

“He, She, They, Them... Us”

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Based upon Gen. 1:26-27; Acts 8:26-40

What do you see when you look at this picture?¹ Do you see cheerleaders doing a chest bump or the head of a bug? How about this one?² A butterfly? Talking elders wearing headdresses? OK, now let’s get more concrete. What do you see in this one?³ An independent little girl who owns her own power or someone not playing the role that she should? What about these next two? Do you see a woman and a man, in that order, or something different? Do you see kindred spirits, unsettling strangers, or troubled souls?⁴ Now think about how you picture God when you read these words from *Genesis*?⁵ Finally, how about the image on the bulletin of today’s story from *Acts*?⁶ What do you notice first about these men?

We all go through life with preconceived ideas of what things and people should look like and act like, what is right and natural and what is wrong and unnatural. Our minds use these ideas to judge our surroundings and others, and, if we are Christians, and therefore students of the Bible, also to interpret the texts that we read. Ideally, we are supposed to start with the texts, allow the Holy Spirit to inform our understanding of what they mean through our in-depth study, and then form our opinions about the world based upon those understandings. This process is called “doing exegesis.” But frequently Christians approach the text from the opposite direction, bringing their preconceived ideas and looking for texts to support our views and rejecting those that do not. That is called doing “eisegesis.” It’s almost impossible not to do this at least some of the time because we all are informed by the times in which we live, and are therefore biased whether we realize it or not. But if our main approach to Scripture is to go looking for what we already believe, then not only do we miss the opportunity to learn and grow in our faith led by the Spirit, we also risk turning the Bible into a weapon or a trap, instead of a source of good news for all of God’s children.

In today’s story from *Acts*, a man named Philip, who was a newly elected deacon in the fledgling Church, (not the Philip who was one of the Twelve), had an opportunity to use the Scriptures to teach a stranger he met along the road about how to understand his own identity before God. Philip could have easily found sacred texts to use as “clobber texts” against the man who was so different from himself; but moved by the Spirit, Philip chose instead to use the Scriptures as a testament to God’s love, and to share that good news with the stranger as a gift.

¹ Slide of Rorschach inkblot shown. [See https://miro.medium.com/max/3200/1*5UYKB2rIoI5v-dbSv3hVfw.jpeg](https://miro.medium.com/max/3200/1*5UYKB2rIoI5v-dbSv3hVfw.jpeg)

² Slide of Rorschach inkblot shown. [See https://cdn1.vectorstock.com/i/1000x1000/89/65/rorschach-inkblot-test-random-vector-30518965.jpg](https://cdn1.vectorstock.com/i/1000x1000/89/65/rorschach-inkblot-test-random-vector-30518965.jpg)

³ Slide of a little girl dressed as Batman sitting with lots of other little girls dressed as princesses. [See https://i.pinimg.com/originals/10/a8/eb/10a8eb4403b9c0f568209da6cbd56278.jpg](https://i.pinimg.com/originals/10/a8/eb/10a8eb4403b9c0f568209da6cbd56278.jpg)

⁴ The first is Brianna Titone, an elected official in Colorado who is a transgender woman. The second is Kenny Ethan Jones, a transgender male model and activist. [See https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/styles/width_300/public/2021a_titone%2C%20brianna.jpg?itok=lvBUbQHR](https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/styles/width_300/public/2021a_titone%2C%20brianna.jpg?itok=lvBUbQHR); and https://media2.s-nbcnews.com/j/newscms/2020_02/3181921/200111-kenny-jones-al-1121_d93e2f698e997d5a71f6a280125657b8.fit-1240w.jpg

⁵ Slide of *Genesis* 1:26-67 shown.

⁶ [See https://jeanieshepard.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/screenshot_2016-08-22-05-49-261.png](https://jeanieshepard.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/screenshot_2016-08-22-05-49-261.png)

In so doing, he not only showed the man the right way and the wrong way to use Scripture, and welcomed him into the fold of the Christian community as a beloved child of God, he also shows us how to move beyond our preconceptions into a broader understanding of God's grace in Jesus Christ, which, like the Noahic rainbow we celebrated last week, embodies love and mercy for all of God's beloved children.

Now when people have read today's story through the years, they have seen all kinds of things in it based upon their preconceived ideas. Some have seen in it the story of a white man bringing a black man into the fold. Some have seen in it a great contrast between worldly power and spiritual power since the Ethiopian man was a rich, royal official, and Philip was just a Jewish Christian, presumably poor and relatively powerless. Some have seen in this story the first Gentile to be converted to Christianity through baptism, and others the first apostle to have his eyes opened by a faithful stranger to the vast inclusiveness of God's love. But I think if we want to understand this story, it's best to start by first focusing on what Luke, the author of *Acts*, "saw" when he pictured this story in his mind's eye.

