

Sermon: “Seeing Ourselves in God’s Story”

Texts: Genesis 37:2-4 and Luke 22:7-13

Over the past weeks we’ve been exploring how the Bible is queer and genderful in our sermon series. We’ve heard some powerful examples:

(1) We’ve heard from the writer of Genesis 1 about the diversity of all of God’s creation and the diversity of God within God’s very self - that God is a genderful God, encompassing male and female and everything between and everything beyond.

(2) We’ve heard stories about eunuchs -people in the Bible who inhabited this liminal space of being neither male nor female and were often ostracized and excluded for that reason, and yet eunuchs are lifted up by the prophet Isaiah and Jesus speaks of eunuchs as exemplary and for all we know Jesus may even have been called a eunuch because of the way he defied the gender roles expected of men in his culture.

(3) We’ve heard about Isaac as queer in Rev. Naomi’s sermon last week. (4) We’ve heard about the love that two men - David and Jonathan shared from Rev. Jean’s sermon. And (5) Chris Paige preached about God’s queer activity in Exodus when God gives the people of Israel manna in the wilderness and the people say “what is this?” Which is often what we say when we see something new and are distrustful when that newness that doesn’t fit our categories and wonder if it can really be something from God. And indeed as the story goes and is often the case, this “what

is this?” - is a startling gift of God and in fact turns out to be God’s saving grace to us.

I am grateful for what I’ve been learning and for all the guest preachers who have shared so powerfully with us from their own stories about their experiences of God and seeing themselves in the Bible.

We have two more sermons in our series, as we reach the end of August. And today I want to lift up a couple of witnesses of people in the Bible who were gender non-conformists! Let me explain what I mean when I say *gender non-conformists*. What I mean is “people who dress or act in a way that is not typical of their assigned sex in their particular culture”. If you are a gender non-conformist, it doesn’t necessarily mean you are transgender. You can be a cisgender female like me and if you shave your head, let your leg hairs grow out and ride a motorcycle, in our culture - you would probably be a bit of a gender non-conformist. Because you are not acting in a way that is typical for cisgender women in our culture. Not all cisgender people conform to gender norms and not all transgender people defy gender norms. And it’s important to remember that what is considered typical of a person assigned female or male at birth - varies greatly from culture to culture.

Today I’d like to lift up two gender non-conformists in the Bible. And it seems a shame to go through this whole sermon series and never talk about Joseph! What is

the deal with this coat that he wore anyway? Well it turns out that the coat in fact is much more than what it seems. It plays a curious and dominant role in the story.

In the NRSV translation of the Bible, which Deb read for us, we hear that the coat that Joseph wore was given to him by his father and is described as “a long robe with sleeves”. However in the King James Version it is called “the coat of many colors”. And in fact the way this coat is described varies a great deal translation to translation and the reason for this discrepancy is that Hebrew scholars have not actually known how to translate the phrase “*ketonet passim*” which is the Hebrew phrase used to describe this garment that Joseph was given.

This phrase does not appear anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible *except* in one other place. And it is in the story of Tamar, King David’s daughter in 2 Samuel 13. It’s a horrifying story - Tamar is sexually assaulted and raped by David’s son. And in that story we are told that princess Tamar was wearing a *ketonet passim*. And verse 18 than says explicitly that this garment is “how the virgin daughters of the king were clothed in earlier times.” So a *ketonet passim*, this robe of many colors or a garment with long sleeves was clothing for a princess. It was a **princess dress**.

Many Jewish scholars have seen this queer connection for a long time. Certainly there are multiple interpretative possibilities here, **but one interpretation that must be put on the table because it’s clear in the text** - is that, Jacob, Joseph’s

father, gave his son this female garment. And if this is the case, the story takes on a whole new light. In some ways the violence Joseph experiences at the hands of his brothers makes more sense. If you remember how the story goes - Joseph's brothers don't just do violence to Joseph, they also do violence to the garment itself - they drench it in blood after they sell Joseph and he's shipped off to Egypt. If they had been just jealous of him and the garment, it seems like they would've kept it for themselves or maybe even sold it for a good price! But no, there is something about Joseph, the way he acts, the way he dresses - that they abhor and it stirs them to excessive violence. Reminds me of the kind of violence that we hear about directed toward many trans folk today and especially transgender women of color.

As you may remember, after Joseph is sold off to Egypt, he becomes much more accepted there and rises to the top of power. He becomes the chief overseer in Egypt under Pharaoh. And years later when his brothers travel to Egypt out of desperation because of drought and hunger in their land - they come before Joseph but they don't recognize him. With his power and status now, Joseph could have destroyed them - easily! It would've been the "just" thing to do, the thing expected of him as a man in his culture. And yet Joseph acts differently than other men would act in his family. He brings them together. And shows them mercy.

