Reconciling Scripture for Lutherans

Sexuality & Gender Identity

AUSTEN HARTKE
EMMY KEGLER

ReconcilingWorks
LUTHERANS FOR FULL PARTICIPATION

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written by
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About the Authors

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Emmy and Austen are long-time friends and regular co-contributors to organizations such as *Q Christian Fellowship*. Together they cover a spectrum of experiences: pastor and lay leader, gay and bisexual, cisgender and transgender, female and male.

Introduction

Over the past several years we, as Christians and as Lutherans, have had many conversations about sexuality. Our denomination offered the *Statement on Human Sexuality* in 2009, specifically addressing same-gender relationships, and this has moved some of us further towards affirmation of our LGBTQ+ siblings. More recently we've begun having productive conversations about the inclusion of people of diverse gender identities in our churches and in our lives. Still, many of us in the ELCA struggle to apply a Lutheran interpretation of the Scriptures in regards to LGBTQ+ individuals and communities.

In recognition of this continued journey, ReconcilingWorks offers here a short commentary which takes into account biblical integrity and knowledge, key Lutheran interpretative lenses, and the diverse experiences of the LGBTQ+ community. This commentary addresses eight of the so-called "clobber passages" used to exclude LGBTQ+ people from the body of Christ, and finishes with eight Bible passages that offer inclusive and expansive understandings of the nature of God's welcome. Our hope is that these interpretations, based in scripture, tradition, and reason, may lead to a deeper understanding of our LGBTQ+ siblings in Christ and continued acts of reconciliation within God's family.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURAL LENSES

When Christians attempt to talk about Scripture and its meaning for our lives, we have several ways of looking at any given passage. We may, for example, try to read a set of verses as simply as possible, taking each word at face value. We may try to put the passage in its wider context, making sure that we're paying close attention to the stories surrounding it on either side. We may look at multiple translations of a verse, or we may compare similar stories in separate passages. Each denomination active today has its own ways of reading the Bible, and its own history and tradition to rely upon. For Lutherans, our most common metrics for scriptural interpretation come from the writings of Martin Luther.

The Dialectic of Law and Gospel

Many of us may be familiar with Luther's division of Scripture into the two categories of "Law" and "Gospel." Luther believed that it was incredibly important for Christians to know the difference between these two things, and to make use of both of them in our reading of the Bible. He defined the Law as the thing which we measure ourselves against--the thing which shows us how far we often fall of the mark that God sets for us. The best example of the Law in Scripture is, of course, the Ten Commandments. They ask us to follow certain standards of behavior and attitude toward God and others, but when we read them it's easy to see our own flaws and faults. So in one hand, the Law gives us the knowledge of all of our sins and "drives us toward Christ" [1] by showing us our need

[1] *Martin Luther, The distinction between the law and the gospel. Concordia Journal, 18(2), 153-163, 1992.*

for forgiveness. The purpose of the Gospel, on the other hand, is "to preach the forgiveness of sins to troubled consciences," and to offer us "life eternal." [2] These two themes work symbiotically and lead from one to the other in a cycle. Luther believed that the Law called us to repentance, and the Gospel provided forgiveness, which then in turn gives us the love and encouragement we need to follow the Law more thoughtfully.

The Plain Reading of Scripture in its Original Context

In Luther's time, allegorical and metaphorical methods of interpretation were popular. For example, the church father Augustine believed the two coins which the Good Samaritan pays the innkeeper in Luke 11:35 were a metaphor for Jesus' two commands to love God and neighbor. Similarly, Origen of Alexandria believed that the two coins signified the divine figures of Father and Son. Luther pushed back on these allegorical readings, insisting that Scripture should not be interpreted to say more than what it meant to its original hearers, writers, and readers. He believed that "words and language cease to have meaning when the things which have a simple meaning through interpretation by a simple word are given further meanings and thus become different things." [3] This lens invites us into exploring what Scripture would have meant to its original hearers in its historical context. Who wrote each book, and where, and why? What do we know about that time in history? How is the Bible similar to other ancient

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[2] *Article IV: Of Justification - Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1531). In The Book of Concord.*

[3] *"Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by the Goat Emser in Leipzig—Including Some Thoughts Regarding his Companion, the Fool Murner" (1521), in Luther's Works 39:178.*

stories? In the same way that *Wicked* would make a lot less sense without the background we get in The *Wizard of Oz,* knowing the history and references behind the Bible helps us to better understand it.

The Canon of Scripture Interpreting Individual Scripture

A single verse or story from the Bible does not exist in a vacuum. The multiplicity of voices and authors, all trying to describe an experience of God, are held together in one book for a reason. Some stories may seem very easy to understand, while others seem complicated, challenging, or even cruel. Luther's proposal was that the whole of Scripture -- the proclamation of God's unconditional mercy, call for justice, and promise to make all things new -- interprets each of the smaller parts of Scripture. [4] When we read a single verse or story, we are called to read them alongside other parts of the Bible. What is the one grand story that Bible writers are trying to point to, and how does each part fit into that larger narrative?

The Metaphor of the Hebrew Scriptures as the Manger Which Holds Christ

Martin Luther believed and taught that Scripture was meant to point to Christ. In his 1522 preface to his translation of the Old Testament, Luther used the metaphor of the manger, saying that

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[4] *Diane L. Jacobson, Stanley Norris Olson, and Mark Allan Powell, Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.*

[5] *Martin Luther, "Prefaces to the Old Testament," The Works of Martin Luther, Vol. 35: Word and Sacrament, Volume One, pg. 236.*

the Bible "holds" Christ, the Word of God, just like the manger held the baby Jesus. [5] We should not mistake the manger (the Bible) for the true Word of God; it is Jesus who is the Word and our source of life (John 1:14). When Christians read the Hebrew Scriptures--what we call the Old Testament--we look at them through the lens of Jesus' incarnation, life, miracles, teachings, death, and resurrection. For example, we may read a passage from the Old Testament that concerns different kinds of food restrictions, but rather than considering those restrictions all by themselves, we also consider Jesus' words and actions on the same subject. While all Scripture is important, Christians see God's revelation through Jesus as the true centerpoint of our faith, and as we seek to understand the rest of the Bible we always keep that centerpoint in view.

ON TRANSLATIONS

The most commonly used Bible interpretation in the ELCA is the New Revised Standard Version, although others (including the New International Version and the Common English Bible) are also in use. We have used the NRSV for our Bible quotes, and noted interpretative differences where it is relevant.

Passages Used to Exclude

Genesis 1: Through the Dialectic of Law and Gospel

When Christians seek to understand our place in the word, many of us begin at the beginning--with Genesis. In the beginning, we read, God created the heavens and the earth. Verses 1 through 25 paint a brilliant picture of nature and living things, separated conveniently into distinct categories such as light and darkness, and sea and land.

