

Sermon Series “The Bible is Queer and Genderful”
Sermon 3: “Out of Bounds for the Reign of God”

Texts: Isaiah 56:3-8 & Matthew 19: 11-15

This is the third sermon in our series called *The Bible is Queer and Genderful*. Today we are going to continue our focus on gender in the Bible and gender identity. As we said last week, it’s important to remember that gender identity is different from sexual orientation. We all have a gender, we all express our gender identity, and we all have a sexual orientation. **Sexual orientation** is about your relationships to others - who you are sexually and romantically attracted to. **Gender identity** is about how you see yourself, your internal sense of who you are: am I male, female, both or neither? Your gender identity may or may not match the sex you were assigned at birth. If you are cisgender, that means that your gender identity *does* match the sex you were assigned at birth. I was assigned female at birth - I identify as female in terms of gender, and so I am cisgender (“on the side of” in latin). If your gender identity does not match the sex you were assigned at birth, then you may identify as transgender. This may all be very familiar to you, but it may not be. We are in different places and we are all learning and so it’s important that we take time to understand definitions and that we are on the same page.

This morning I want to pick up a thread from our sermon last week and delve a bit deeper. Last week I made the claim that in the Bible there are texts and stories about people who did not conform to the gender binary. And by gender binary I mean the “social system in which it is assumed that people come in only two genders - male and female.” The gender binary is the norm in white western contexts. **The Bible bears witness to people who did not conform to the gender binary and who lived lives in gender roles that did not match their assigned sex at birth.** We talked last week about how the presence of a third gender or multiple genders have existed since antiquity. So this is nothing new, and the Bible bears witness to it.

The most obvious example of non-binary folks in the Bible are people called *eunuchs*. “Eunuch” is an old word, we don’t use it anymore. But there are many examples of eunuchs in the Bible. Eunuchs were men who were castrated.

This was actually a pretty well known practice in places like ancient Assyria, Babylon and Persia. All of these nations used castration for different purposes. Sometimes as a penalty for a crime, and it was a way of marking someone as a slave for life. Other times eunuchs were created to form a people who were considered neither male nor female - and so could move more easily between gendered spaces. So for example eunuchs could serve as keepers of a king’s harem. They would look after the king’s many wives and were considered trustworthy guardians of the harem because there was no threat of them impregnating any of

the king's wives. Eunuchs also served as advisers and sometimes close companions to kings, and to queens - and so were allowed into spaces specifically reserved for men, and spaces that were specifically reserved for women. They were in this kind of liminal space. Neither male nor female. Somewhere in the social ladder a few steps above women, but definitely several steps below men.

This liminal gender space that eunuchs occupied was not problematic in Assyria, Babylon and Persia. But it was for the Israelites. Clear boundaries are what provided identity and distinction for the Hebrew people. We see many laws in the Hebrew Scriptures that prohibit a disruption of clear categories. So for example mixing fibers produced for clothing was prohibited as was planting multiple kinds of crops in a field. We find the law from Deut 23:1 that commands, that no man who is castrated can be admitted to the assembly of the Lord". Imagine if you were a Hebrew eunuch who was returning home after exile in Babylon where you had been serving in the courts of the king. There was no place for you.

Eunuchs found themselves cut off from their people, not allowed to share in God's covenant. Plus it was a disgrace for them as it was for women who could not bear children - if you could not reproduce - you were not blessed. It was through your children that you would be remembered and that you would have a future.

With this context in mind, the words that the prophet Isaiah speaks are most striking and amazing. And this portion of Isaiah was written when the people of Israel and Judah were coming out of Babylon and where trying to figure out how to

gather their community and reshape their identity after having been scattered and taken against their will. The prophet says, *“Do not let the eunuch say, “I am just a dry tree”, for thus says the Lord...to the eunuchs who keep my sabbath, who do the things that please me and hold fast to my covenant, I will give them in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name...I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.” For thus says the Lord who gathers the outcasts of Israel.*

This really is an incredible word within the Hebrew Bible. A prophetic word that breaks in from God as God demands a remedy to this situation of exclusion of eunuchs to the covenant. A whole group of people have been excluded because they do not fit into a gender category that is clearly defined and God declares them acceptable. **And notice something here:** God does not say they should change, that they should conform to the societal norms, that they should somehow try to fit by taking on specific gendered roles in the culture. NO! God declares them acceptable. Period! And furthermore the previous understandings of what it meant to be fruitful and blessed have now changed and made more expansive. Blessing and fruitfulness is no longer narrowly confined to just having the ability procreate. God gives eunuchs who did not have that ability a name, *“an everlasting name that shall not be cut off”*.

What God calls for is not for the eunuchs to change themselves, but for the entire community to be transformed into something entirely new, like nothing they had ever seen before.

Isn't it a shame, that for so many people, and especially for queer and transgender folk, the message that you receive when you walk into a church is: change first, then you'll be accepted. Conform first to the binary system, then comes acceptance. Conform first to society's expectations of gender identity and gender roles, and then we'll accept you. Churches do this because so many churches in north America have become captive to the domination system. The mainstream white North American church - by and large, has not so much modeled the Reign of God as it has mimicked the white western male domination system. So people who don't fit the binary, who don't fit conform to white western culture, are seen and treated as outsiders. And yet...what Isaiah witnesses to is that the whole system, the whole community needs to be transformed continually. And often the people in most need of transformation are the people in the center of power and privilege who don't see themselves needing transformation!

