

"All the Best Disciples Are Eunuchs"

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[0 : 00] Jesus, we gather here this morning on this Pride Sunday, on this first Sunday of June, an ordinary time to be formed in your ways.

We gather to remember that we are called to become fools for Christ, foolish in the eyes of a world that prizes domination and exclusion, foolish to all that is cruel and inhumane.

Lord, as we come, I do acknowledge that I am one who is waiting for your glory, that so many of us need to experience your presence and your love today, and I pray that no one would leave this place without feeling that touch and being reminded that you are deeply good and deeply loving.

In the name of Jesus, we pray these things. Amen. So years ago, years ago, having completed my graduate degree at American University and then having begun to slowly come out as a lesbian, I realized that I needed to start making friends in this city intentionally.

Meetup.com was my vehicle of choice. Does anybody still use that? Okay. All right. Thank you. I didn't know if it dated me. And I joined a number of different groups on Meetup.com.

[1 : 52] I joined this group that watched films together, movies together. I joined a group that would go hiking. I joined a number of different book clubs.

And as you can imagine, some of them that I went to were really small and awkward. Some of them I actually never made it to. But after a while, I found two Meetups that were my favorites.

The first was this gigantic meetup that would host, like, events nearly every single day of the week. It was a group of, I don't know, a couple thousand black lesbian women.

We would hang out together. And the second group came to form the nucleus of my, really my friend group in the first years that I was in the city. It was the first time that I started to, with these people, engage my full self, black, queer, and a woman.

And this book club would host gatherings that helped me to learn about intersectionality, but not because we were reading the works of Kimberly Crenshaw.

[3 : 04] Instead, just by hosting these gatherings where we got to hold court, that's the way I like to think about it, where we got to become the people who judge the world for once.

Where we, as these black and queer women, got to lean into our own beauty and excel our own power.

I learned so much more about myself. We would have these late conversations into the night. We would discuss things like, Tyler Perry's movies, are they toxic or are they harmless fun?

That's a long discussion, y'all. We would talk about dating. We would talk about, like, if the girl you're dating consistently calls you after 10 p.m., can it be okay?

Like, if it's not a booty call, is that just disrespectful no matter what? Like, we just have these conversations. What does it mean? Whatever we talked about, we were always super loud and we were always deeply unapologetic.

[4 : 09] And sometimes, y'all, we actually didn't read books. But it wasn't all the time. But one of the books that I do remember reading in that setting was this book called *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides.

Some of y'all might have read this. It's this beautiful book about this character named Cal who grapples with issues of shifting identity. In particular, the book pays attention to Cal's growing knowledge of themselves as an intersex person.

A person who doesn't fit easily into medical definitions of male or female. And in one of, like, Cal's self-reflective moments, they say this.

Emotions, in my experience, aren't covered by single words. I don't believe in sadness, joy, or regret.

Maybe the best proof that the language is patriarchal is that it oversimplifies feeling. I like to have at my disposal complicated hybrid emotions.

[5 : 19] Germanic train car constructions like, say, the happiness that attends disaster. Or the disappointment of sleeping with one's fantasy. I've never had the right words to describe my life.

And now that I've entered my story, I need them more than ever. I remember that book, and I love that quote, because it reminds me that many of us, especially those of us who are queer, are often still trying to find the right words to describe our lives.

We're still trying to enter fully into our own stories. And that's precisely what those of us who gathered in that book club were trying to do so many years ago.

But we were trying to name complexity. See, I grew up in this Christian environment that did not allow much complexity.

Despite claiming to love the Bible, we tried to pin everything down into neat categories. And in so doing, I think now that we impoverished our understanding of God, and we impoverished our understanding of ourselves and of discipleship, those categories were often barriers to our wholeness.

[6 : 39] By settling for what Cal calls these single words, we lost touch with this whole vocabulary of God's revelation. For the last few weeks, if you've been hanging out, you know that we've been trying to regain some of that beautiful and rich complexity in our series, *God Across Gender*.

First two weeks of that, we talked more about kind of the gender part of that title. On Mother's Day, I explored the idea of revolutionary mothering, regardless of gender, as implicit to God's work and God's character.

On Pentecost Sunday, Heidi and Tochi preached about the divine feminine through their own respective lenses. And this morning, what I want to do is actually transition us more into talking about the across-gender part of this.