Toward the end of the chapter we read:

> *Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."*
>
> *So God created humankind in his image,*
>
> *in the image of God he created them;*
>
> *male and female he created them.*
>
> *God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (Genesis 1:26-28)*

While some point to God's creation of male and female as proof of the existence of only two sexes or genders, we might just as easily ask whether God's creation and separation of land and sea mean

that there are no such things as swamps, estuaries, or reefs, or whether the creation of day and night mean there's no such thing as dusk or dawn. Realistically, when we look at nature we find a multitude of different kinds of life that don't make it into this first chapter of Genesis, but we don't see anyone arguing about the existence of something like the platypus, just because it doesn't appear in this text. Think, for instance, of our intersex siblings who are born with differences in sex development that make it impossible to categorize them as simply male or female, [6] and yet they are made in the image of God in exactly the same degree as every other human being.

In excluding people with gender- and sex-diverse identities, Christians have considered verse 27 to be acting as Law--as a piece of Scripture that designates how we should think and act. But Luther's definition of the Law as the thing which shows us our flaws and pushes us toward repentance doesn't apply to this description of God's creation. There is no command for us in the phrase "male and female he created them." Instead, we may see that phrase as descriptive, rather than prescriptive. We may read the description of human beings as male or female in this verse in the same way we read the description of God as Alpha and Omega--as a summary of every point along spectrum, rather than as two distinct boxes.

So what if the Law found in this passage is more rightly applied

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[6] *M. K. DeFranza, Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015.*

to God's command to "be fruitful and multiply" and to "have dominion" in verse 28? Some LGBTQ+ people may have had this verse used against them because it appears to be a command to procreate, and historically people in same-sex relationships have not been able to jointly have their own biological children. But throughout Christian history we've understood that not every person is called to marriage or to parenthood, and we also recognize different ways of being fruitful. What if we understood this passage to be a command towards all kinds of fruitfulness? We may be called to produce art, or food, or medicine, or affordable housing, or new communities of faith!

It's in the command to "have dominion" that we see Luther's use of the Law most fully. Historically, Christians have used this command as an excuse to exploit our environment, and we have consequently wiped out many of the species that God gave us control over. On the whole, humans have not been good stewards of the creation God entrusted to us, and for that we may be called to repentance.

The Gospel in this passage is that we may yet find ways to live into our birthright as people created in the image of God. Because we are created in God's image we are given the ability to be creators in our own right. God is calling us into our divine nature as individuals and communities who can work together with God to create a more just and loving world. No matter what we do or who we are, none of us will ever lose that mark of grace--the stamp of God's nature on our very being.

Genesis 2: Through the Metaphor of the Manger

In the second creation story, found in Genesis chapter 2, we see the

world created not through separation, but through relationships. God creates Adam from the dust of the ground and breathes life into him before placing him in a beautiful garden. Adam has everything he could want, but there's one problem--he's lonely. God responds to the first need from the first human being, and brings every created animal to Adam in the hope of finding him a companion. Verse 20 tells us, "The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for Adam there was not found a helper as his partner." Finally, God causes Adam to fall into a deep sleep and then removes part of Adam's side, which God makes into the second human being.

> *And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,*
>
> *"This at last is bone of my bones*
>
> *and flesh of my flesh;*
>
> *this one shall be called Woman,*
>
> *for out of Man this one was taken."*
>
> *Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. (Genesis 2:22-24)*

Jesus himself quotes this passage in both Matthew and Mark when questioned about the possibility of divorce.

> *Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any*

cause?" He answered, "Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." (Matt 19:3-6)

This coming together of Adam and Eve as man and woman has been used as a proof text in the argument against same-gender relationships. Some Christians believe that true unity in relationships can only be achieved by male-female pairs whose differences complement each other, essentially making one whole out of two halves. The thing that complicates this interpretation is the repeated language of "one flesh" used both in Genesis and in Matthew, which recognizes a desired "sameness."

It would make sense that if Adam was searching for a partner who had significant differences, or even complimentary differences, he might have chosen one of the animals whom God brought to him earlier in the chapter. After all, the height of a giraffe could make up for a human's shorter stature, or a cheetah's speed might make up for human's slower hunting ability! But rather than choosing something entirely different from himself, Adam speaks reverently about the similarities he and Eve share, saying, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!" The characteristics that Adam was looking for in a mate had more to do with similarity and the ability to share a life with someone like himself than it had to do with making up for some kind of lack in either partner.

Clearly Jesus felt strongly about this one-flesh union, since he

repeats the phrase even after quoting the original text. While in Genesis 2 we see more human agency ("a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife), in Matthew Jesus emphasizes God's agency ("what God has joined together"), suggesting a divine interaction in the relationship. Furthermore, we see this phrase being used to describe other kinds of family bonds throughout the Old Testament (Gen. 29:14, Judg. 9:2, 2 Sam. 5:1, 2 Sam 19:12-13; 1 Chron. 11:1). [7] In every case, the phrase is used to emphasize an incredibly strong commitment to relationship with another person.

When Christians seek to exclude same-gender couples from entering this kind of relationship, we are in fact creating the problem that God intended to solve in Genesis 2. We force our LGBTQ+ siblings to live in loneliness, rather than celebrating the kind of commitment that Jesus himself recognized as foundational and God-given.

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[7] *James V. Brownson, Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships, Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2013.*

Genesis 19: Through the Canon of Scripture Interpreting Scripture

In this passage, two angels are sent by God to the city of Sodom, which has earned a reputation for sinfulness (Genesis 18:20-21). Abraham's nephew Lot greets them and persuades them to stay with him rather than sleeping in the town square. Every single man of Sodom then comes to Lot's house, and as a group they demand that Lot "bring out" the men who are staying with him, "that we may know them" (Genesis 19:5). Lot begs them not to make such a demand, and offers his daughters instead, but the men refuse to listen and try to break down his door. The angels strike all the men blind and warn Lot to flee the city with his family before it is destroyed. As Lot escapes with his wife and unmarried daughters, God rains down sulfur and fire, destroying the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah completely.

The word "sodomy" comes directly from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1-29. The men's demand "that we may know them" and Lot's offer of daughters "who have not known a man" seems to use the biblical euphemism for sexual relations (as seen in Genesis 4:1, Genesis 4:17, and Genesis 4:25). The men of Sodom are demanding to have sex with the male angels of God. This wicked act, and the total destruction that follows, has been interpreted by some as a biblical condemnation of homosexuality.

Other biblical references to Sodom and Gomorrah, however, make this condemnation less clear. The prophet Ezekiel specifically summarizes Sodom's sins: "she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but they did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me" (Ezekiel 16:49-50). There is no connection to sexual activity;

instead, Sodom's sin is injustice and greed. When Jesus' message is rejected or when cities refuse to listen to his disciples, he proclaims that the day of judgment will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah than for those towns (Matthew 10:1-15, Matthew 11:20-24, Luke 10:1-12). The sins of these cities are not sexual, but are about a refusal to hear Jesus' message or to be welcoming to his followers. Jude condemns them for how they "indulged in sexual immorality and went after other flesh" (Jude 1:7), neither of which are sins specific to same-gender sexual activity.

