

PODCAST START:

[intro music]

Brian: Welcome to the Queer Theology podcast!

Fr. Shay: Where each episode, we take a queer look at the week's lectionary readings. We're the cofounders of QueerTheology.com and the hosts for this podcast. I'm Father Shay Kearns —

B: And I'm Brian G. Murphy. Hello hello hello! Today we are looking at the lectionary reading for Sunday, April 29th. We're going to be looking at Acts 8:26-40. It's the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. I will read it to you now from the Common English Bible.

An angel from the Lord spoke to Philip, "At noon, take the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.) So he did. Meanwhile, an Ethiopian man was on his way home from Jerusalem, where he had come to worship. He was a eunuch and an official responsible for the entire treasury of Candace. (Candace is the title given to the Ethiopian queen.) He was reading the prophet Isaiah while sitting in his carriage. The Spirit told Philip, "Approach this carriage and stay with it."

Running up to the carriage, Philip heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you really understand what you are reading?"

The man replied, "Without someone to guide me, how could I?" Then he invited Philip to climb up and sit with him. This was the passage of scripture he was reading:

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent so he didn't open his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was taken away from him. Who can tell the story of his descendants because his life was taken from the earth?

The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, about whom does the prophet say this? Is he talking about himself or someone else?” Starting with that passage, Philip proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him. As they went down the road, they came to some water.

The eunuch said, “Look! Water! What would keep me from being baptized?” He ordered that the carriage halt. Both Philip and the eunuch went down to the water, where Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Lord’s Spirit suddenly took Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing. Philip found himself in Azotus. He traveled through that area, preaching the good news in all the cities until he reached Caesarea. [CEB]

Okay, Shay. There’s a lot going on in this passage. What do we do with it?

FS: I love this passage so much. In fact, this is probably one of my favorite passages in all of scripture. [overtalk] Oh, go ahead.

B: Oh, I’m surprised that in four years of queering the Bible, we’ve yet to [laughs] do this passage. So I’m really excited to dive into it.

FS: I know, right? One of my favorite sermons that I’ve ever preached was on this passage. We can link that in the show notes. I preached that a couple years ago. But I love this passage, because on the surface it seems a little bit weird, but also like—

B: [laughs] Yep.

FS: —kind of straightforward, right? There’s this guy, and Philip converts him, and that’s it. But there’s actually a *lot* that’s happening here. I love this passage because, you know, when we look at scripture so often the conversation about LGBT issues and the Bible is, “What about those seven verses that condemn LGBT folks?” And I love this passage because it’s a passage where we can say, “Okay, yeah, but what about this passage that actually affirms gender non-conforming people of color?” [laughs] Right? Because that’s what we have in this passage.

B: Right.

FS: We have the story of a eunuch from Ethiopia who is coming home from Jerusalem, which is a really weird thing, because he wouldn't have been allowed to worship. He wouldn't have been allowed inside the temple because he was a eunuch, and maybe he knew that when he went or maybe he's now traveling home, feeling like he's just been rejected from the church and from the worshipping community – which I know that lots of LGBT folks know a little something about that. [Brian laughs] And yet, he still is wanting to connect with the divine, with scripture, with a community. And we have this interaction, then, between him and Philip. And Philip knows the law – he knows that this person shouldn't be allowed to be part of the community, and *yet*, Philip baptizes him anyway. And by so doing, this passage really indicates that something new is happening here, something new is happening with this Jesus movement. What it means to be a part of this community means that the old rules about who is in and who is out don't exist anymore. They are being broken down, and the circle of inclusion is being drawn ever-wider. I love that, and I love this passage.

B: Yeah, one of the things that sticks out to me is that, what you were saying, that the circle of inclusion is drawn ever wider. It's really tempting to think that there was like, the 'old law', quote-unquote, and that was one way of doing things. And then Jesus came to establish quote-unquote 'a new covenant', and Jesus laid out exactly how it was supposed to be, and then from thenceforth [laughs] it was exactly the same. And what we see, even in scripture, is that – Jesus certainly draws the circle a bit wider, and even over the course of his ministry, he learns and changes his mind and is pushed to draw that circle wider. I think we have some articles or podcasts about moments in scripture where Jesus changes his mind and is taught by folks that he encounters and grows in his vision. But in scripture itself, we see that even after Jesus has come and gone, that that process of drawing the circle even wider continues. It continues throughout the Christian writings, and then over the course of the early church and into the church today, humanity is sort of on this march through time. We grow in deeper understanding of ourselves and of the world around us and what it means to encounter the divine inside and outside of ourselves. And so I love this idea that growing inclusion happens after Jesus leaves as well. It's not just this thing that Jesus does once and transforms things and then it's set in stone.

And Jesus isn't even the first person to sort of draw that circle wider. We see this arc of justice throughout the Hebrew scriptures as well. We've talked elsewhere about how Jesus places himself in this Jewish lineage of folks who have come before him, that he's not some sort of special, separate thing, or a replacement of

Judaism, or a better version [laughs] or a correction of it, but that he's situating himself in this context, and then changing it and transforming it and making it into something new. And that's a process that as Christians we continue to do today.

I'm also struck by this little bit [laughs] at the end where they came up out of the water and then the Lord's spirit suddenly took Philip away. It's perfect timing, because we just launched this series on A Skeptic's Guide to Jesus, and one of the things that we're going to be looking at is miracles. [laughing] So if you're interested in trying to figure out what to do with the supernatural, or things that you have doubts about or are skeptical about, you can go to QueerTheology.com/skeptics to sort of dive into that series. Is there anything else that you would add, Shay?

FS: No, just that I think what's so great about this passage is that it really instructs us to pay attention to what is going on below the surface, and to really dive deep into reading scripture by asking lots and lots and lots of question about what's actually happening. And that when something feels or seems weird, odds are that there's something else going on beneath the surface, and that we should pay attention to that.

[outro music]

B: The Queer Theology podcast is just one of many things that we do at QueerTheology.com, which provides resources, community and inspiration for LGBTQ Christians and straight cisgender supporters.

FS: To dive into more of the action, visit us at QueerTheology.com. You can also connect with us online on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Instagram.

B: We'll see you next week.

PODCAST END

Transcript by Taylor Walker

Referenced links:

Shay's sermon on this passage, "A Strange Baptism":

<http://www.shannonlkearns.com/sermon-on-the-ethiopian-eunuch/>

Skeptics Guide to Jesus: <https://www.queertheology.com/skeptics/>