

“What Easter Makes Clear: Everybody’s In!”

Isaiah 56:1-8; Luke 23:32-33, 39-43; Acts 8:26-39 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be stretched by the vast embrace of your life-giving love. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

One of the surest ways to know that someone hasn’t read much scripture is if you hear them repeating simplistic declarations like “The Bible says it. That settles it.” The Bible says a lot of things. But without the Holy Spirit aiding our discernment about the varying levels of authority and importance of those multitudinous things, it doesn’t settle much. Another thing you’ll sometimes hear is that we should just focus on the New Testament, because that’s where we find the God of Love and Mercy, as opposed to the Big, Bad God of Wrath who supposedly dominates the Old Testament. Jesus would have found such an assertion entirely nonsensical; he was very clear that he wasn’t somehow inventing a whole new God, but rather that he was fulfilling what the God of his ancestors had been trying to show us for centuries.

One of the ways these false stereotypes show up in our modern discourse about how the church should position itself in relation to society is that people who interpret scripture in ways that are rigid and punitive – taking a fear-based approach that focuses on who is in and who is out – try to claim that such strict hierarchies are “traditional” Christianity that must be preserved in the face of modern distortions.

It's simply not true. Or more precisely, it's only half the story. The truth is that these two strands of strict tribalism and a more open, accepting compassion-based faith are interwoven throughout all of scripture. Throughout the centuries, Christians have made choices about which parts of that complex tapestry they want to shine their light on, for better or worse. But don't you let anyone tell you that accepting all people just as they are isn't biblical; the only person who would try to make such a claim is someone who hasn't read Isaiah.

It might seem a bit contradictory for me to say that the Bible doesn't settle much in a sermon series purporting to explore "What Easter Makes Clear." But first, we must recognize that "Easter" and "the Bible" are not the same thing. Much of the story of Holy Week and Easter can be interpreted to show Jesus fulfilling the ancient words of the scriptures of his tradition. There are also parts of the Old Testament that one could argue Jesus refutes. Indeed, I think it would be fair to say that part of the drama of the New Testament is Jesus expressing a clear preference for one of those two strands that are interwoven throughout the tradition from which he arose. Jesus came to show us how the God of Compassion and Mercy is inviting us to live. He had his moments when he gave a nod to the more wrathful aspects of God's justice, but the way Holy Week and Easter, in particular, unfolded, tipped the scales forever away from vengeance and domination. And again, to be clear, that was not Jesus offering us a brand new revelation about God's nature. That was Jesus showing

us the path of faithfulness to the God whose worship had shaped his entire life; or if you prefer a broader, cosmological interpretation, the God he had known and been and been with from the Beginning.

And so we have these two passages about eunuchs and foreigners, separated by centuries, but bound together by a shared testimony to the welcoming nature of God. I'm not sure there could be a better poster child for God's fully accepting love than the Ethiopian eunuch. He was a foreigner, so his language and customs and presumed loyalties and obligations were different than the Jews in Jerusalem or Galilee. He was a eunuch, so he represented marginalized groups in terms of both gender and sexuality, and in starker terms pointed out by Isaiah, reproductive capacity, which was actually more important than the other two then than it is now. His relationship to power was more complicated than most people's, as he held a position of authority, but was also basically a slave.

Any and all of that could have been a reason why those who were trying to spread the good news about the Risen Christ would have skipped over him. If he'd shown up and asked what they were about, they might have been cordial, but they also might not have enthusiastically encouraged him toward baptism. That tendency toward passive exclusion didn't work for God though. So an angel was sent to Philip, sending him miles away, specifically to bring this unlikely candidate into the fold. The way this story is told and the very fact that it made the final cut as part of the biblical

canon tell us that there's something we cannot afford to ignore. Philip was not the most prominent of apostles; they could have just left this story out completely. But they didn't, and we need to take heed.

The strand of biblical witness to God's broad inclusion is ancient. The person who put this story together has the Ethiopian eunuch reading from Isaiah 53, just a few short chapters before the passage we read about the foreigner and the eunuch being specifically welcomed into God's "house of prayer for all peoples." And in between those two passages, at the beginning of chapter 55, we read the verses saying, "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters." It is no accident that the eunuch brought their discussion to a climax by saying "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" And the answer to that question is so obvious, it doesn't even need saying out loud; they just go do the deed. Because nothing is there to prevent this beloved child from becoming part of the body of Christ, nothing. As one of my Elders of blessed memory used to say when she prayed at Christ's Table, it is open to "whosoever will."

And lest we quietly harbor some residual sense of superiority, we have that story of the Jesus on the cross, with the criminals. We might look at the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, and extrapolate that to say that race and gender and sexuality and ethnicity are not categories that we choose, so no one can held responsible for them. But to imply that if they were a choice, there might be a problem reveals some

lingering sense of judgment than one way of being is better than another. To say “it’s not his fault that he’s gay” exposes an underlying assumption that there’s something wrong with being gay. To say “they can’t help where they were born” uncovers our prejudice about which places are the better places to be born.

But this story in Luke 23 cuts off any pretensions we might have – conscious or unconscious – about who’s in and who’s out. The guy is literally a criminal, a confessed, convicted, condemned criminal. And what does Jesus say to him? “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” It doesn’t get much more inclusive than that! This is so far beyond whether something is someone’s fault or not. “Whosoever will.” Whether we judge them worthy or not. The story that Easter tells – or perhaps more accurately, the biblical narrative that Easter amplifies makes clear that any categories or barriers or standards that we might try to apply to humanity will be swept away by the wind of the Holy Spirit faster than we can light a match. They simply don’t have anything to do with the faith of the Risen Christ. So why would we traffic in them? Why not embrace the broad and beautiful inclusion that God has been inviting us into for centuries? Why not celebrate that we are gathered here in a “house of prayer for all peoples”? What is there to prevent us? Nothing. Hallelujah and Amen!