We see this challenge of the center and of privilege through Jesus too. If we pay close attention to Jesus and the people that Jesus is often calling to change - all of us are included. But some of the harshest and most direct and challenging words are for people in positions of power and privilege who don't see their power and privilege as problematic!

And if we look at what's happening in our passage from Matthew today, when Jesus talks about eunuchs, we will see this taking place. Was this the first time you had ever heard this passage where Jesus mentions eunuchs? (First time for some of us). But how many in here have seldom heard this passage read from Matthew? It's interesting isn't it. It's worth pondering why we don't hear this passage talked about much.

The context of this passage in Matthew is that Jesus is arguing with male religious authorities -about marriage and when it is okay to divorce your wife, and then Jesus speaks about eunuchs, which seems kind of odd. He says, "not everyone can accept this teaching.... But only those to whom it is given: "There are eunuchs who have been eunuchs from birth. There are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others. And there are eunuch who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom."

Many biblical scholars argue that Jesus is not speaking here literally about eunuchs. He's talking about choosing abstinence or being celibate and they connect this portion to the argument Jesus is having about marriage just prior to this. And there is a lot of interesting discussion around this, and how to interpret these verses. In fact early Christians interpreters - in the first 100 and 200 years of Christianity had a whole variety of interpretations of this passage and many did take these verses literally and chose either to castrate themselves or to live outside of their assigned sex, or both. There's a lot more we could say here, but I want to

for our purposes to put forth what some queer and trans theologians have been asking: “How and when did we decide that Jesus wasn’t speaking literally about eunuchs?” Why wouldn’t he be literally speaking about eunuchs - they were around during Jesus’ time, and they were not particularly known for being celibate or for being models of celibacy. In fact they were often scorned and looked down for not being *real men*! For not being REAL anything. They didn’t fit a category that was easily understood, they were even referred to with words like monstrous, illegitimate, false. Not real people.

And of course if we think about it, these are the kinds of people who Jesus tended to hang out with and lift up - people whose bodies, whose lives were not considered real or legitimate. One scholar even suggests—which I think is very plausible—that Jesus and his disciples were name called “oh you’re just all a bunch of eunuchs” you’re not real men! After all, Jesus and his male followers left their homes, they left their responsibilities as “men” and as “upholders of tradition”, they left their access to power and status. So Jesus may very well have been accused of being a eunuch. Either way, he knew of the eunuchs marginalized status and their tendency to be seen as not real or legitimate. And so what he does in these three sentences much like what Isaiah does, is remarkable:

Jesus says “there are those who have been eunuchs from birth” and could there be speaking of people who were born with diverse sex characteristics, as is the case with intersex folks. “There are those who have been made eunuchs by

others” - and here Jesus could very well have been speaking about people who were castrated against their will. And when Jesus says “there are those who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom” he could be talking about people who are called to live a life outside of their assigned sex — for the sake of the Reign of God! (see *Transforming* pg. 106).

Jesus does not say that eunuchs need to be healed or changed to enter the kingdom. He doesn't ever say that they are in need of “fixing” in order to be included in the reign of God. No kind of illegitimacy or need for fixing is implied here. What is truly in need of healing is the blindness of the people in power who can't see that the eunuchs and the children and the barren women are already on their way ahead into the kingdom, they are already living into the Reign of God! But not everyone can accept this teaching Jesus says.

What I find so beautiful and liberating is that what is shown here is that to live into your identity as a queer or trans person is part of your calling. God and Jesus call you to move outside the gender binary in order to be your most authentic self and to be able to live more fully and faithfully in loving relationship with yourself, with others and with God... This is not just who you are, it is who you are called to be by God. And it is a witness. And when you move out of bounds in this way, it can be part of your journey of living into the Reign of God.

And if you think about it, this calling to move out of bounds for the reign of God is on all of us in different ways. Christianity—if you think about it—is

actually really quite queer! Authentic Christianity is all about disrupting binary thinking and rigid categories of who is in and who is out. And the good news of the gospel is really all the time, calling each of us out of bounds - in whatever ways that we've become captive to the domination system. Out of bounds of patriarchy, out of bounds of violence and gun worship, out of bounds of white supremacy and racism. Theologian Austen Hartke says it plainly: "When God calls us to something, it is a call to move out of bounds."

And so here we are captured by these words of Isaiah and of Jesus today: Eunuchs are included as they are and so the whole community needs to be transformed. Jesus said that eunuchs are not only included, they are called to move out of bounds and be *as they are* for the sake of the Reign of God. And so we must take our cues from those who are modeling that call to move out of bounds. Queer and trans folk are witnessing in the church and to the church. We're called to move out of bounds. Always for the sake of the reign of God, the reign of compassion and mercy, the reign of love for our neighbors and for ourselves.

Amen? Amen