Many of the leaders of the Israelite people refer to Sodom and Gomorrah when prophesying destruction, but these situations are not limited to sexual activity. Moses warns the Israelites against violating the covenant they make with God (Deuteronomy 29:22–23). Isaiah recalls Sodom and Gomorrah when rejecting sacrifices and burnt offerings (Isaiah 1:9-11); Jeremiah connects it to adultery, lies, and injustice (Jeremiah 23:13-15). The prophet Amos mourns the injustice and empty worship of the people of God, noting that the people overthrown like Sodom still will not return to God (Amos 4:1-11). The fiery judgment of Sodom is not limited to same-gender sexual acts. (Sodom and Gomorrah are also used as general warnings of future destruction without specific reference to the sins that the people have committed, including in Isaiah 3:9, Isaiah 13:19-22, Jeremiah 49:17-18, Jeremiah 50:39-40, and Lamentations 4:6.)

We should also pay attention to the kind of sexual contact the men of Sodom desired. They are not interested in the angels' willingness or consent. They don't speak to the angels at all, but rather to Lot, who is responsible for them. A similar story is found in the book of Judges, when an unnamed Levite is a guest in the town

of Gibeah. The men of that town also demand his host turn him over, and they are given his concubine to rape instead. She dies at the doorstep, and her owner cuts her into twelve pieces and sends her to each tribe of Israel, demanding retaliation against Gibeah (Judges 19:1-30). These are not stories of consensual sex, but of stranger rape.

The canon of Scripture uses Sodom and Gomorrah as a warning for all, not specifically for same-gender sexual activity. It also names Sodom's sin as pride, greed, and uncharity. The abomination of Sodom and Gomorrah might not be same-gender sexual activity, but rather a self-aggrandizement that sees the other (even angels) as something to be exploited.

Leviticus 18 & 20: Through the Metaphor of the Manger

Leviticus is one of the five books of Moses, and one of the four latter books -- Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy -- which weave together story and Law, detailing the events of the Israelites' forty years in the desert, along with the lessons God sought to teach. Leviticus is primarily a book of the Law, outlining proper worship and sacrifice, specifying how to address bodily disease, and naming key festivals of the calendar year. In the midst of this, the writer of Leviticus also gives instructions as to appropriate sexual behavior.

Chapter eighteen of Leviticus addresses sexual purity and rejects "what they do in the land of Canaan." Numerous forms of incest and familial intercourse are forbidden, as is sex during a woman's menstrual cycle and sex with any animal. Also included is a prohibition, as has been commonly interpreted, against male-male sexual activity:

> *You shall not like with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. (Leviticus 18:22)*

This prohibition is repeated in chapter twenty, which outlines the penalties for sexual impurity:

> *If a man likes with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. (Leviticus 20:13)*

How do these laws compare with what we know of Christ? Do they correspond with the God we know in Jesus, or are they instead like the straw that held the baby?

Jesus' relationship with the Mosaic Law is complex. He explicitly affirms the Law and rejects the idea that he has come to "abolish" it. In Matthew 5:17-18 he says, "I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one iota or a stroke of an iota will pass from the law until all is accomplished." In this passage Jesus appears to affirm the whole of the Law and to reject anyone who would declare it invalid.

However, Jesus then goes on to complicate the Law. He expands some of Moses' commandments, saying seven times "you have heard it said … but I say to you …." (Matthew 5:21-48). He demands more accountability in regard to anger and conflict, lust and objectification, divorce, oathbreaking, retaliation, and feelings towards enemies. Each time, he makes the commandment even harder to follow, but far more life-giving for the one on the opposite end (the brother, the woman, the enemy). In his repeat additions to existing commandments, Jesus creates a system that more actively breaks down oppression, injustice, and hatred.

In contrast to this affirmation of the Law, Jesus also directly contradicts it. He allows his disciples to pluck grain on the sabbath (Matthew 12:1-8) in direct violation of the interpretation of the sabbath law in the Ten Commandments. He then goes into a synagogue and heals (Matthew 12:9-14), again in direct violation. Jesus explains that it isn't in violation, in part because rescuing an animal is permissible (Matthew 12:11) and in part because "The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath" (Matthew 12:8) -- implying that, because the disciples are in service to the Son of Man, they too can break sabbath laws against work.

Finally, Jesus is presented directly with the chance to fulfill Moses'

command to put a sexual sinner to death. In John's gospel, a woman caught in adultery is brought to Jesus (John 8:53-9:11). Leviticus demands that both the man and the woman be put to death (Leviticus 20:10). Yet Jesus, in direct contradiction to the Law's command, challenges the crowd, refuses to condemn the woman, and sends her on her way.

Jesus' complex relationship with the Law of Moses, at the very least, does not support modern-day violence against a man who has sex with other men. It also calls into question how we apply the laws of the Hebrew Scriptures, and whether they are as a whole an absolute norm of faith and life -- or whether they require new interpretation in the same way that Jesus offered.

Deuteronomy 22:5: Through the Plain Reading of Scripture

At first glance, Deuteronomy 22:5 seems like a fairly easy verse to understand:

> *A woman shall not wear a man's apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment; for whoever does such things is abhorrent to the Lord your God.*

When it comes to Luther's plain reading lens, however, we have to remember that "plain reading" does not mean "taking this verse at face value as it's translated into our current language and context." Rather, this lens asks us to wonder about what this verse would have meant if taken at face value in its original context. Plain reading, in this case, might mean asking questions like, "What was going on in ancient Israel that would have inspired this verse?"

Some scholars believe that this verse was written because dressing in the clothing of another gender was a common part of cultic rituals for many of the civilizations surrounding Israel. By outlawing this clothing practice, the Hebrew people were essentially adding another layer of protection against any kind of worship that might be directed toward other gods.

Another question we might ask is, "What are 'a man's apparel' and 'a woman's garment?'" Are we talking about suits and dresses? Well, in ancient Israel, probably not. One Jewish teacher, Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob, writing about this verse several hundred years later, suggested that the words used for "a man's apparel" actually referred to armor and weapons. He believed that this verse was written specifically to keep women from dressing as men to go

into battle in a society with so few people that the loss of anyone capable of childbearing was a hardship for the whole tribe. Today, in the context of a Christianity that encompasses cultures all over the world, all of whom have their own particular way of dressing, would it be right, or even possible, to standardize our concepts of gendered clothing?

Third, we might ask, "What does the word 'abhorrent' mean in this context?" This word, which is sometimes translated as "abomination," is used eight times in Deuteronomy, and is applied to everything from creating idols, to sacrificing a sheep with a defect, to consulting someone who practices divination, to using trick weights to measure goods in your favor. The eight passages that use this word all have to do with things that get in the way of our relationship with God (like idolatry), or in the way of our relationship with our neighbor (like cheating with trick weights to make them pay more for a bag of flour).