And to do that, we're going to look at two different scriptures. It's kind of two for the price of one today. And the first of those is Matthew 19, 1 through 12.

So it'll be on the screen, or you can feel free to read it on your phone or tablet or Bible. Matthew 19, 1 through 12. When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.

[8 : 10] Large crowds followed him, and he cured them there. Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him, they asked, Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?

He answered, Have you not read the one who made them at the beginning, male and female, and said, For this reason he shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?

So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate. They said to him, Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?

He said to them, It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality and marries another, commits adultery, and he who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

I love this. The disciples said to him, If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry. But he said to them, Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given.

[9 : 28] 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. Now, Megan DeFranza, Megan DeFranza, who's the author of this book called *Sex Difference in Christian Theology*, and is somebody who's really influenced my thinking, she says, Instead of Jesus saying, Let anyone accept this who can, Jesus should have said, Let anyone that has any idea what I'm talking about accept this.

Yeah. This is not an easy passage to interpret. What is clear is that in this section of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is redefining family, shifting from this patriarchal, hierarchical understanding of relationship to one that's rooted in egalitarianism.

In this one chapter, chapter 19, Jesus addresses divorce, addresses the status of women, addresses issues of wealth as social privilege. And what is also clear is that Jesus begins, that as Jesus begins this geographical movement in his ministry from Galilee toward Jerusalem, he expects this kind of deepening of discipleship among his followers.

The resounding phrase that ends this chapter is this famous line, But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. There's a sense, too, that the disciples are to grow in their rejection of status at every turn.

[11:17] So the verses we're talking about today, they focus on these religious leaders who are trying to test Jesus. They ask Jesus about the grounds for divorce. Is it lawful to divorce your wife for any cause?

They're basically asking Jesus to weigh in on this public debate where some rabbis held that, no, you can only divorce your wife in a specific situation. Again, this is a male conversation.

Or no, or you can divorce your wife for basically anything. And they're talking about this law in Deuteronomy. Jesus counters by giving the scripture that comes from Genesis and essentially says that marriage is a creation of God and that Moses was conceding to human nature.

And then Jesus shows his cards by basically saying that, by basically siding with the conservative schools, saying, no, it's only for specific reasons that you can get divorced as a man.

And he kind of pushes back against the sense that men should hold arbitrary authority over their wives, implicitly affirming women's value in a world in which that value was denied.

[12:26] Okay. So while all of that's really interesting, I think y'all already know I got my pride shirt on today that I did not come to talk about divorce, okay? It's fascinating.

But what I came here to talk about is that last section of the passage, the part in which Jesus recognizes after just having referred to Genesis, it's brilliant, that eunuchs exist.

When his male disciples suggest that having to give up their power to marry arbitrarily, it's just, it's like too much. They're like, I can't give up my power. I should just not get married.

Jesus holds up eunuchs as this example, or seems to hold up eunuchs as this example. He talks about eunuchs who have been made, or who have been born as eunuchs, people who don't fit easily into gender categories from birth.

He talks about eunuchs who have been made so, people who perhaps in the ancient world were castrated or has a similar experience. And he talks about people who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of God, people who maybe refused to marry or maybe even who castrated themselves because of religious commitment.

[13:41] In this passage, Jesus refers to the scripture that so many people use to resist the possibility of gender variation.

That in the beginning, God made male and female. Yet just these few lines later, after referring to the creation story, Jesus very matter-of-factly says that some people exist in our world outside of the male and female, outside of the heteronormativity of marriage.

And Jesus seems to think that his disciples have something to learn from those folks. It's not an easy piece of scripture. So what I want to do is to look at another scripture that I think will add some insight about what Jesus might think we can learn from eunuchs.

So now we're going to go to Jeremiah 38, 1 through 13. Now some of these names, y'all, as Luther said, I'm going to sin boldly.

So this is my best attempt at these names. Now Shephethiah, son of Matan, Gedaliah, son of Pasher, Jekal, son of Shalamiah, and Pasher, son of Maokiah, heard the words that Jeremiah was saying to all the people.

[15:06] Thus says the Lord, those who stay in this city shall die by the sword, by famine and by pestilence. But those who go out to the Chaldeans shall live.