When Luke tells the story, two descriptions stand out. The first is that the encounter took place "on a wilderness road." If the road that the men met on actually ran through the wilderness, that little detail might not mean much. It would simply be a geographical footnote. But the road from Jerusalem to Gaza didn't go through the desert. So, either Luke needed a better map, or he was getting at something else with this story. I think it's the latter. I think Luke was saying that the men met in a place that was outside of the established jurisdictions of their communities, outside of the boxes that ordinarily defined them. They weren't on the Temple grounds in Jerusalem or in the courtyard of the palace of queen whom the Ethiopian man served. They were in between, in a place where rules are less binding and where the Spirit likes to work. The second defining description in this story is that the man Philip encountered in the wilderness was a eunuch, a castrated man. We don't generally talk about sexual identity, let alone the anatomy that shapes it in the Church. It makes people uneasy and to some seems inappropriate. But five times in this story Luke chose to describe the official not by name or rank, but simply as "the eunuch," making it pretty clear that his significance to Luke had little to do with his nationality, race, or power, and everything to do with his identity as a sexual outlier.

Eastern Orthodox tradition came to call the eunuch Simeon Bachos, so I will too from now on. Although Simeon would have been esteemed in Ethiopia as the treasurer of the royal court in which he served, and considered especially trustworthy and valuable by virtue of having been rendered sexually non-threatening to work for the queen, to the Temple authorities in Jerusalem, Simeon would have been seen both as an outsider and an unnatural kind of person. *Deuteronomy* expressly prohibits eunuchs from being Jewish proselytes or worshiping in the Temple, because their anatomy and corresponding inability to reproduce as God commanded, made them "defective." (Deut. 23:2). This means that although the story doesn't mention it, the odds are good that not long before Simeon and Philip met, someone had told Simeon that he wasn't welcome in the Temple, despite his coming such a long way, because he was unnatural and didn't fit in the right boxes. According to Luke, Simeon had gone to Jerusalem to worship, apparently, drawn to Yahweh and Jewish theology. But despite all of his power and wealth, his hope of belonging in the community of the chosen would have gone unfulfilled because of the

part of his identity that was outside of his control.

But here's one of the interesting things about the story, the status of the characters shifts all the time depending on how you look at it. For example, although Simeon would have been an outcast in Jerusalem, in the wilderness, he was the one who looked like the image of success and authority, not Philip. On the road, Philip fit the "other" box far more. Imagine Simeon, riding along in his posh royal chariot, reading a scroll of *Isaiah* few could ever afford, let alone read, and suddenly a Jewish peasant appears out of nowhere and starts jogging alongside him shouting out to him, "Do you know what you are reading?" If you were being driven somewhere off the beaten path in a Mercedes limousine, reading a sophisticated text, and some random man in sandals offered to jump into your car to enlighten you about the meaning of what you were reading, would you invite him in? I don't think so. But this encounter was not driven by chance, it was driven by the Spirit who specifically sent Philip to give good news to Simeon. So, it wasn't long before the two men were huddled together over a sacred scroll, chewing together on difficult questions about identity, faith, and what it takes to belong to and be loved by God.

"How can I understand what I am reading if no one guides me?" the clearly well-educated Simeon humbly replied to Philip's presumptuous question from the road, beginning their conversation by acknowledging his outsider status. The text Simeon was reading was from *Isaiah* 53:7-8, one of the so-called "suffering servant" passages which Christians cannot read without picturing Jesus in their minds' eye. No one knows for sure why Simeon was reading this specific passage, but if he had just had *Deuteronomy* thrown in his face when he tried to worship in the Temple, it makes sense why he would have turned to *Isaiah* for solace. *Isaiah* holds hope for both foreigners and eunuchs in the form of a divine promise:

"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."