So we have to ask one final question in light of all these contextual clues: How does this verse apply to us today? Some transgender and gender-non-conforming people have this verse quoted to them when it comes to their gender expression, but it's possible that it may not apply. If trans folks are not wearing clothing as part of a ritual worshipping other gods, or to damage their relationship with God or with their neighbor, is it really the same thing as the practice this verse was originally referring to?

Deuteronomy 23:1: Through the Canon of Scripture Interpreting Scripture

As we saw in Genesis 1, one of the most common themes in the first five books of the Bible is a practice of separation and categorization. As a people set apart for the Lord, the Israelites adhered strictly to laws that made them different from the societies around them, and in many cases may have kept them safer and healthier. Leviticus and Deuteronomy are filled with laws deciding between acceptable and unacceptable food, clothing, farming practices, relationships, warfare, and just about everything else. In Deuteronomy 23:1-8 we even find a list of acceptable and unacceptable people. The very first verse in the chapter says,

> *No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.*

At first glance, this verse seems a bit cruel and unnecessary. Why go out of your way to regulate the rejection of someone who is probably already experiencing a strong sense of "othering?" But as scholars have looked more closely at the cultural practices of Israel's neighbors, it's become more likely that this verse was written as a kind of preventative measure.

Many of the cultures in the region at the time used castration as a form of capital punishment. The famous Babylonian Code of Hammurabi listed castration as a punishment for certain sexual crimes including rape, and so it wouldn't have been surprising to see a similar law enacted in Israel. But instead, this verse in Deuteronomy kept the Hebrew people from using castration as a punishment because it would essentially disconnect the offender from society as a whole, which, in that time and place, would have been almost

as effective as a death sentence.

Today this verse is often used by Christians who believe that transgender people should not choose to go through any kind of gender-confirming surgery. While gender-confirmation surgery may technically include a form of castration for someone assigned male at birth, this is certainly not the case for all trans people, and it is certainly not the only kind of surgery a trans person may choose to have.

But even if we consider this verse to be relevant to the process of transitioning for transgender people today, its context within the larger scriptural story is absolutely crucial. When this story begins, at the time Deut 23:1 was written, Israel would have had some control over its own laws and the lives of the people. Not long afterward, however, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were overthrown first by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians--both of whom practiced castration as punishment and as a means to create a group of people who could move between gendered spaces. Eunuchs, as castrated men were called, were seen in these cultures as a kind of third gender, and they were often employed by royalty to take care of the king's wives (as we see in the book of Esther), or to watch over the royal treasury (as seen in the book of Daniel). During the time the Israelites were captive in Assyria, Babylon, and later, Persia, it's likely that many of the Israelite men were castrated and became eunuchs. Sometimes this may have been done without their consent, since the Israelites were treated as slaves, but at other times it may have been a conscious choice, since eunuchs were often placed in positions of power and authority.

When the people of Israel were finally allowed to return home they

had a serious problem on their hands. How could they uphold the Law found in Deuteronomy when so many of their family members were now considered outside the bounds of the community? This is why, as we move through scripture from Deuteronomy 23:1 to Isaiah 56:1-8 to Matthew 19:11-12 to Acts 8:26-40, we see a change in the biblical attitude toward eunuchs--moving from exclusion to inclusion.

We'll talk more about this change in attitude in the following section on Isaiah 56, but keep in mind the way this story starts, and begin asking whether this change in theology and practice may be equally relevant to our treatment of LGBTQ+ people in Christian communities today.

Romans 1: Through the Dialectic of Law and Gospel

The letter to the Romans is thought to be Paul's last letter. In it, Paul explains his understanding of the relationship between the Jewish people and the new Christians, promises new life in Christ, and gives guidelines for how to live in Christian community. In the opening to this letter, Paul describes how wicked people have rejected the revelation of God:

> *Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator … For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. (Romans 1:22-27)*

This passage, with its powerful language, has often been used in judgment against same-gender sexual activity. Paul's frequent use of the word "natural" and "unnatural" comes up in many conversations about LGBTQ+ people. We know that Paul, like every other writer of his time, did not have a concept of "sexual orientation" as we have today, which makes it difficult to assess what "natural" and "unnatural" may mean in a time when we acknowledge the existence of people who are not solely attracted to a gender differ-

ent from their own.

It is very important to notice how Paul is using this story. He seems to be telling the story of a pagan people, who might have known who God was through creation (Romans 1:19-20) but choose to create idols based on mortal beings. Ancient historians wrote about "cults of prostitution," in which Greek or Roman temples employed prostitutes to serve, possibly as part of ritual sex dedicated to particular gods. We can say with certainty that Paul is not describing Jews or Christians who engage in same-gender sexual activity, since he puts idol worship at the center of the problem. This unnamed group of people turned from God and worshiped idols, and as a result were given into same-gender sexual activity.

Despite its frequent use in conversations about LGBTQ+ affirmation, Paul did not tell this story to condemn same-gender sexual activity. He is depicting a sinful and unnamed people who are set up as a foil for the Romans who have received his letter. Just as we reach his most vitriolic verse, when he declares that "those who practice such things deserve to die," he turns the tables on his hearers: "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things" (Romans 2:1).

Either Paul is accusing his readers of literally doing all the things he listed in the previous chapter, or he is trying to set them up. Paul's argument throughout Romans (and in most of his other letters) is that salvation is based entirely on Christ, and not on our own ability to do good works and follow the Law. Any form of sin under the Law will be judged (Romans 2:12), and not one person is

righteous (Romans 3:10). The promise of the Gospel is that Jesus has freed us from the penalty of sin.

Paul is very clear that relying on sanctification through the Law leads to death (Romans 6:21). However, whether that Law still has a hold on the sanctified believer has been a subject of debate -- and even the letter to the Romans is not entirely clear. Paul rejects sin and wickedness within the body of Christ (Romans 6:12-14) but also disregards longstanding Jewish food purity laws (Romans 14:14-15). Yet his promise remains the same: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10: Through the Plain Reading of Scripture

The first letter to the Corinthians and the first letter to Timothy are commonly attributed to the apostle Paul. In those letters, he provides instructions to the church community he started in Corinth and to his fellow leader Timothy. Two verses from those letters are often quoted in opposition to people in same-gender relationships:

> *"Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers - none of these will inherit the kingdom of God." (1 Corinthians 6:9)*

> *"This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching..." (1 Timothy 1:9-10)*

Of particular interest are the words "male prostitutes" and "sodomites." These are translations of the original Greek, which is nearly two thousand years old. What did these words mean?

The first word, found in 1 Cor 6:9, has been translated "male prostitutes" in the NRSV. The original word is *malakoi*, and literally means "soft ones." In the past, it has been translated as "effeminate." It often referred to men who were the "bottom" in a male-male sexual relationship -- the man who was penetrated. Because

sexual activity was and is read through a heterosexual lens, being penetrated was seen as taking the "female" role. A man taking the woman's place, willingly being lesser, was seen as an inappropriate or even abominable role reversal.

