

Ten Questions Series
(based on Brian McLaren's book, "A New Kind of Christianity"
"Can We Find a Way to Address Human Sexuality?"
May 30th, 2010

There used to be a bumper sticker that proclaimed, "The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it."

If you displayed that bumper sticker, you meant that the Bible is clear about things. We just need to believe what the Bible says and live what the Bible says. So let me start off this morning by declaring one thing that the Bible is clear about, and that is that the sun moves around the earth. The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it. After all, the psalmist says, "The Lord is king, he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed, he is girded with strength. He has established the world; *it shall never be moved.*" (Ps. 93:1) and, "You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken." (Ps 104:5) In other words, the earth is on a solid foundation; it doesn't move; everything moves around it. In 2 Kings 20, the prophet Isaiah asks God for a sign to show the king, and the sun retreats on the sun dial. Obviously the sun is moving around the earth.

In the book of Joshua, when General Joshua needs more time to defeat the Amorites, the sun "stopped in mid-heaven, and did not hurry to set for about a whole day." (Josh. 10:13) The sun revolves around the earth. The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it.

Now some of you think I'm being silly, because you say, You know we don't take that literally. Those are figures of speeches. And being 21st century people, and knowing from our astronomy classes that the sun does not rotate around the earth, it's hard to imagine believing any other way. But when Copernicus and later Galileo dared to say that the planets revolved around the sun, they were censured for that. The church placed Galileo under house arrest for the rest of his life, because he was going against Holy Scripture.

Luther, by the way, labeled Copernicus an "upstart astrologer." Because of his radical beliefs, Melancthon, Luther's friend, claimed that Copernicus was deluded by a "love of novelty." Calvin, the great reformer in Geneva, asked, "Who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of Holy Scripture?" In 1616, the Roman Catholic Church banned Copernicus' ideas as "false and altogether opposed to Holy Scripture." After all, the Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it.

Now you may think that's a silly example when it comes to the history of Bible interpretation. But it shows how we as a church have struggled to understand Scripture in light of new discoveries in our world. We had to re-interpret Scripture when it came to slavery; remember that nowhere does the Bible condemn slavery, in fact, churches used to vehemently defend slavery from the Bible.

Many of us, when we discovered how old the earth is and discovered fossil records, had to reassess how long it took for God to create this world and everything in it, and we reinterpreted Genesis 1 and 2. Many of us in the Christian church have changed our

understanding of women in ministry. And many of us are re-looking at what the Bible says about same-gender committed relationships. That became clear last August when our ELCA Church-wide Assembly voted to allow individual congregations to either call or refuse to call pastors and other rostered leaders in committed, life-long same-sex relationships. And that's the question that come up today in this ten-week series, based on Brian McLaren's book, "Ten Questions That are Transforming the Church:" Can we find a way to address human sexuality?

And one of the questions that has come up over the last hundred years or so of studying the human personality is the question of sexual orientation. And a relatively recent discovery is that some people are oriented towards same sex attraction. One of the questions to ask is, did those who wrote the Bible assume that everyone had a heterosexual orientation, so to act out sexually with someone of the same sex would be going against their heterosexual nature? But what if that is their nature? The Bible assumes that everyone is attracted to someone of the opposite sex. But in the mysteries of human biology and psychology, some people don't fit that category. And some of them are Christians, who have prayed for a change in their nature, and it hasn't happened.

And there are some who say, Well, it doesn't matter if someone has a homosexual orientation. If it can't be changed, then they simply need to remain celibate. After all, the Bible's examples of same-sex behavior are all condemnatory. (e.g. Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, Gen. 19, Romans 1:26ff. 1 Corinth. 6:9-10).

The question many of us are asking is, Are the committed, loving, monogamous same gender relationships that we know today examples of what the Bible is talking about? Do we say, The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it? Or do we say that we have a different understanding of sexuality now than the biblical authors and two thousand and 2500 years ago?

We have the conversion story of a sexual minority in the book of the Acts this morning. But let me start with Acts chapter 1, where Jesus says to the disciples that they are to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes upon them. And when the Spirit comes, they will receive power to be Jesus' witnesses "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

The entire book of the Acts is about boundary crossing. We forget how radical this was, but Jesus was saying, I want my Gospel, the good news of liberation and reconciliation and peace-making, to go out to all people, beginning with the Jews, but then going out to those awful Gentile people. And in Acts chapter 8, the Gospel goes out to a most unlikely person.

Philip, one of the leaders of the early church, has received an angelic vision where he was told to walk the Wilderness Road that leads to Gaza. Along the road came a chariot with a visitor from Ethiopia. The traveller worked for the Ethiopian government; he was in charge of the queen's treasury, and was just coming back from a visit to Jerusalem. Luke

says he was a eunuch, which is an odd designation to us today, but in ancient times it was less odd.

In the ancient world, certain males were chosen for castration, so they wouldn't marry and have a family. That way their loyalty would be only for the job that had been chosen for them. So eunuchs were put in charge of the king's harem, or they were the king's taster (an important "homeland security" job) or in this case the queen's treasury.

