

## ***From Exclusion to Inclusion: Eunuchs in the Bible***

Deuteronomy 23.1, Isaiah 56.3-5, Matthew 19:12, and Acts 8.26-39

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### I

Today we begin a series of three sermons on the biblical basis for including LGBTQ persons in congregational life. What biblical texts and themes offer us a rationale for welcoming LGBTQ persons into the full range of congregational life and ministry? This is a big topic and three sermons will not be enough to explore it fully, but at least we can make a beginning.

You may wonder why we are not presenting a biblical rationale for excluding LGBTQ persons from the full range of congregational life and ministry. We have two reasons. First, we're not presenting a traditional perspective on the Bible because we're already familiar with it. For more than 30 years now, traditional views of what the Bible says have been the most widely articulated views in Mennonite conversations about LGBTQ persons. For three decades, traditional views have received a lot of air time. By contrast, a biblical rationale for *welcoming* LGBTQ persons has not received nearly as much air time. Over the last 30 years we've not heard as much about how the Bible opens the door to covenanted LGBTQ relationships. In this series, we're trying to rectify an imbalance that has been present for decades.

The second reason for focusing on a welcoming perspective is that the traditional exclusionary perspective has deeply wounded a lot of people. I'll use an analogy. If I wanted to, I could write a sermon arguing that the Bible rejects biracial marriages and biracial children. For that sermon, I could use books like

Leviticus, Ezra, and Nehemiah.<sup>1</sup> But I will never do that sermon because it would deeply wound a lot of people in this congregation who are in biracial marriages or who are themselves biracial. In a similar way, sermons that reject the full participation of LGBTQ persons would also wound people here at Berkey.

## II

In this series, it's important to keep in mind the Bible's overarching theme of covenant. One of the Bible's most important themes is the covenant between God and the people of God. Covenant comes up in about 400 texts.<sup>2</sup> God promises to be faithful to the covenant relationship with Israel, and in return, Israel is expected to be faithful to the covenant relationship with God. When the Israelites were not faithful to the covenant, the prophets lambasted them for their faithlessness. The biblical idea of covenant is why we place so much emphasis on baptism and on marriage. In baptism, we and God make a covenant of fidelity with each other. In marriage, the two partners make a covenant of fidelity with each other before God. For all these, God's covenant is the model. If you read the Bible carefully, you'll see that it doesn't emphasize marriage as much as you might think. What it does emphasize in a big way is covenant—and the biblical emphasis on covenant is what gives marriage between two people so much weight.

For this reason, as a pastor I would prefer that we talk about covenant as a primary theological category rather than marriage. And here's the thing: biblical covenants are made between many different kinds of people. God, who is beyond gender, makes a covenant with us. Kings made covenants with other kings. Men made covenants with other men, as David and Jonathan did (1 Sam 18.3). Women

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<sup>1</sup> The concern for purity in Leviticus, when paired with Ezra 9-10 and Nehemiah 13:23-31, might become a biblical basis for such a sermon. However, this would represent poor biblical exegesis in light of other texts such as Ruth that bless biracial marriages and in light of the Bible's overarching eschatological vision that people of every tribe and nation will inhabit God's glorious future (Revelation 5).

<sup>2</sup> For this I used the Oremus Bible Browser, the NRSV text, at <http://bible.oremus.org/>.

also made covenants with each other, as Ruth did with Naomi (Ruth 1.16-17). I'm not suggesting those covenants were sexual; they were instead covenants of fidelity. The larger point is that biblical covenants have a supple, adaptable nature. You could use them in different situations for different reasons, but the common feature in every covenant is this idea of fidelity. Both parties agree to remain true to each other, and only to each other. This idea of covenant opens the door to committed relationships—marriages, if you will—between a man and a woman, or between two men, or between two women. No matter who makes them, these covenants are meant to endure through thick and thin. They are not to be taken lightly.

### III

Now let's shift gears to talk about eunuchs in the Bible. Why are texts on eunuchs crucial for our conversations about LGBTQ persons? Because in a sense, eunuchs were the ancient world's equivalent of transgender persons. Eunuchs were typically born as male, and then at some point later in life, genital surgery was performed to turn them into a third gender, the gender known as eunuch.

In our conversations about sexuality, we sometimes assume there are only two genders, male and female. And yet there are people among us who scratch their heads and say, "Well, actually, I'm not sure what my gender is. I don't sense that I fit in the category of either male or female. I think I might be something else." Or they may say, "I was born with one gender, but have come to know my real gender identity is something else, so I'll undergo an operation to facilitate that change." When we in the church hear this, we might respond with questions: "Hmmm, can someone who isn't sure about their gender, or who is transgendered, follow Christ? Can we baptize such a person? Invite them to chair the Worship Commission? Call them to be a pastor?"