They shall have their lives as a prize of war and live. Thus says the Lord, the city shall be surely handed over to the army of the king of Babylon and he will take it. Then the official said to the king, this man ought to be put to death because he is discouraging the soldiers who are left in the city and all the people by speaking such words to them.

For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm. King Zedekiah said, here he is, he is in your hands for the king is powerless against you.

So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern at Malchaia, the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only

mud and Jeremiah sank in the mud.

Abed-Melech, the Cushite, a eunuch in the king's house, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. The king happened to be sitting at the Benjamin gate.

[16:20] So Abed-Melech left the king's house and spoke to the king. My lord, king, these men acted wickedly in all they did to the prophet Jeremiah by throwing him into the cistern to die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city.

Then the king commanded Abed-Melech, the Cushite, take three of the men with you from here and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the cistern before he dies. So Abed-Melech took the men with him and went to the house of the king to a wardrobe of the storehouse and took out old rags and worn out clothes, which he let down to Jeremiah and the cistern by ropes.

Then Abed-Melech, the Cushite, said to Jeremiah, just put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes. Jeremiah did so. Then they threw Jeremiah up by the ropes and pulled him out of the cistern and Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.

Okay, so I know that if Matthew 19 feels like another land, like Jeremiah 38, it's probably like another planet. But basically here again, this is basically what happens.

Here's just a story. Zedekiah is the king of Judah. The Babylonians have attacked Jerusalem and Judah and they're winning, kind of the enemies are winning. The prophet Jeremiah has been telling the people that their only hope is to surrender.

[17:45] Like you're not going to win, you've got to surrender. And then four of the king's officials basically accused Jeremiah of, I love this phrase, discouraging the soldiers because of his critique of this national plan to stay the course.

And let me just say, there's this whole, there's a whole sermon about this idea of national critique being connected to discouraging the soldiers that one day I'm going to preach. But this fascinating language there.

But anyway, the officials believe that Jeremiah's words are harmful and they want to put him to death. So they throw him down into the cistern, this place that usually has water, but is now dry. And then out of nowhere, this eunuch appears. Eben Melech, who's described as a Kushite, is eunuch in the king's house. Pretty common for eunuchs to serve, particularly in keeping the harem of the king because they were considered non-threatening.

And while it's not fully settled that Eben Melech was a eunuch in the sense that I'm using the term, enough scholars think about this as a parallel, interestingly, to Acts 8 that's also about another African eunuch.

[18:51] Eben Melech hears that Jeremiah has been left to die. He goes publicly to this place of justice, the Benjamin Gate, where legal disputes are settled. And he basically appeals for Jeremiah's life.

And the king grants his wishes and Eben Melech leads several men to rescue Jeremiah. Jeremiah. I love that the eunuch here is a person who not only has this keen sense of justice, but is a person who acts based on that sense of justice, even as such action might endanger their own precarious status.

And I love even more that there is a gentleness. Oh, I love that there is a gentleness to Eben Melech's method of deliverance. They creatively gather these old rags and these clothes from the king's own closet in order to pad the rope so that Jeremiah doesn't get rope burned when he's lifted out of the pit.

It's a good reminder that as we participate in movements of liberation, we have to think about our methods and that small detail speaks volumes about the possibility of a posture we can take in terms of gentleness and care for people.

When we consider this story of Eben Melech and Jeremiah, I think that we can glimpse a little bit of what Jesus might have meant by holding up eunuchs as models of discipleship.

[20:24] These folks, while they might have had some economic privilege, often had ambiguous social status. So Jesus talking about becoming like eunuchs fits right into this idea of disciples becoming like children and disciples disregarding the status that wealth brings.

Megan DeFranca, who I referred to earlier, says that in Matthew 19, Jesus lifts up eunuchs as icons of discipleship. And I love that phrase. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, an icon, you might have seen these in churches, it's an image of a person, it can be a carving, a painting, it can be even an image of an event that is considered holy.

And as a spiritual discipline, folks in those traditions will gaze at the icon, just look at it, contemplatively, as a form of prayer.

The icon is considered both a window, I'm sorry, both a mirror reflecting the self, honestly, and is considered a window that points to God and says something true about God.

