

Rejoice!

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Metropolitan Community Church of Boston
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Happy Pride Month! It's great, as always, to be here tonight. I don't know about you, but June is my favorite month of the year. Does anyone else feel that way? For me, June is a time when we lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people can really rejoice in who God has created us to be, in all of our glorious diversity.

Isn't it great how we queer people seem to be everywhere during this month? I personally rejoiced in the fact that Margaret Cho -- the fabulous bisexual Asian American comic -- graced the cover of *Out Magazine's* 10th Anniversary Issue. It may have taken a decade for this to happen, but I feel like we queer Asian Americans have finally arrived! In an interview, Cho talked about how far those of us in the LGBT community have come in the media with TV shows like *Queer as Folk*. "Growing up," she says, "all we had was Wayland Flowers and Madame."

It's not just TV either. Michael and I saw the new movie *Scooby Doo* on Friday night, and I thought it was a perfect representation of the diversity of the queer community. There's Velma, who is the quintessential dyke. There's Daphne, the lipstick lesbian. There's Fred, the pretty gay boy. There's Shaggy, the grungy, artsy bisexual type. I'm not really sure what to do with Scooby, or, for that matter, Scrappy Doo ...

How far we've come, indeed. I rejoiced in the fact that this year's Boston Dyke March had it's biggest crowd in it's eight-year history, and it's theme was: "Toward Unity -- Challenging Racism." One of the organizers of the march said, "[O]ften racism isn't addressed enough in the community . . . And so we decided that this would be an important issue." What a great way to recognize the African American and Latino drag queens and bull dykes who ignited the modern-day queer rights movement with the Stonewall Riots nearly 23 years ago.

It's also been a personal time of rejoicing for me and my family. The last time I preached here, my Dad had just been diagnosed with lung cancer and was about to undergo open heart surgery. He has since survived both the removal of a part of his lung and a quintuple bypass. He's still very weak, but he's come a long way. I give thanks to God, and I especially rejoice on this Father's Day, for all of your prayers and your concerns.

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Finally, as a community, we have lots to rejoice about. We are growing, and great things are happening here. Just a few days ago, MCC Boston was recognized by the denomination as one of the Top 20 congregations in the Fellowship in terms of recent membership growth and growth in attendance. Isn't that just fantastic? I think we deserve to give ourselves and Pastor Joan a big hand.

Tonight's lesson about the Ethiopian Eunuch from the Book of Acts is one of my favorite stories in the Bible. I think it's really fitting for tonight's service, because it teaches us to rejoice in three very special ways. First, it teaches us to rejoice in God's Word. Second, it teaches us to rejoice in God's Welcome. And third, it teaches us to rejoice in God's Way. Let's explore this passage together.

Will you pray with me?

Holy One, we thank you for the many gifts that you have bestowed upon us, especially for the gift of Pride Month and the gift of diversity. Help us to rejoice in ourselves, in each other, and in You. May the Word of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O God, my rock and my redeemer. All this we ask in the Spirit and in your many Names. Amen.

First, tonight's reading teaches us to rejoice in God's Word. We encounter the Ethiopian Eunuch, who is one of the most important officials in the great African Kingdom of Ethiopia, riding in a chariot and reading from the Book of Isaiah. The apostle Philip comes up to him, and asks him whether he understands what he's reading. "How can I," the Eunuch replies, "unless someone guides me?" And so he invites Philip to sit next to him, and they read the Bible together.

For many of us who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, the Bible is often a scary thing, used to beat us into submission. We're told from an early age that the Bible condemns who we are and what we do. But when we finally muster up the courage to come together as queer people of faith and read the Bible in community -- like the Ethiopian Eunuch and Philip sitting side by side -- we discover that there's a reason to rejoice in God's Word.

Scholars have discovered that the traditional anti-queer texts of terror in the Bible are actually warnings about turning one's back on God and neighbor, be it inhospitality, ritual laws, or idolatry. They are *not* warnings about homosexuality as we understand it today! For example, the Sodom and Gomorrah story is a warning about turning away strangers at your door who ultimately turn out to be God's messengers. This is the interpretation that Jewish rabbis and even other books in the Bible have given to the story for centuries. Isn't it ironic that the religious fundamentalists are actually the ones who are violating these warnings against inhospitality, and not us?

