

Acts 8:26-39
Baptism Sunday

Baptism as Coming Out*

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Blessed Minority Christian Fellowship, Hong Kong
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Good afternoon! What a privilege and blessing it is to be at BMCF today. It's wonderful to be with you on this baptism and membership transfer Sunday, and to see so many friends, both old and new. Although I've been in contact with BMCF members since the early 2000s, this is actually my first visit to your church. I give thanks to God for giving me the opportunity to make a pilgrimage to this holy space.

Thank you to all of the wonderful musicians, worship leaders, and translators – especially Brother Kevin. They have given so much of their time, talent, and treasure so that we can glorify God together in worship.

Thank you to my friends, Brothers Paul, Gary, and Sam, for their warm welcome and hospitality in hosting me for dinner last night.

And thank you to Pastor Wong for inviting me to preach today. I am grateful for his contributions to BMCF over the last few years, and I celebrate and honor his ministry today.

Today I want to talk to you about *baptism as coming out*. I believe that we, as LGBT Christians and allies, have a special insight about the meaning of baptism based upon our experiences of coming out.

That is, we can understand baptism as coming out in at least two ways. First, baptism is how we come out as Christians. Second, baptism is how God comes out to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Let me talk about each of these queer understandings of baptism in turn.

First, baptism is how we come out as Christians.

I think it's fair to say that everyone in this room knows how much courage and grace it takes to come out as queer. When we come out of the closet as LGBT people, we dare to show our true selves to the world. We are no longer afraid to tell our friends, family, and loved ones about who God has created us to be. We leave behind our old lives, and we take on a new life. We are welcomed into the broader LGBT community,

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both at home and around the world. We become part of a new family of comrades, of *tongzhi*.

If you think about it, these are the very same things that happen with baptism! When we decide to be baptized – especially as adults – we come out of the closet at Christians. We dare to show our true selves as Christians in a highly secular and materialistic world. We are no longer afraid to tell our friends, family, and loved ones about the Good News of who God has created us to be as Christians. We leave behind our old lives, and we take on a new life in Christ. We are welcomed into the broader church community, both at home and around the world. And we become part of a new family of comrades, of *tongzhi* in Christ.

Isn't it amazing how baptism and coming out are like twin sacraments? Baptism is a Christian sacrament, and coming out is a queer sacrament. They are two sides of the same coin! That is why I believe that baptism is a particularly meaningful ritual in an LGBT community of faith like BMCF.

But baptism is more than just our coming out as Christians. Baptism is also how *God* comes out to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

God needs to come out, just like those of us who are LGBT. The Bible is God's coming out letter to us. Without the Bible, we would not know about God in all of God's fullness. Just as we sometimes write coming out letters to our families and friends, God writes a long coming out letter to us in the 66 books of the Bible. And nowhere does God come out more clearly than when Jesus is baptized in the River Jordan.

During Jesus' baptism, the skies open up and God says in a loud voice, "This is my child, the beloved. With him I am well pleased." It is at Jesus' baptism that God tells the world that God is most fully and perfectly revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ. God is saying to us, pay attention to this person. Live your life like this person. Because this is who I AM. So baptism is God coming out to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Does anyone know about the work of the queer Swedish photographer Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin? She creates art by taking photos of scenes from Jesus' life and by placing them in the context of LGBT life. One of her photographs shows Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist in a pool at a gay sauna. Although this might seem shocking for some people, it is actually a powerful way of showing through art how God comes out at Jesus' baptism.

So far, we have talked about baptism as coming out – both in terms of our coming out as Christians, and in terms of God coming out to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

But *who* exactly is called to baptism?

I believe that LGBT people have a special baptismal calling. Why? Because, as today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles shows us, the very first Gentile, or non-

Jewish person, to be baptized in the Bible was the Ethiopian Eunuch. Like other eunuchs in ancient times, the Ethiopian Eunuch was a sexual and gender outsider, and I believe that the eunuch is a spiritual ancestor to those of us who are LGBT people today.

As you know, the Acts of the Apostles is the fifth book in the New Testament, and it comes after the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Acts is the continuation, or second part, of Luke's gospel, and it tells the story of the earliest history of the Christian church, from Jesus' ascension into heaven until Paul's arrival in Rome.

In the eighth chapter of Acts, we learn about the missionary work of the deacon Philip, who was one of the first seven deacons in the early church. An angel of the Lord instructs Philip to travel south on the desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza.

On that road, Philip meets the Ethiopian Eunuch, an important official in charge of the treasury of the Queen of the Ethiopians. The eunuch is returning from worshiping in Jerusalem, and he is reading the Book of Isaiah in his chariot. Philip asks him if he understands what he is reading, and the eunuch replies, "How can I unless someone explains it to me?"

So Philip explains to the Ethiopian Eunuch the passage from Isaiah about the Suffering Servant. The Suffering Servant was led like a "lamb before its shearer" and was silent, even though he was unjustly slaughtered and would have no descendants. The Book of Isaiah was a prophecy about the Good News of Jesus Christ, Philip explains.

Upon hearing this, the Ethiopian Eunuch sees water next to the road and asks "What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" The eunuch stops the chariot, gets out, and Philip baptizes him. When the eunuch comes out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord takes Philip away. And the eunuch goes away rejoicing.

