked by my being a good, empathetic listener. If *he* felt that what he was doing was "wrong," who was I to argue with him?

After these two years with Mark in New York City, I left for California and Fuller Theological Seminary. Much to my surprise, a couple of years later Mark followed me, and also enrolled in Fuller in the School of World Missions.

As I look back now, I don't recall the reality of homosexuality ever being discussed in any academic context that I was a part of. One of my professors was Rev. Dr. Jack Rogers who – years later – wrote an exceptional book entitled "**Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality**," but this was never discussed publically at the time I was there. I also took a course with Rev. Dr. Mel White who had fought to overcome his own homosexual orientation for decades before coming out, and becoming a leading activist for LGBTQ rights particularly in Christian circles. It seems now that Mark and I both were born in the wrong era.

Mark went on to live an extraordinary life, living in Africa the majority of the time. While we never lived together again, he would write long, profound letters. In the years since leaving Fuller he became an Anglican priest. He became an expert on the Dinka people in Sudan, mastering their difficult language and studying their music. At one point he was kidnapped by the Sudanese Liberation Army and held for a while. Somehow over the years he picked up a Ph.D. in Edinburgh, Scotland. His primary work was in theological education among the Dinka people of the Nile basin in South Sudan. He co-founded the Kakuma Refugee Camp in South Sudan, where he named the young Dinka survivors "the Lost Boys," whose story was later

made into a movie. For a little while he made a heroic, ill-fated effort to be in a relationship with a woman from the Sudan. He once wrote about how strange it was to be a featured speaker at an evangelical conference in the United States – the guest of a group that was causing division in the church over the growing acceptance of the gay community.

Personally, I have changed enormously over the past twenty years in my understanding and embrace of this human rights issue, and in my ability to frame an appreciation and celebration from a theological perspective. Sadly, my friend Mark died close to twenty years ago. How profoundly I regret that I was never able to be a tool in supporting his flourishing in this dimension of his life, and in finding joy in all of who he was.

To me, the moral of the story is that it is not enough to smile, and avoid judgmental comments. For us to be a part of God's expanding circle of grace, we need to be overtly and proudly affirming.

* * *

Returning now to our text, we see that it was “an angel of the Lord” who set up this seemingly chance encounter between Philip and this Ethiopian eunuch, whom we recognize as a religious seeker. Philip helps him interpret what he is reading in the prophet Isaiah. They then come to some water, and the eunuch says, **“Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”** (8:36) It is a darn good thing that Philip didn't have the opportunity to overthink this, because others might have seen several obstacles. If homogeneity were a value, some might have wondered whether a black Ethiopian would fit in. But even more potentially troubling was the fact that this man was a eunuch.

According to Old Testament law this person would have been considered a sexual outlier at best. You can read Deuteronomy 23:1 yourself if you want the graphic version, but it essentially says that **“No male whose sexual organs have been cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.”** One writer on this text says, **“Their transgression of gender binaries and the inability to fit in proper categories made them profane by nature. They do not fit. But despite the fact that in all likelihood he would be turned away by the religious establishment, the Ethiopian Eunuch sought God anyway.”**

What is it like to have such a longing for God that, at the risk of rejection, at the risk of vulnerability, at the risk of disappointment, you seek after God passionately anyway, even when you have been told you are not wanted? That question was touched on recently in a study.

John Blosnich, of West Virginia University's Injury Control Research Center, said that for decades, studies have indicated that religion generally *protects* people against thoughts of suicide. But the research has *also* shown that religion specifically doesn't have that impact on those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or questioning. To the contrary.

In order to study religiosity and suicidal ideation among sexual minorities, Blosnich and his fellow researchers turned to data that surveyed 21,247 students aged 18 to 30 years old. Out of this group, about 2.3% identified as lesbian or gay, 1.1% said they were questioning their sexuality.

Analyzing this data, the research team found that 3.7% of heterosexual young adults reported recent thoughts of suicide, while those questioning their sexuality had the highest rate of recent thoughts about suicide at 16.4%, followed by bisexual individuals (11.4%) and lesbian or gay

individuals (6.5%). (see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/queer-youth-religion-suicide-study_us_5ad4f7b3e4b077c89ceb9774)

We know that 5% of heterosexual youth reported attempting suicide in their lifetimes, compared to 20 percent of bisexual youth, 17 percent of questioning youth, and 14 percent of gay or lesbian youth. Bringing it closer to home, our own John Burns told me how there were three suicides just from the ranks of his high school classmates, all who were struggling to come to terms with their own sexuality. I read in these statistics an invitation to the church.

I was raised in an era where some have said that “therapeutic preaching” was the norm. It was like there was a prevailing message of “I’m OK, and you’re OK.” It was common to find “All Are Welcome” written in bulletins. That was all well and good, but in practice it tended to offer a form of self-welcome – a welcome felt most by people just like ourselves.

By contrast, if we in fact are serious about *choosing* welcome to those *not* just like ourselves, we can no longer be coy. As we can see from the above statistics, being overt in our welcome can literally save lives. “Choosing welcome” is not about making *us* feel good for being welcoming. Choosing welcome is all about *the other*. We never know when someone might walk through those doors desperately needing no-nonsense affirmation.

Even though Philip was likely aware of the Deuteronomic law prohibiting eunuchs from the assembly of Lord, it was obvious to him that he was being prompted by a higher power to baptize this man on the spot. The circle of welcome was indeed expanding ever wider.

I came across this quote by Sr. Laretta Mather that I believe speaks to us as a church as we consider how audacious we should be when choosing welcome. She writes, "**The community of persons closest to us has the power to keep us in the tomb of fear, or to call us into the daybreak of hope. Do those around us call us to huddle more closely together and bolt the doors of our upper room? Or do they help us throw the doors open because we have experienced together the freeing call to action which is the Spirit of Jesus in our midst?**"

As I inch towards winding up, let me share the ending of a long poem that Ethel brought to my attention that was written by a non-binary Presbyterian pastor:

“God’s reality is wider than human definition
or even, human imagination.

And one day . . .
one day, Beloved,
the knowledge of the Lord,
of God’s upside-down,
binary-breaking,
mysterious,
queer reality,
will cover the earth like the waters cover the seas.

And no one will hurt us or destroy us anymore.” (by Slats)

In conclusion, I am happy and honored to have known my friend Mark, but I am sad that I didn’t have the chance to be an even better friend for him. I don’t want to be sad like that again. Won’t you join me in opening the doors wide? Along with the Ethiopian eunuch, may we too be converted.

Amen

Acts 8: 26 – 38 Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

²⁶ Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth."

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.