This Ethiopian eunuch had just visited Jerusalem- maybe as a way to show solidarity between the two nations, maybe because he was hungry for God, maybe both. So the Spirit says to Philip, run alongside this chariot. And as he runs alongside, he hears the Ethiopian reading aloud from the prophet Isaiah: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." (Acts 8:32-33)

Philip asks him if he understands what he's reading, and the eunuch says, Come on up into the chariot and explain it to me. And then he asks this question: "Is the prophet speaking of his own experience or someone else's?" You've had the experience of reading Scripture or hearing Scripture and thinking, God's talking to me! Given this man's unique identity, why would this particular passage grab his attention? Would something about a sheep being sheared have special meaning for him? Would hearing about someone's humiliation shine for him in a special way? Would hearing the word "generation" be particularly poignant for a man who could not produce the next generation?

So Philip tells the eunuch about the good news of Jesus. Remember that the good news of Jesus has to do with God bringing about new creation in Jesus, it has to do with liberation, with reconciliation. Remember that the good news is centered around a man who was publicly humiliated, misunderstood, a man without physical descendants, a man who had been cut and scarred. Obviously the Ethiopian feels that this good news connects with him in a powerful way because he says, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" (8:37)

Remember that this man had been returning from Jerusalem, where he had been hoping to worship. But remember he is a person of color, so obviously not a Jew. He could have stood in the court of the Gentiles, and worshiped from a distance. But that would have been denied him too, because for the Jews castration was a "defect." (Lev. 21:18-20) It would have denied him from the priesthood. And it would have denied him access to the temple, because Scripture says, "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord." (Lev.23:1)

So he had come to Jerusalem to worship, but had been turned away because his racial and sexual identity put him outside the worshipping community. And I wonder if he hears this story of Jesus and wonders, Is there a place for me the way I am? You tell me about a man who was rejected and humiliated in Jerusalem, who was scarred, who would not

have physical descendants. Is there a place for me in his kingdom, even though I have an unchangeable condition that was condemned forever by the sacred Jewish Scriptures?

So Philip simply acts. He does something radical. They stop the chariot; he leads the eunuch down into the water, and there he baptizes him. The ministry of Jesus to the outsider and the outcast is continued in the Book of Acts. The Samaritans are accepted, Gentiles are accepted, and now the sexually other is accepted into the kingdom of God, someone who could never have had a place before. Philip and the Ethiopian walk out of the water, reconciled in the kingdom of God.

Do you remember talking about that aspect of the Gospel Brian McLaren called the peaceable kingdom? Jesus modeled for us what the reign of God looks like, and it is the stranger being welcomed, and swords being beaten into farming tools, and creatures who normally would be at odds with each other finding community together, the wolf lying down with the lamb, that kind of thing. And do you remember I said that we have interpreted those descriptions as pictures of heaven? Those things won't really happen on earth, we say. And yet the prophets were talking about a time when God would make those things reality.

This Ethiopian eunuch- a nontraditional person, a person of color, a non-heterosexual person, is one of the first people baptized into the Christian faith. And tradition says that he went back to Ethiopia and founded the Christian church there. He was an early missional leader.

And with this story we are reminded of an image of the peacemaking kingdom from Isaiah, "Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come and my deliverance be revealed. Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast, who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil.

Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people,' and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.' For thus says the Lord, 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.

And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant- these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." (Isaiah 56:1-7) And just in case they miss the point that God is moving the boundaries, Isaiah says this in v.8: Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel; I will gather others to them besides those already gathered." (Is. 56:8)

Isaiah was painting a picture a picture of the reign of God being opened up to people who had previously been excluded: foreigners, and people of suspect sexuality who were hungry for God.

I close with a story that Brian McLaren shares in his book, "A New Kind of Christianity." McLaren was pastoring a church that was meeting in a school cafeteria near the University of Maryland, where McLaren was teaching a class. He had invited a Kenyan student to come to worship, and this was his first Sunday there. Francis had suffered from polio as a child, and he walked with braces. His upper body was powerful above his shriveled lower body.

After the service, when all the folding chairs had been stacked away, Francis sat alone in the middle of the room, weeping. And when McLaren touched his shoulder and said, Are you OK? Francis answered, Oh, dear brother, these are tears of joy. McLaren said, I don't understand. What happened? Francis said, This was my first time celebrating the Holy Supper. McLaren said, But Francis, I thought you said you had been a Christian since childhood? Yes, but until today, I had never shared in the holy Supper. You see, I am the child of the third wife.

He went on to explain that the Anglican church in Kenya had made a policy that when a family was baptized and the husband had more than one wife, only the children of the first wife could receive communion. He was the child of the third wife. He said to McLaren, When I came here today, Brian, and when you said that all were welcome to the table, I realized that here I am not a child of the third wife. Here I am simply Francis, a Christian, and I am welcome at the table.

I am convinced that Jesus welcomes tax collectors and sinners, impure Samaritans, uncircumcised Gentiles, de-sexed eunuchs, children of the third wife. Jesus welcomes gay and lesbian and straight people, and asks them to live out their God-given sexuality faithfully. And yes, Jesus welcomes tea party activists and liberals, the abled and the differently abled. I believe that God gathers us all together around the table and invites us to be transformed in order to love and serve this world in Jesus' name. Amen.