What an incredible passage! I am always amazed by the fact that God chose the Ethiopian Eunuch – someone who would be considered transgender or queer today – to be the very first Gentile who is baptized into the church. The Ethiopian Eunuch was a gender-variant person who, like many LGBT people today, was a sexual and gender outsider.

I suspect that many LGBT people today can relate to the Ethiopian Eunuch. He was someone who excelled at his job – serving the wealthy and powerful Queen of Ethiopia – but ultimately was seen as an outsider who didn't fit into society because of his sexuality and gender identity.

How many of us have a talent for working in service industries and helping the rich and powerful – and yet still remain on the margins of society?

I know that I can relate to the Ethiopian Eunuch. I worked as a tax lawyer for many years before becoming a theologian and seminary professor. I was good at what I did, and I served many wealthy and powerful corporations and clients. But ultimately I

was still an outsider in those circles, and I was deeply unhappy with my work. You could say that I was closeted about my true vocational calling.

One day about fifteen years ago, I saw a flier for a summer course in Biblical Hebrew at a local seminary in New York City. I'm not sure what drew me to that course, but, like the Ethiopian Eunuch, I wanted to study scripture and needed help from others to do so. I took the class, and I fell deeply in love with my class and the seminary. That was the beginning of my transition from a lawyer to a theologian. It hasn't always been an easy journey, but I've never felt happier and more whole in my life.

The Ethiopian Eunuch was also made whole and went away rejoicing after he was baptized. He no longer needed Philip by his side. As legend has it, he returned home to Ethiopia and established the first Christian churches in sub-Saharan Africa, which survive to this day. In the end, the Ethiopian Eunuch ended up having many spiritual descendants, even though he was physically unable to have children.

In Ancient Israel, eunuchs were unable to participate fully in the worship life of the community because of their outsider status. It must have been painful for the Ethiopian Eunuch to be in Jerusalem and to experience this exclusion. But God promises in chapter 56 of the Book of Isaiah that a eunuch should never say that "I am only a dry tree." Even the eunuch will receive an "everlasting name that will endure forever." This promise is fulfilled in the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch, and it is a promise that we as LGBT people should always remember.

My understanding is that the sermon theme for this quarter at BMCF is "spiritual development." Let me close my sermon today by saying a few words about how Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch can be good role models for our ongoing spiritual development. In particular, our spiritual development requires three things: (1) scripture; (2) community, and (3) commitment.

First, *scripture*. The Ethiopian Eunuch was reading the Book of Isaiah at the time of his encounter with Philip. As queer Christians, we are also called to read scripture. Sometimes we avoid reading scripture altogether because of the hurtful ways in which it has been used against us. Other times, however, we use scripture selectively. That is, we only cite the Bible when it is convenient for what we believe. Neither complete avoidance nor selective reading is a satisfactory approach to scripture. Spiritual growth requires us to listen carefully to God's Word in all of its fullness, because God is speaking to us – as God's beloved children – through scripture, right here and right now. Today's passage about the Ethiopian Eunuch is an important reminder of this fact.

Second, *community*. The Ethiopian Eunuch told Philip that he needed help. It was not enough for him to study the Bible alone; he needed to be in community to understand the Good News. The same is equally true of us. Even though I may hold a Ph.D. in theology and serve as a seminary professor, I would be deceiving myself if I thought that I could grow spiritually without the help of community. No matter how well intentioned I might be, I can only truly hear the Good News of Jesus Christ in community

– and in conversation – with my sisters, brothers, and siblings in Christ. We are called to model what many feminist and lesbian theologians have called a relational approach to power. The cross is not about top-down or vertical power. It is about power that is broken open from below and that is shared horizontally among community.

Third, *commitment*. The Ethiopian Eunuch made a commitment to be baptized. When the eunuch saw the water on the side of the road, he stopped his chariot and asked Philip to baptize him. He could have chosen to do nothing and to limit his understanding of the Good News to his intellect. Instead, the eunuch made a commitment to living out the Gospel by becoming baptized. Being a Christian is not just about theory; it is about practice and a long-term commitment to living the Christian life. It is a commitment to staying with our families of faith, through good times and bad times, through easy times and hard times.

As you witness or participate in today's baptism and membership transfer services, I invite you to reflect upon these three themes of scripture, community, and commitment. Ask yourself: Which of these themes speaks to me the most?

Some of you might be drawn to *scripture*. That is, you might feel called to participate in advanced Bible study, to read commentaries on the Bible, or to take classes in Biblical Hebrew or Greek.

Others of you might be drawn to *community*. That is, you might feel called to become even more involved with the BMCF community or leadership, or with the broader LGBT community in Hong Kong or around the world.

Still others of you might be drawn to *commitment*. That is, you might feel called to making a commitment to social justice ministries, to enriching your daily prayer life, or perhaps even deepening your commitment to your sisters, brothers, and siblings in the BMCF.

Whatever stage you might be at in terms of your own spiritual development, I pray that today's service and today's scripture reading about Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch will always help you to remember the deep connections between baptism and coming out.

In baptism, we come out as Christians to the world. In baptism, God comes out to us in the person of Jesus Christ. And in baptism, those of us who are LGBT find our special vocational calling. As the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch shows us, God chooses the marginalized, the unexpected, and the outcast to be God's bearers of the Good News to the world.

Christianity is a queer faith, and our God is a queer God. And for that we give our thanks.

+Amen.