The second word, found in both 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10, has been translated "sodomites." The original Greek word is *arsenokoitai*, a combination of the words "male" and "bed". Paul's use of the word is one of the few instances we have of it in ancient Greek. It might be a reference to the Greek translation of the Hebrew in Leviticus 18:22, "men who lie with men."

It is important to take note of the rest of the passage. Paul's list of people who are banned from the kingdom ranges from murderers to idolaters to alcoholics to thieves. Those for whom the law is given include murderers, pornographers, slave traders, and liars. If we strictly applied 1 Timothy 1:10, we might have to have a serious conversation with almost every youth group teenager about how honest they have been with their parents! How does the variety of groups in the rest of the verse inform how we read the inclusion of *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*?

In addition, we should pay attention to the culture in which Paul was writing. Same-gender sexual activity existed, but long-term, monogamous, same-gender romantic relationships did not. There was no concept of "sexual orientation"; everyone was assumed to be straight. So what kind of relationships is Paul talking about?

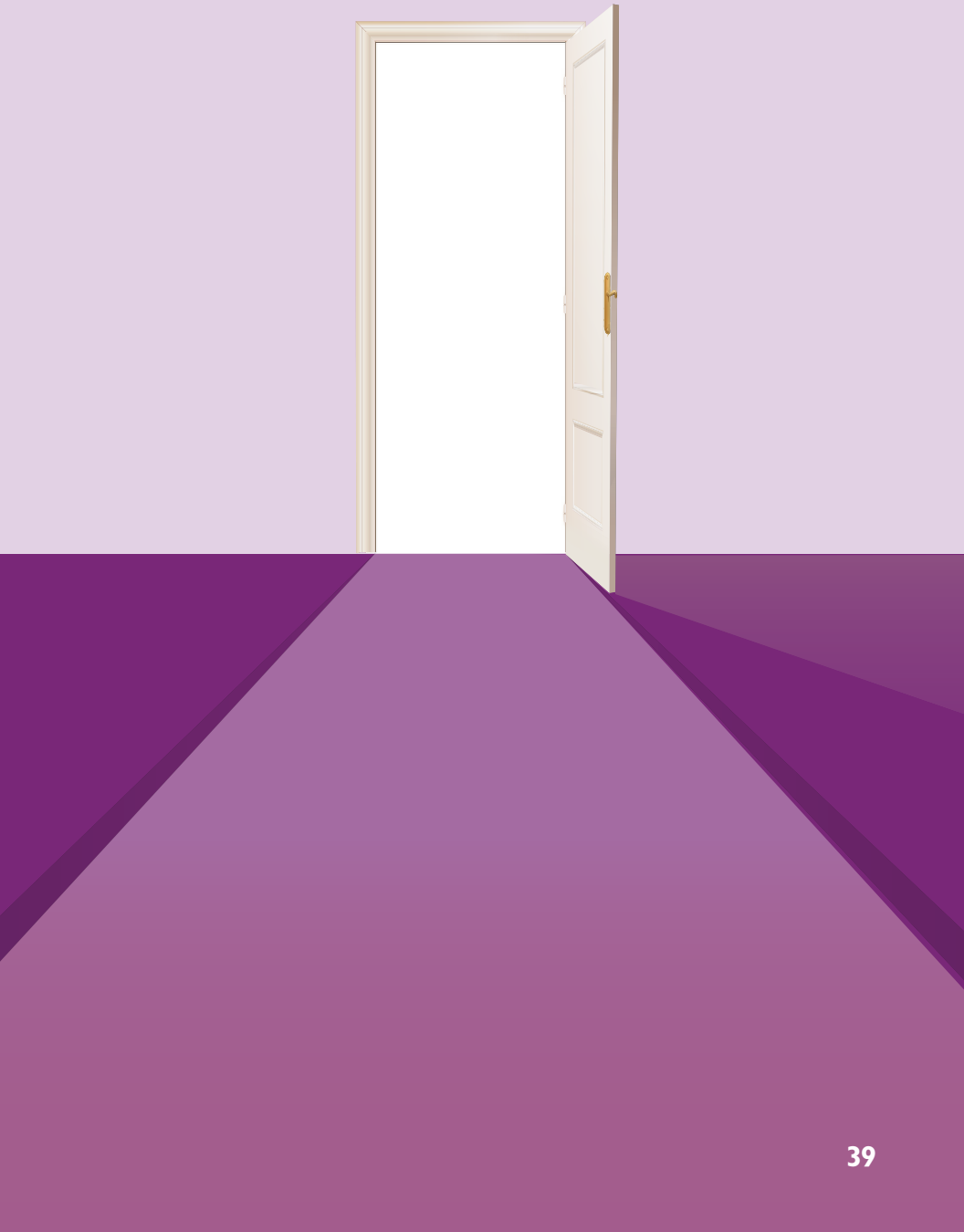
Paul was concerned with how Christian households were run. In rejecting "fornicators" (in Greek, *pornai*, from which we get pornography) and adultery, Paul wanted to reaffirm the boundaries of marriage. Although there was same-gender love in Greek and Ro-

man cultures, it was not understood as a long-term relationship or one that could lead to marital fidelity and family. Since there was no cultural concept of long-term same-gender romantic relationships, his call for faithful monogamous marriage could not make space for same-gender sexual activity.

Same-gender sexual activity was often found in prostitution (hence the NRSV's translation of *malakoi*). Some scholars have argued that there was temple prostitution in Corinth, or that first-century pagan worship included same-gender sexual activity, which would have connected it to idolatry. Finally, same-gender rape was common among first-century soldiers when they conquered another army. How could relationships that were based in economic disparity, pagan idolatry, or military violence be welcome in the kingdom of God?

Paul's knowledge of same-gender sexual activity is very different from ours today. When we are discussing committed romantic same-gender relationships, how do we understand Paul's words?

Passages Used to Welcome



The Story of Ruth Through the Metaphor of the Manger

The book of Ruth, found in the Hebrew Scriptures between Judges and 1 Samuel, is a short tale of a Moabite woman and her Israelite mother-in-law. Ruth is from Moab, one of the enemies of the nation of Israel (Num. 22). When her husband, Naomi's adult son, dies, Ruth would have returned to her own father's house and looked for a new husband, likely among her own people. Instead, she commits herself to her mother-in-law and returns with her to Israel.

This is a big risk on Ruth's part. She is committing herself to another woman, also widowed. They have very little way of earning money. Ruth might be shunned because she is not an Israelite; even if she is allowed to join the community, she might not find another husband, and would die poor and childless. But Ruth is unphased! She shows unfailing loyalty to Naomi, making a promise in words often found in marriage ceremonies: "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you rest, I will rest" (Ruth 1:16-17).

