

“Where Do We Come From?”
Isaiah 56:3-5,8; Acts 8:26-38
October 8, 2017
Central Texas Metropolitan Community Church

This morning’s Call to Worship is an excerpt from a poem entitled “Threatened with Resurrection,” written by Julia Esquivel. As her native Guatemala endured nearly 30 years of catastrophic violence under the rule of a series of dictators, Esquivel watched as thousands and thousands of indigenous people were savagely murdered. Hundreds of villages were literally wiped off the face of the earth. Where others gave up hope, or took up arms in resistance, Esquivel searched for another path toward peace, choosing to stand as a witness to God’s justice and compassion. As a result of her work on behalf of the poor and oppressed in Guatemala she was threatened and harassed by police and army forces for many years, narrowly escaping kidnapping, arrest, and assassination. Finally, in 1980, she was forced to go into exile to save her life.

In the excerpt from the poem which we all read responsively, Esquivel talks about a marathon of hope born out of tragedy and persecution. This marathon of hope is one which leads to a resurrection of new life. It’s a resurrection that threatens our complacency and sense of powerlessness.

But as Parker Palmer writes, “For Esquivel, there is no resurrection of isolated individuals. She is simply not concerned about private resurrections, yours or mine or her own. Each of us is resurrected only as we enter into the network of relationships called community...[Resurrection] is above all a corporate, social and political event, an event in which justice and truth and love come to fruition.”

On this 49th anniversary of Metropolitan Community Churches, this notion of “community” is worth talking about because community is one of the core values of MCC churches. Specifically, it says we offer a “safe and open community,” and are “committed to equipping ourselves and each other to do the work that God has called us to do in the world.” In other words, we believe we have been called into community: the community of hope and resurrection that Esquivel writes about.

And that’s what this morning’s scripture reading is about, also. Whether he realized it or not, the eunuch in this morning’s scripture reading was being called into a community of hope and resurrection. So go with me as we take a closer look at the story of this Ethiopian eunuch, which as it turns out, is our story, too.

It’s a story that takes place in the wilderness, where all important things seem to happen. The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness after his baptism where he was tested and his life calling was fine-tuned. Moses led the Israelites into the wilderness, which was a transition between their past lives as slaves and their future existence of freedom within the Promised Land. And in today’s story, an angel calls Phillip from a successful revival in Samaria to a road in the wilderness between Jerusalem and Gaza.

And it was there that he encountered someone who, for many reasons, would have been labeled as “other” by most first-century Jews. He was a foreigner, an African, very likely black. He was a rich person, employed by the royal court, and literate, which in and of itself made him a minority.

And he was a eunuch. Eunuchs were important members of the royal palace because they guarded the women in these households. Eunuchs, then, might have been castrated in order to ensure that they didn’t impregnate the women under their care. But sometimes they were simply homosexual men who wouldn’t have been interested in the women for their sexual pleasure.

But whether this man whom Phillip encountered on this wilderness road was a gay man or was surgically altered, there is one thing for sure: he would have been rejected by the religious society of Jerusalem, the city from which he was coming. Eunuchs were sexual outcasts in Jewish religious society, much like LGBT people in much of the Christian church today. First-century Jewish law condemned homosexual acts and forbid converting eunuchs to Judaism.

But even though the eunuch was rejected by the church, he didn’t abandon it. In fact, we find

him reading a passage from Isaiah which refers to someone who was also rejected, one who was treated unjustly. But one who endured the humiliation of it all in silence.

So when Phillip approaches the eunuch, the eunuch wonders aloud if this passage which has caught his attention and which resonates with his own life experience is about the author of the text or about someone else. And the eunuch's inquiry opened the door for Phillip, giving him an opportunity to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

But one has to wonder if the eunuch continued reading beyond this text found in the 53rd chapter of Isaiah. Because just three chapters later, in the 56th chapter of the same book, he would have discovered very good news for himself. He would have read the same words which we heard this morning: "Do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.' For thus says God: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. Thus says Almighty God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered."

For the first time in his life, this man who had been rejected by religious society was affirmed – this man who is the spiritual ancestor of LGBT Christians. The word of God clearly was making room for him at the banquet table of God's love, and was including him within God's community of resurrection and hope. And immediately he seized upon the first opportunity to be baptized into that community.

As I said, this eunuch's story is our story, too. It's the story of Troy Perry, the founder of Metropolitan Community Churches. God called Troy from his own wilderness of a failed relationship and an attempted suicide, and threatened him with resurrection. A resurrection into the community of God's family, the very same community into which this morning's eunuch was baptized. The very same community, in fact, to which all MCC churches are called.

It's so important to us, that it has its place in our denomination's recently adopted Statement of Faith: "Jesus Christ, You invite all people to Your open table. You make us Your people, a beloved community. You restore the joy of our relationship with God, even in the midst of loneliness, despair, and degradation."

We are a people who have known loneliness, despair, and degradation. Just two days ago, the White House administration extended that sense of loneliness, despair, and degradation to women and to the LGBT community by allowing employers to opt out of no-cost birth control for workers and by issuing sweeping religious-freedom directions that could override many anti-discrimination protections for LGBT people and others.

It is at just such a time as this that God calls us into community. And it's up to us – to you and me and this church – to reflect that call to others. We have been called to a community resurrection that threatens our complacency and sense of powerlessness. Because it's in community that we find belonging when religion and society say we don't belong. It's in community that we discover that we're stronger together than we are as individuals. And it's in community that we are nurtured into wholeness. And that's the good news of Jesus Christ.

I think the first epistle of Peter says it best for all Christians certainly, but especially for LGBTQ people of faith. It just feels as though the author had you and me and the people who have yet to join our community in mind with these words from its second chapter: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of the one who called you out of the shadows into God's marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

May we never forget where we have come from, so that we always extend to others the mercy which we have been so fortunate to receive. And may we extend that mercy in the form of community, a community of resurrection and hope. Amen.