

Year B

Acts 8:26-40

The following open letter was published in the lead up to the Southern Baptist Convention in the USA in June 2014 when a motion would be proposed condemning transgender identity.

“Dear Southern Baptist Convention,

I know that you are considering passing a resolution against transgender identity this week at your meeting in Baltimore. In anticipation of this vote, I write to you as a fellow believer in our Lord Jesus Christ, the

saviour of the world, the person to whom I have given my heart and soul and whom I spend my life serving.

I was raised Southern Baptist in Stanly County, North Carolina, in a devoted Christian family.

My dad grew up in Nigeria, the son of Southern Baptist missionaries who taught there. The theology and worship of my Southern Baptist church was a core part of my identity as a child, and in many ways, it continues to form the person I am today.

Growing up, I was desperate to be a good Christian and to earnestly give my life, my

heart, and my soul to the Lord. I was also trans. I knew I was a girl from a very young age, even though the world saw me as a boy. It wasn't easy. I fought against this. I fought with every tool I had. I prayed and I prayed and I begged.

I went through the act of being saved over and over, thinking each time that if I was perfectly contrite and sorrowful, Christ would save me from being trans, from being a girl.

When I was about 16, I was on a youth retreat up near Liberty University. My youth group was staying in cabins out in the

woods. At one of the evening praise and worship times I fell down on the floor praying that God would fix me. My minister prayed over me. I hoped, I hoped incredibly hard that that would be the moment where I was fixed, but of course it wasn't.

I couldn't "fix" being trans because it's how God created me.

Isn't it the role of Christians to minister with those who are excluded and marginalised?

I ask you, as fellow believers, to join with us in the Episcopal Church and other traditions as family in standing with trans and gender

non-nonconforming people rather than against us.

Don't make the world harder for trans folks. Instead, let's explore together the ways that our gender, in all its beautiful diversity, is a blessed gift from God.

Thank you for listening.

Your sister in Christ, Vivian Taylor”¹

In March this year, the Church of Scotland published a pastoral aid resource entitled; “Diverse Gender Identities and Pastoral Care” with the intention of offering support to ministers and members of the Church of

¹ <http://www.believeoutloud.com/latest/trans-christians-open-letter-southern-baptist-convention>

Scotland to inform and to assist those offering pastoral care.

Now, you may wonder, in our series of sermons on the Acts of the Apostles texts offered to us by the lectionary at Easter, what this subject has to do with the text before us today. Well, I would want to emphatically state - everything. It is very easy to read the Acts' passage today and miss the central issue - or if not missing the central issue then only glancing past it. I can remember this story being read to me in Sunday School and the emphasis was very much on the Ethiopian element of the story.

The man in the chariot was an Ethiopian. He was a foreigner. He was very likely a Jewish exile or convert and that was by no means unusual in the ancient world. The Jewish diaspora had spread far and wide after the upheavals of exile in the centuries past. There were thriving Jewish communities in Egypt for example. That was not made clear to me as a child and so I understood the story in terms of the gospel spreading out through national boundaries by the faithful witness of the apostles and, of course, that is perfectly true. But it's not the central issue. In fact, the so-called Gentile

Pentecost is recorded in Acts 10, when the emphasis is clearly on the gospel moving to the Gentile world. That is yet to come in Luke's story at this point (Luke being the author of Acts). A closer reading of the text will leave us in no doubt what the issue is.

We are told that the Ethiopian was a eunuch.

That fact is not simply an interesting aside.

Eunuchs would usually be servants or slaves who had been castrated in order to make them reliable servants of a royal court where physical access to the ruler could wield great influence. Seemingly lowly domestic functions—such as making the ruler's bed,

bathing him, cutting his hair, carrying him in his litter, or even relaying messages—could in theory give a eunuch "the ruler's ear" and impart de facto power on the formally humble but trusted servant.² We learn that the Ethiopian eunuch was in charge of the treasury of the queen of Ethiopia. His a-sexual nature would perfectly suit the trust required of a man in his situation. And here comes the telling point. When Philip arrived at his chariot the eunuch was reading from Isaiah 53:7-8. It's interesting that reading, back then, was

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eunuch>

always audible - out loud. There was no such thing as the skill of reading into oneself until monks perfected it in the fifth century AD. So Philip heard the words and no doubt the angst of the cruelly emasculated man as he read them. “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.” This man had been cruelly sheared. He would have been deeply aware of the words of Deuteronomy 23:1 - “No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly

of the LORD.” Here was such a man returning from the assembly of the Lord in Jerusalem. He had not given up on his faith but we can feel the personal angst in his question to Philip about the Isaiah passage - “about whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” “Is this about me too?”, he was asking. And of course it was, but not in the way that the eunuch thought it was. Isaiah would go on in his prophecy to state:

“For this is what the Lord says:

“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose what pleases me
and hold fast to my covenant—

to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever.”³

That everlasting name would be immortalised through *the name* - Jesus Christ: the good news of Jesus Christ. The good news for the eunuch was that Jesus was lead to the place of exclusion and humiliation. The place that the eunuch knew and could do nothing about. There Jesus endured and overcame in order that the eunuch would overcome too. And to celebrate the reality of that new start he saw

³ Isaiah 56:4-5

the water and asked for baptism. It was Philip's joy to help him and send him on, in the same joy. In Acts 1:8 we read the words of Jesus; "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." To the ends of the earth is both literal and metaphorical. We are to share the good news without partiality and prejudice and only in that manner can we remain faithful to the one who was excluded and humiliated for us.

To their shame on June 10th 2014, the Southern Baptist Convention passed the resolution condemning transgender people.

May God challenge our hearts. Amen.