When they reach Bethlehem, Ruth goes into the fields and "gleans" -- picking up the scraps that the reapers have dropped. In this way, she is able to provide enough food for the two of them to live on. Ruth gains the attention of the field's owner, Boaz, who was related to Naomi's husband. He treats her with kindness and, with Naomi's encouragement, Ruth approaches him to ask him to claim Ruth as his wife. He does, and approaches the elders and the people of the town, who bless their marriage with a traditional Israelite prayer: "May the Lord make [her] like Rachel and Leah,

who together built up the house of Israel" (Ruth 4:11). Ruth shows great loyalty to Naomi, both in word and in action, and for it she is rewarded with a husband and a place among the chosen people of Israel.

Ruth almost literally embodies the metaphor of the manger that holds Christ. She has a son with Boaz, who is named Obed. Obed grows up to become the father of Jesse, who becomes the father of David -- the same David who killed Goliath, who becomes king of all Israel, and from whom Jesus is descended. Ruth, a Moabite, was not part of the people of Israel, and could have been rejected. Instead, she is made part of the chosen people of Israel and a member of the lineage of Christ.

Ruth's inclusion in the people of Israel should not surprise those of us familiar with the stories and work of Jesus. Jesus actively welcomed people who were on the edges of society. Some of these people were different ethnic/religious groups, like the Samaritans. Samaritans were a sect of Israel and often depicted as enemies of the Jewish people in the first century. But in Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37), one of these enemies is lifted up as a hero. Jesus also spoke with a Samaritan woman, who evangelized her whole town (Jn. 4:1-32). Jesus reached out to Zacchaeus, a despised tax collector (Lk. 19:1-10), and brought him back to unity with his town. In announcing the beginning of his ministry, Jesus reminds the synagogue at Nazareth that prophets are often sent not only away from their hometowns but directly to Gentiles (Lk 4:22-30 -- notice the violent reaction of the town!).

Ruth's story gives us some of the most beautiful commitment poetry in the Bible. We also see how God works through outsiders to

continue to bring the whole world to restoration and reconciliation. In God's eyes, no one is left out and no one's story is unimportant.

Psalm 139: Through the Metaphor of the Manger

All people have a deep desire to be fully known by others, and to be fully loved for who they are. Oftentimes, in Christian communities today, LGBTQ+ people feel as if they need to hide parts of themselves in order to be accepted. They may feel the need to put on masks when they're in church, not allowing God or other people to see parts of themselves that have to do with their sexuality or gender identity, for fear of rejection.

How scary and wonderful is it, then, to realize that God already knows us completely, and loves us unconditionally? One of the most poetic expressions of this realization can be found in Psalm 139:1-18. The psalmist begins by acknowledging that nothing can be hidden from God *(O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away), and then doubles down by pointing out that there's nowhere we can go where God won't follow (Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?).*

Then the psalmist dives inward, wondering at God's deep understanding of our being:

> *For it was you who formed my inward parts;*
>
> *you knit me together in my mother's womb.*
>
> *I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*
>
> *Wonderful are your works;*
>
> *that I know very well. (Psalm 139:13-14)*

For the people of ancient Israel, there was no concept of the human being as separated into categories like body, mind, and spirit--those distinctions came out of Greek philosophy much later on. For the psalmist, this knitting together of a person by God included all parts of who that person is. We learn here God not only created us as a whole being--including what we now know as our brains, and all the matter and synapses that make up our sense of self, our sexuality, and our gender identity--but also that our entire being is wonderful.

But if we are made intentionally and wonderfully by God, does that mean we can't change? Realistically, of course not. We all begin as babies who learn and grow and continue to change throughout our entire lives. Sometimes we require or choose to do things that help make us more whole and more healthy, like getting fitted for glasses, or taking medication for depression, or having our appendix out. For transgender people, these changes may include things like name and pronoun changes, hormone therapy, or gender-confirmation surgery.

When we think about our creation, and specifically about our physical bodies, it's important to remember that we are wonderfully made. Some of us may have grown up in traditions that focused on the body as a sinful thing--as flesh that we must deny. But when we look at Psalm 139, we see a foreshadowing of the way in which God blesses all bodies by taking on flesh in the form of Jesus. We see this most clearly in the Gospel of John, which tells us, "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory" (John 1:14). Jesus' incarnation shows us the lengths to which God will go to fully know and accompany and love us as human beings. For Christians, who read all of scripture with

Christ's words and actions in mind, it may be helpful to remember that Jesus cared deeply about the whole being of a person, always healing someone's body and then also restoring them to the community they've been cut off from, holistically attending to needs that include their bodies, minds, and souls (ex: Matt. 8:1-4). Therefore, we must also attend to the needs of the whole person of our neighbor, not asking them to cut off pieces of themselves in order to be accepted. Instead, we can affirm together that we are all fully known and fully loved children of God.

Isaiah 56: Through the Plain Reading of Scripture

When we left the biblical story concerning eunuchs in Deuteronomy 23:1, the people of Israel were facing a crisis. Many of their siblings had experienced castration while in captivity in Assyria, Babylon, and Persia before coming back to the Promised Land a generation or two later. When the people returned and attempted to begin rebuilding their society they looked back at their foundational laws in the first five books of the Bible. Here, they found verses in Deuteronomy 23 that seemed to outlaw both eunuchs and people of other cultures who had intermarried during the years in exile. How could a small, damaged population exclude so many of their own people? Is this really what God wanted for them?

In response to this great need, God spoke through the prophet Isaiah:

> *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. (Isaiah 56:3-5)

You can imagine what a relief this proclamation was to the eunuchs of Israel--they were being welcomed back into the community, and more than that, they were being welcomed back into God's house.

For the ancient Hebrew people, one of the main markers of identity was their connection to the covenant God made with Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 17). That covenant promised land, family, and blessing to the people of Israel, and those promises were considered earmarks of what it meant to be an Israelite. Eunuchs, who could not produce their own biological children, were seen as being at least a third less a part of that covenant as a result. They were considered "dry trees,"--people who were unable to produce any fruit for their community.

What God does in Isaiah 56, in response, is to connect eunuchs to the Abrahamic covenant by promising them "a monument and a name better than sons and daughters" which will last in God's house and God's memory for all time. In this way, these gender- and sex-diverse people are given a full membership both in their community in their own time, and within the larger narrative of the people of Israel.

For people of differing sexualities and gender identities living today, this story of inclusion is a story of hope. It points to God's

compassion and willingness to change the rules in light of new situations, and in favor of wider welcomes. It also gives LGBTQ+ people something to think about when it comes to our own advocacy for other marginalized groups. What does it mean, for instance, that a welcome for differing sexualities and gender identities is tied so closely to a welcome for foreigners and refugees?