Furthermore, when we come together and read the Bible, we discover that God's Word is filled with stories about us! There are stories about women loving women, like

Ruth and Naomi. There are stories about men loving men, like Jonathan and David. There are stories about transgender people, like the Ethiopian Eunuch. Virginia Mollenkott, a queer theologian, has identified literally dozens of different relationships and family structures in the Bible. The Bible is our story too! It has been one of the most powerful sources of social change and freedom in history, from the Reformation to the Civil Rights Movement. As an oppressed community, we must never forget that. What a great reason to rejoice in God's Word!

Second, tonight's story teaches us to rejoice in God's Welcome. Even though the Ethiopian Eunuch was one of the most powerful individuals in his country, he was a radical outsider figure, both in terms of his race and his sexuality. In ancient times, Ethiopians were considered to be strangers because of their skin color and because of their geographic origin from the far ends of the earth. Eunuchs were also considered strangers because they were castrated and were different from most people in terms of their sexualities.

On top of all that, the Ethiopian Eunuch was a stranger in the Israelite religion because of Jewish law. According to the Book of Deuteronomy, eunuchs were not allowed to be full members of the Jewish community because they were not "whole." Even though the Eunuch was traveling back from Jerusalem, he would have been forbidden to worship at the Temple because he was different. In many ways, eunuchs in the ancient world were just like queer people today -- excluded from the religious establishment on the basis of who they were.

When the Ethiopian Eunuch is told of the Good News about Jesus, however, he immediately stops the chariot, gets out, and is baptized by Philip. Absolutely nothing gets in the way of God's welcome -- not the Eunuch's race, not the Eunuch's sexuality, not even the "rules" of the religious establishment.

I've always seen the Ethiopian Eunuch as one of my spiritual ancestors. Like me, he is a queer person of color. Like me, he is often seen as a double outsider, both in terms of his race and his sexuality. But the Good News is that he's welcomed unconditionally by God -- just like how all of us are welcomed here at MCC Boston. Isn't it amazing, if you stop and think about it, that the very first non-Jewish (that is, gentile) convert to Christianity in the Bible is a queer person of color? What a great reason to rejoice in God's Welcome!

Third, tonight's story teaches us to rejoice in God's Way. The beauty of the Good News is that, once you have been touched by it, you simply can't keep it to yourself. That's what gave Philip the courage to approach the Ethiopian Eunuch (despite their differences in background and social standing), and that's why the Spirit snatched Philip away once his work was done. Now it was the Eunuch's turn to pass on the Good News to others. Ancient church legends tell us that, after his conversion experience, the Eunuch "went on his way rejoicing" and founded the Christian church in Ethiopia, which grew to become one of the largest churches in Africa.

It's simply not God's Way to keep the rejoicing to ourselves. I recently read an interview with David Henry Hwang, the Tony Award winning Asian American playwright who wrote *M. Butterfly*. He was raised in what he called a "hard, restrictive and joyless Christianity." The Chinese evangelical church in which he grew up did not have the capacity to "tolerate shades of gray." Rather, he said, it "perpetrated a black-and-white mode of thinking which demonized its opponents." How many of us have experienced the same kind of joyless religion in the past? It doesn't really make us want to spread the Good News, does it? Maybe it's because there's not much Good News to spread in the first place under those joyless versions of the faith!

In contrast, once you've experienced the unconditional love of God, it's impossible to keep it to yourself. You just have to keep on "coming out" about God to one person after another! How do *you* live God's Way? How do *you* let the world know about God's love and places like MCC Boston that affirm God's love? Challenge yourself in the coming weeks and months to pass on this gift to others, like Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. What a great reason to rejoice in God's Way!

In sum, tonight's lesson about the Ethiopian Eunuch teaches us to rejoice in God's Word, to rejoice in God's Welcome, and to rejoice in God's Way. God loves us just as we are, regardless of our skin color, our sexualities, our religious background, or our social or economic status -- and that's the message of Pride month all around the world. Take a moment to pull over your chariot and reaffirm your commitment to God. And then go on your way, rejoicing in the Good News.

Amen.