Here's where the biblical texts on eunuchs can help us. Let's turn our attention to four texts that mention eunuchs. The first is in Deuteronomy 23.1. It reads:

*No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD.*

This text doesn't use the word "eunuch," but it describes what eunuchs functionally are: males whose sexual organs are damaged or removed in some way. This law, taken from early in Israel's history, declares that eunuchs who cannot bear children because of genital surgery were not welcome in the assembly of Yahweh. Membership was denied them. Eunuchs were like blemished sheep, or damaged turtledoves, which could not be sacrificed to God. The thinking here was that only whole and clean and pure things were acceptable to God, that God would never accept anything flawed or blemished.

A second text about eunuchs comes from Isaiah 56.3-5, which says:

*<sup>3</sup>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." <sup>4</sup>For thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, <sup>5</sup>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.*

To understand the radical message of this text, it helps to know more about eunuchs in the ancient near east. Eunuchs were originally males who had surgery to remove part or all of their sexual organs. As a result, they could not have children. Depending on the type of surgery, some of them could still engage in sexual intercourse. But none of them could create children.

These surgically altered males, or eunuchs, were treated as a third gender—neither male nor female. The ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Israelites, Persians, Greeks, Romans—they all knew about eunuchs. Take the Persian Empire. The various royal courts of the Persian Empire employed over 3,000 eunuchs.<sup>3</sup> At court they carried messages, worked as scribes, and gave political advice to the king. One of their main roles was to guard the king’s harem—his wives and concubines. Because eunuchs were incapable of having children, kings knew that by having eunuchs guard his harem, all children born to his wives and concubines were his children and not someone else’s. In some times and places, eunuchs also worked as prostitutes on the bottom of society.

Genital surgery affected a eunuch’s physical appearance, especially if it happened before puberty. Eunuchs didn’t look like either men or women. They usually couldn’t grow beards. They had soft, fair skin, along with a distinctive body shape. Visual markers like these meant they were easy to recognize as an ambiguous third gender, neither male nor female.

Eunuchs often had no family. When castrated as youngsters, they were generally taken away from their parents and raised elsewhere with other eunuchs. This meant they were cut off from their families of origin. And because they couldn’t procreate, they had no children or grandchildren either. Thus they were people without a past or future family. In a world that put so much emphasis on family, this lack of family was a big deal for eunuchs because it turned them into excluded outsiders.<sup>4</sup>

In this cultural context, the words of Isaiah 56 are astonishing. No longer are eunuchs dry trees, incapable of bearing fruit. God now says that eunuchs will have

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<sup>3</sup> Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* (Eerdmans, 2015), chapter 2 (page number unavailable).

<sup>4</sup> Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1-29, discusses the background of eunuchs prior to late antiquity and the early Byzantine empire.

a house, a monument, and a name better than any biological sons and daughters. They are now welcome into the assembly of the Lord, as long as they keep the sabbath every week, choose what pleases God (that part is a bit ambiguous), and keep the covenant with God. This text flatly reverses the law about eunuchs laid down in Deuteronomy, rendering it null and void. So we can see that from Deuteronomy to Isaiah, the Bible moves toward a more inclusive stance. Marginal people who had been prevented from joining the people of God are now welcome.

The third passage comes from Matthew 19:12, where Jesus is speaking:

*<sup>12</sup>For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”*

It’s hard to know everything this passage might mean since it comes in the context of a longer conversation about divorce. Even so, we can identify 4 points that seem clear.

1. Jesus knew about the existence of eunuchs. They were not strangers to him.
2. Jesus acknowledges that some people are eunuchs from birth. They came out of the womb that way and had no choice in the matter.
3. He also acknowledges that some eunuchs were forced into this third gender by others—by the circumstances of their lives. They too did not have a choice in the matter.
4. Jesus further says that some people choose to make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. It’s hard to know what he means by that phrase “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” Still, Jesus clearly welcomes eunuchs just as they are into this

grand and wonderful project that he and God have going. Jesus therefore affirms the welcoming stance announced back in Isaiah 56.

Our last text is the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8.26-39. Since this text is familiar to most of us, I won't read it aloud. But I will name 2 intriguing aspects of this story.

1. Philip welcomes this eunuch into baptism with open arms. Philip doesn't hesitate when the eunuch asks for baptism. In Philip's mind, of course the eunuch can be baptized into Jesus, even though the eunuch is neither male nor female.
2. Philip makes no moral demands as a condition of baptism. Philip does not say, "Now look, eunuch, before I baptize you, you have to agree to certain moral standards. You have to agree that you *will* do a, b, and c, and that you will *not* do x, y, or z. Promise me, then we'll get into the water together." No, there is nothing like that in the story. Philip cares only that the eunuch has a simple commitment to Jesus and a basic understanding of scripture.

These four biblical texts show a trajectory toward welcoming eunuchs into the fellowship of God's people. This group of alternately gendered sexual minorities is no longer rejected but welcomed. After the exclusion of eunuchs in Deuteronomy, Isaiah brings a new message that eunuchs are now fully welcome. Both Jesus and the early church verify this welcome. Sexually marginal eunuchs can become followers of Jesus. They can be baptized. They are welcome in the community of faith.

As we ponder the place of differently gendered persons in the church, the biblical texts about eunuchs can guide us.