Matthew 22: Through the Canon of Scripture Interpreting Scripture

Jesus' debates with the religious leaders of his day -- the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the scribes -- often begin with one of them asking him a question. They may be legitimately interested in his answer, or they may be trying to trick him into an answer that they can prove "wrong." When one scribe asked Jesus to name the greatest commandment, he answered, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-34).

Jesus is participating in a common discussion in Jewish religious leadership: how do we summarize the whole of the Law of Moses? The rabbi Hillel, a teacher in the first century, famously explained it this way: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man. That is the whole Law; the rest is commentary."

Does Jesus' summary match with the whole of Scripture? Many of the stories we know seem to say "yes!" The Ten Commandments can be sorted into commands to love God (no idol worship, not taking God's name in vain) and love neighbor (no murder, no adultery, no lying, no stealing). The laws in Leviticus about proper worship could be understood as a way of showing love for God. The prophets' demands for justice and an end to oppression could be a way of showing love for neighbor. Love as the sum of the Law fits with much of Scripture!

But what about Scripture where love doesn't seem to fit? In our reading of Leviticus 18 and 20, we noted that there are prohibi-

tions against sex with animals, sex with "a man as with a woman," and sex during a woman's menstrual cycle. Do these, especially the last two, show love?

It may help to ask why these specific laws were originally written. We know that the Israelite people were very concerned with having children and growing their tribe -- that was the only way to survive! In addition, the ways that men and women contribute to the reproductive cycle is relatively new information. Some scholars think that ancient cultures, including the Israelites, thought that semen was limited. Sex with animals, same-gender sexual activity between men, and sex during a woman's menstrual cycle all would have "wasted" the chance at a child. Depriving a wife of children (most men receiving these instructions were married!) would not have been an act of love. Today, since we know more about the reproductive process (and aren't desperately trying to survive in the desert!), we know that semen isn't limited -- but we do talk about the importance of consent.

How does that change how we see "love" shown in the laws of Leviticus? Could Jesus' summary still hold true there? Jesus' two commandments of loving God and loving neighbor might be one way to measure individual verses of Scripture against the whole of the Bible. If a single sentence aligns with the command to love God or love neighbor, it might align with the whole arc of Scripture!

Acts 8: Through the Dialectic of Law and Gospel

In Acts 8:26-40 we come to the capstone of the eunuch's story. In this narrative we find the apostle Philip called by the Holy Spirit to "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza," which we are told "is a wilderness road" (v. 26). Philip obeys, and as he's walking along the road in this liminal space outside of cultural designations, he meets a person traveling in a chariot. The Holy Spirit tells Philip to run up to the chariot and join it, which he boldly does. Inside, Philip meets an Ethiopian eunuch, whom the text introduces as a high-ranking court official of the Ethiopian queen. The eunuch "had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah" (v. 27-28).

Now, since we know about the huge movement toward inclusion for eunuchs found in Isaiah 56:1-8, you might be surprised to know that it's very likely this Ethiopian eunuch was not allowed into the temple in Jerusalem when he got there. Unfortunately, rather than adopting the reforms Isaiah called for, the people of Israel had decided that they would continue to exclude sex- and gender-diverse people from the assembly. We don't know why exactly the Israelite leaders chose to do this, but we do know that in scripture written after Isaiah, foreigners and eunuchs were still kept out of religious practice (ex: Ezekiel 44:4-14).

Besides his identity as a eunuch, there were several other things about the person Philip met that would have kept him from inclusion in Israelite society and worship. For one, he was an Ethiopian, and as such he was also a foreigner--not a descendant of Abraham. He also probably had darker skin, as he was African, rather than

Middle Eastern. Second, the text doesn't make his religious identity clear--it doesn't tell us he was a Jewish convert, but it doesn't mention any other faith background either. In short, the Ethiopian eunuch was someone with in-between or uncategorizable identities. Mosaic Law, as set down in the first five books of the Bible, would exclude him at every point because he couldn't be easily classified according to the black-and-white separation that determined acceptance.

The Law that we find in this passage is exactly that--a set of rules that governed the behavior and attitude of the people of God. The problem is that for the Ethiopian eunuch there was no possibility of following the rules, since the things that kept him out had to do with his very identity. The Law could not call him to repentance, since he could hardly be called to repent of the place or faith of his birth, or the shape of his body, or his self-concept concerning gender.

So instead, as we've seen so many times before in Scripture, God makes a way out of no way. The Spirit prompts Philip to join the eunuch and to begin talking about the life of Jesus. Philip is literally sharing the Gospel with this person who has been told over and over that there isn't enough grace in the Law to cover him. Then, beginning in verse 36 we read,

> *As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of*

the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8:36-39)

While this story has been called "the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch," it might just as easily be called "the conversion of Philip," because here we see a follower of Jesus realizing the real-life implications of a Gospel that is meant for all people. When the eunuch asks Philip, "Can anything prevent me from being baptized?" what he's really asking is, "Can my identity as a gender- and sex-diverse person, as an ethnic and racial outsider, or as a seeker kept out of organized religion keep me from God, or keep God away from me?" And Philip's answer is a resounding, "Of course not."

The last thing we might notice about this passage is its ending, in which God whisks Philip away as if to say, "Alright! Mission accomplished here!" It gives the reader a sense of intention--that Philip was called specifically to meet this uncategorizable person, in this specific middle-ground in the wilderness, to change one life through overwhelming love, and to consequently move all of God's people toward a fuller expression of grace. It's no wonder the eunuch went on his way rejoicing.

Acts 10 & 11: Through the Plain Reading of Scripture

I'd like to tell you the story of a nightmare.

Peter was waiting on lunch and praying, and fell into a trance. A sheet from heaven dropped down, and it was full of food -- food that Peter had been taught, since he was old enough to chew, to reject. Vile creatures like eagles and snakes, bats and camels, lobster and pigs (Leviticus 11). Peter's hungry stomach would have turned over in disgust. And a voice from heaven said, "Go ahead, Peter -- kill and eat" (Acts 10:1-16).

Words cannot capture how horrified Peter must have been! He was a proclaimer of Jesus Christ, one of the key disciples, trying to spread the good news throughout Judea. He has been taught all his life to follow the Jewish dietary laws, one of the central ways of remaining a part of the chosen people of God -- and now it seems God is telling him to eat what he has always rejected. The Law of Moses which clearly prohibited such food must have been ringing in his ears. How could he give up God's Law?

Peter doesn't eat, and he is still wracked with confusion from his nightmare when messengers from Cornelius--a Roman centurion--arrive. Surprisingly, Peter lets them stay with him (an act that could have compromised the ritual purity of his house), and then gets up and goes with them to meet Cornelius. At this point, the Christian church is almost entirely made up of Jews, except for the Ethiopian eunuch (see previous story!). Peter's decision to proclaim the good news of Jesus to Cornelius, a Gentile, and to baptize his whole household, doesn't fit at all with what Peter has been taught. He should be rejecting Cornelius, or at the very least making him convert to Judaism before becoming a Christian. Instead,

Peter pays attention to what the Spirit is doing. When he proclaims the good news of Jesus, the Holy Spirit falls on the Gentiles and they speak in tongues (Acts 10:44-46).