This text is in Chapter 56, but when Philip showed up, Simeon wasn't there yet literally or spiritually. The words he was stuck on were in Chapter 53, and describe someone being crushed and wounded, oppressed and afflicted. He didn't know who the text was talking about, but it's safe to assume in that moment he knew what it felt like to be treated that way. People today whose gender identity does not match the gender they were assigned at birth, or fit traditional binary forms of male and female certainly do. According to a 2015 U.S. Transgender survey, they are among the most persecuted and afflicted in society today. 30% of those surveyed had been fired because of their gender identity. 46% had been verbally harassed. 9% had been physically attacked and more than double the national average are living in poverty.⁷ Other websites record even grimmer statistics, saying 80% of transgender students feel unsafe at

⁷ As cited in "On Affirming and Celebrating the Full Dignity and Humanity of People of All Gender Identities," Overture to the 223rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), submitted by New Castle Presbytery, 2018; retrieved from <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000312?print>

school, 58.7 % have been harassed, and 41% have been suicidal.⁸ Our society tells people who identify as transgender or gender fluid they are unnatural or wrong in all kinds of ways. But this year, people who fall in these categories are under attack like never before. More than 30 states' legislatures have proposed more than 117 bills to limit their rights to do everything from play sports, to use the bathroom, to have access to medical care.⁹

Simeon, despite all of his power and his wealth, could not get into the Temple. He wanted to know the love of God and be faithful to God. Recently rejected and reading about suffering, he couldn't resist asking Philip, "Who is this text about?" That is when Spirit-led exegesis replaced eisegesis in the story. In that moment, Philip has a choice. He could have taken one look at Simeon and told him that it didn't matter who the prophet was talking about because Simeon was never going to be right before God, or he could have said the text was about Israel, a people to whom Simeon would never belong. But he didn't because his own experience of the risen Christ had changed how he understood the text. Now in that prophecy, he could hear the foreshadowing of Jesus' ministry of salvation for the world, and in his Spirit-driven encounter with Simeon know that Isaiah's promise in Chapter 56 had been fulfilled in Christ. A new age of greater inclusivity had begun, one in which even eunuchs would be loved as God's children. "Have I got good news for you!" Philip said to Simeon, knowing through Christ that that was what the Gospel was meant to be: good news for all people. So, when Simeon asked "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Philip didn't rattle off all the reasons Simeon didn't fit in the old boxes, instead he said, "Nothing!" and baptized him on the spot. He didn't convert or change Simeon into someone "acceptable." He was already faithful and remained a eunuch after the baptism. He just welcomed him into God's family. Then, having accomplished what the Spirit wanted him to do, Philip disappeared, whisked away to share God's love somewhere else.

"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" Jesus once told his followers in a conversation about law and sexual norms in which he objected far more to straight men and women who violate their marriage vows than to people who fall into any of the three eunuch categories. (Matt. 19:12). Why then do so many people today, in the name of Christ, object to those who don't fit into the established boxes of old? Why do so many people feel that it is the Christian thing to do to deny God's children medical care and protection from discrimination? Fear of the unfamiliar, of change? Perhaps. Our society is indeed changing, and along with it, so are the ways people understand and refer to their identities. This can be unsettling and awkward as we struggle to find the right ways to refer to one another and see one another. We are on another wilderness road in terms of where our language and understandings of each other will ultimately end up. But as disciples of the risen Christ, we must remain open to the Spirit, so that the Gospel can remain good news for all defined by God's love, not by human fear, hatred, or condemnation.

⁸ See "*Why Trans People Need More Visibility*," Infographic, Trans Student Educational Resources (Landyn Pan, 2021); available at <https://www.transstudent.org/graphics>.

⁹ Wax-Thibodeaux, Emily, "*After Arkansas passes its trans ban, parents and teens wonder: Should we stay?*", THE WASHINGTON POST, April 24, 2021; retrievable at https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/after-arkansas-passes-its-trans-ban-parents-and-teens-wonder-should-we-stay/2021/04/23/74c822f0-9d34-11eb-8005-bffc3a39f6d3_story.html

Our denomination is open this way. In 2018, the 223rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) affirmed its commitment “to the full welcome, acceptance, and inclusion of transgender people, people who identify as gender non-binary, and all people of all gender identities,”¹⁰ and to advocating on their behalf in the world, because we recognize, as Philip did, that this is what the good news of the Gospel calls us to affirm. We understand that we are in no place to judge whom God calls beloved when Jesus died for all people, and when, as *Genesis* proclaims, all people are made in the image of a God whose divine nature is neither male nor female, but somehow both. We all can be classed as “other” to someone, but none of us are to God. “What is to prevent me from belonging?” Simeon the eunuch effectively asked Philip, after hearing the good news of God’s love in the risen Christ. As people of faith may we always be open to the whisper of the Spirit who tells us to reply to anyone who asks this question, “Nothing!” And then may we work in the world to make it so. Amen.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, General Assembly overture.