Peterson Toscano - A biblical scholar and performer, says that Joseph acts like the "the matriarch" in the family. It wasn't that men couldn't do things like

bring people together and show mercy in this way, but it certainly wasn't modeled much back then. And so as Peterson says, Joseph "expands the way that a man can respond to conflict." And for that reason he becomes an "extremely important gender non-conforming character in the Bible."

The other story I wanted to lift up today may be even less obvious to us in terms of how it describes a person transgressing gender, because our culture and the culture in ancient Israel during the time of Jesus, are so different.

The story I read from Luke 22 takes place when Jesus and his disciples were looking for a place to prepare and share the Passover Meal. This was Last Supper before Jesus was killed by the state. So this is a time of great danger for Jesus and his disciples. And they are searching for a safe house -so that they can prepare the final meal and eat together.

Jesus tells the disciples how to find that safe house. He tells them to look for "a man carrying a jar of water" and they are to meet him and follow him to the house where he enters.

There are several unusual things about this story: First of all, in ancient Israel carrying a jar of water from a well to the home was exclusively women's work. Even the conservative leaning NIV study Bible says that "it would've been unusual to see a man carrying a jar of water since normally this was women's work."

On a busy day in the city, it certainly would've been easier for the disciples to detect such an unusual sight as a male water carrier and maybe that's part of the reason Jesus chose this person so they could find him in a crowd.

But let's think deeper about this for a moment: Why might this man be carrying a jar of water? Why is he doing a traditionally female job? It is possible that maybe he was assigned male at birth but had for a long time felt more comfortable as female. Or perhaps he used to identify as female but now lives as a male. We don't know, but these are possibilities. And isn't it something: that in a time of great danger and in looking for a safe place to prepare a meal, Jesus trusted this gender non-conforming person. He trusted this water carrier to lead them to a safe house.

The other unusual thing about this story is that remember that passover meals were usually prepared and eaten with family. So we have to wonder, didn't this man carrying the jar of water and the household owner have a family to eat the Passover meal with? Where was their family? It actually seems quite possible that both the water carrier and the household owner were not welcome with the rest of their families. And Jesus and the disciples of course are also not with their families.

Something quite amazing is happening here: Not only is gender transgression in this story but traditional family obligations and expectations are also transgressed. A new community, a new family was being created. It was a queer family, a chosen family that consisted of outliers, outcasts and resisters. We are reminded that as Christians, family means something very different for us. It

means we are a queer family. It is a family that is yes - unusual, defying gender roles and defying the status quo of defining who is in and who is out.

Lewis Payne is a transgender man who reflects on how this story of the water carrier has helped him and strengthened his faith. He says, *“Maybe the water carrier is a transgender person right at the heart of the story, which we do not even notice. It is not beyond the bounds of possibilities that this is one of our spiritual ancestors. Someone Jesus trusted enough to find them a place to gather.”*

Lewis goes on to say: *“Discovering a gospel of love and acceptance of all people - even me- has brought me back to the roots of my faith. I have discovered the spiritual heart of living a gender variant life. Opening the pages of Scripture and finding stories of myself has transformed my feelings about myself.”*

And Lewis Payne in those words - brings us back to the importance of why we are telling these stories and lifting up these witnesses in our sermon series. Why are we doing this?

Because when we open the pages of Scripture, we can begin to find ourselves in these stories. These are our sacred stories. These are our spiritual ancestors. Our queer and trans ancestors have always existed in history and in the pages of Scripture —the Joseph’s, the Deborah’s, the Isaacs, the eunuchs, the man carrying the jar of water and countless other examples -these are stories of God’s faithful people. God’s queer people.

Part of the work I believe we are called to do, is to take back the Bible - from the hands of the powerful who have been interpreting the Bible for centuries through a white supremacist heteronormative lens. And this lens has been used to do harm to LGBTQ folks as well as many black and brown, muslims and people of other faiths. And one of the ways in which we have made this harm possible and that the stories of queer and trans people have been erased. So we have to find these stories if we haven't already found them and lift them up, see ourselves and see God's face. We have to find our place in that stream of liberation.

And to my queer and trans siblings - no matter what the folks in religious authority say to you about you not belonging or not existing or not being worthy - remember that you have an established place in the heart of God, you have an established place in the story of God. You belong and you have always belonged. God's family is a queer family.

Amen