Peter's willingness to be open to the movement of the Spirit, rather than rigidly enforcing the Mosaic Law, would have shocked the Jewish readers of the book of Acts. It certainly shocked the Christian church of the time, who demanded an account of why he did this (Acts 11:1-18). Although there were verses throughout the Hebrew Scriptures that promised a coming reconciliation where all nations came to Jerusalem for healing and new life, no one was really prepared to start welcoming in Gentiles like this. What a nightmare for everyone involved! These people didn't know how to worship properly. They hadn't been raised in the Jewish synagogues. And they ate all sorts of terrible foods! But Peter remained convicted by the vision from the Spirit. The letter of the Law may have demanded otherwise, but Peter was convinced that God had spoken directly to him, telling him "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (Acts 10:15).

This incredible experience in the life of the apostles and the early church is deeply meaningful for us today. Peter, one of the primary disciples of Jesus, was willing to set aside the rules he knew so well for a Spirit who did scary and life-changing things. Today, some Christians believe that LGBTQ+ people should not be included in our communities--essentially declaring them unclean. What might the Spirit be saying to us today, especially considering the many LGBTQ+ Christians who long to be included in our churches? Might God be asking us to change our ideas about who's in and who's out?

1 Corinthians 12: Through the Dialectic of Law and Gospel

Many of Paul's letters are part theology, part advice. Paul went throughout the Roman Empire around the Mediterranean, preaching the Gospel and starting house churches. Those churches would then write to him with their successes and their concerns. In his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul is addressing a church divided. They were facing big struggles about how to worship together and how to form a community when the people involved (Jewish and Greek, slave and free, male and female) were so different from each other!

In the midst of trying to reconcile these differences, Paul saw the Corinthians' demands for rules ("Whose spiritual gift is most important?" "We don't have to share our food, do we?" "Members that are less reputable are less important, right?") and instead of answering them, he offered a metaphor:

> *Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free --- and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:12-13)*

Instead of giving in to the desire for rules, Paul reminded the Corinthians that we have been set free in Christ -- free to care for one another. In our baptism, we become part of one body, the living Body of Christ in this world. Just as each part of a human body is interlinked, each human member of Christ's body is linked to each other.

In the face of a world that tries to tell us we are separate and don't need anyone else, Paul's metaphor speaks a word of good news -- especially for LGBTQ+ Christians. Just as no part of the human body can be dismissed, LGBTQ+ Christians can't be dismissed or shut out from the church. The church cannot say, "I have no need of you." We are all part of Christ, claimed in baptism.

Being part of Christ's body is also good news for those of us who are suffering because of exclusion in the church. Paul writes, "If one member suffers, all members suffer with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26). We don't carry our pain alone. The whole Body of Christ is hurting with us, even if it's the church who has done the hurting. We don't have to feel alone -- and we also can call the church to reconciliation and healing, since it benefits not just individuals but the whole Body of Christ.

This is the good news of God in Christ! We have been freed from isolation, made into one body that cares for each other. Rules about how to behave in community have shown us how we need this body, continually redeemed and forgiven by Jesus' work.

Galatians 3: Through the Canon of Scripture Interpreting Scripture

Much like 1 Corinthians, Paul's letter to the Galatians was meant to help a community of diverse people understand how they might worship God together. The problem for the Galatians had to do specifically with differences between Jews and Gentiles. Much like Christian communities today arguing over the relevance of Deuteronomy 22:5 or Leviticus 18:22, the Galatians argued over which parts of the Mosaic Law were relevant to Christian communities.

Throughout his letters, Paul attempts to strike a balance between Law and Gospel, explaining that "a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal 2:16), but also that we are "created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Ephesians 2:10). The larger argument made throughout the Pauline epistles is that our good works should come from a sense of love and gratefulness for God's salvation that overflows into acts of love for our neighbor, rather than from a selfish attempt to save ourselves by always being right.

In an attempt to bring the diverse Galatians together, Paul points them toward the one thing they all share--an identity in Christ.

> *...For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26-29)*

This passage reaffirms the inclusive arc that runs throughout scripture from Genesis through the Gospels and into the time of the early church. We've seen this movement beginning in the earliest history of the Hebrew people--set apart from all others with a Law to govern that separation--to the calling in of one outsider after another from Ruth, to the foreigners and the eunuchs of Isaiah, to the tax collectors and Samaritans of the Gospels, to Cornelius the Gentile centurion. Finally, Paul affirms that none of the identities we hold can separate us from God, for in our baptism we take on our true nature as God's beloved children.

One thing we must be very careful of here, however, is erasing the differences that make us unique parts of the Body of Christ. In the biblical stories of the outsiders brought in, we find a people called to unity, not to uniformity. The Ethiopian eunuch, for instance, is not required to give up his Ethiopian ethnicity, or his unique gender identity, in order to be baptized or brought into God's family. Indeed, when Paul talks about things like circumcision in 1 Corinthians he suggests that new Christians keep their identities, because those identities do not get in the way of God's love (1 Cor. 7:17-20).

What might this call for unity, and not uniformity, look like for Christians today? Might it mean an acceptance of differences in sexuality and gender identity? Might it look like a welcome for all?

CONCLUSION

In this commentary, we've brought together common Lutheran lenses of interpretation with passages that have been used to exclude or to affirm LGBTQ+ people. We offer this commentary in the hope that our better understanding of Scripture, interpretation, and each other can lead to more affirmation and welcome for our LGBTQ+ Christian family. We also hope that this commentary will inspire more informed and positive engagement with the Scriptures as a whole.

Readers of this commentary may be asking, "What's next? Where do we go from here?" The answer to that question differs from person to person and community to community. You may want to start a conversation in your church about more actively welcoming and affirming LGBTQ+ people. You may want to dive deeper into Scripture and engage more with these issues. And you may want to find out more about LGBTQ+ people and how they live out their faith! We offer the following resources to help on your journey:

Websites

believeoutloud.com

> *An online community that empowers Christians to work for LGBTQ+ equality.*

reconcilingworks.org/resources

> *A number of educational resources about gender identity, sexual orientation, youth ministry, preaching and worship, and other issues of justice.*

reformationproject.org

Works to train Christians to support and affirm LGBTQ+ people.

queergrace.com

An encyclopedia of existing resources on LGBTQ+ life and Christian faith.

Books

A Brief Guide to Ministry with LGBTQIA Youth by Cody Sanders (Presbyterian Publishing, 2017)

God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships by Matthew Vines (Convergent Books, 2014)

Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians by Austen Hartke (Westminster John Knox Press, 2018)

Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know About Life and Love and How It Can Revitalize Christianity by Elizabeth Edman (Beacon Press, 2017)

ReconcilingWorks.org