So, before I do sit down, I want to suggest like three ways that these folks, these folks who don't fit into categories of male and female in the scriptures, and folks in our world that don't fit neatly into those categories, how they can reveal our own souls and also reveal God in our midst.

[22 : 05] All right, so first of all, interacting with difference, any kind of difference, is always an honest mirror to the self.

Whether we're straight, interacting with queer folks or queer, but not intersex or intersex and interacting with another letter of the alphabet soup of queerness, difference is always this honest mirror.

And unfortunately, difference, when it comes to gender, too often triggers non-rational disgust.

Even for many of us who are queer, the idea of transgressing gender norms, whether by birth or by choice, can cause discomfort.

But remember that in the Gospels, you will never, and this is true in so many ways, you will never see Jesus reacting to people on the basis of disgust.

that, like, ick feeling, that sense of, oh, something is yucky, is never enough. And I know that many of us are going to go to Pride this upcoming weekend, and for some of us, you might see things, depending on how you grew up or your own kind of thinking about the world, that trigger that sense of ick.

[23 : 23] And when you do, remember this teaching, that whoever you see or whatever you see can become an icon that reflects something about your own, about our own ease at getting caught up in the logic of disgust instead of leaning into the transgressive love of God.

Second thing I want to say is that the eunuchs we see in Scripture, that the eunuchs, quote, unquote, among us can be windows into the fact that God seems to love diversity, like incredible diversity.

God's creation is startling. Here's how writer Annie Dillard puts that. The world is full of creatures that for some reason seem stranger to us than others.

And libraries of books describing them, hagfish, platypuses, lizard-like pangolins, four feet long with bright green lap scales like umbrella tree leaves on a bush hut roof.

Butterflies emerging from anthills, spiderlings wafting through the air, clutching tiny silken balloons, horseshoe crabs. The creator goes off on one wild, specific tangent after another or millions simultaneously with an exuberance that would seem to be unwarranted and with an abandoned energy sprung from an unfathomable font.

[25 : 00] Dillard's point is that God creates with freedom and flourish and as she puts it, the creator loves pizzazz. Consider that even as the book of Genesis names the creation of binary categories, we see over and over God moving across those binary categories.

There's not only day and night, there's dawn and dusk. There's not only land animals and sea animals, there are amphibians. there's not only male and female.

Everywhere we look, God seems to love exquisite diversity and everywhere we look, God seems to cross every category to allow even more diversity to break through.

and then finally, the last thing that I want to say is that our consideration of eunuchs is God-given icons in scripture and among us not only gives us a mirror to see the places where we still allow disgust to rule out love and not only gives us a window into God's love of transgressive diversity, but also reveals the way that God often brings deliverance.

As strange as a story like that of Eben Melech may seem, it pushes into this pattern that we see throughout scripture. And that story is the non-Israelite African eunuch who saves the day, the outsider.

[26 : 39] Now, this week, in the wake of Donald Trump's felony convictions, I saw these words a few different times in different ways and memes. And after all the dust settled, they suddenly realized America had been saved by a porn star.

The end. Did anybody see that? Anybody else? Yeah. So, I want to say regardless of your politics, regardless of your perspective of the case or any of that stuff, there is something that's really pointed and true, especially when we think about how God tends to work in scripture.

It's often the folks that scandalize us the most, the Rahabs and the Eben Melechs through whom God chooses to work. Jeremiah had been left to die.

It was the eunuch through whom his deliverance came. And now, we might not ourselves have ever been thrown into a cistern, but many of us know, and I will say this about myself, many of us know what it is to be buried alive in our faith.

And for many of us, it has been the eunuchs, the people who transgressed categories, the people who were scapegoated in our communities, the people who didn't fit in, the people who had long ago given up any sense of status, who led the efforts at our deliverance.

[28 : 08] And the good news that Jesus seems to point to is that not only can we look at these folks as icons, reflecting both ourselves and reflecting God back to us, but we can become like them, letting go of status and resting, resting in God's grace.

We can give up trying to be them, quote unquote them, whatever your version of them is, the rich, the powerful, the successful, the pure, the politically correct, and instead we can follow Jesus into becoming free.

So here's the real question. How are you becoming like a eunuch for the kingdom of God? or if you're queer or you already don't fit into categories neatly of male and female, how are you cultivating the beauty of that kind of spirituality so that others might see your example and be set free?

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.