

John Sampson  
“What’s Up with the Q?”  
Text: Acts 8:26 - 40  
Preached at KVCC  
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Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

What’s up with the Q?

It’s a question that I’ve often received during our Open and Affirming process, the process where we, as a congregation, are discerning how we might more deeply and profoundly welcome sexual and gender minorities into the life of the church.

And this question comes up when I use that long, somewhat unwieldy acronym LGBTQI, which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex people.

Most often those I speak with say OK, I know about lesbians, and gays, I got it with bisexuals. The meaning of transgender has thrown some of us, but I think the Nat Geo film about gender we showed a couple of months ago here in the sanctuary seemed to be very helpful to those who saw it.

But then we get to queer, and that term leaves some of us scratching our heads. And that’s when I get the question.

What’s up with the Q?

What’s up with queer?

Growing up I learned that queer meant something strange, or unexpected. But I also came to know it was a slur used against sexual and gender minorities. It was a slur used against people like me.

And I can remember being told it wasn't OK to call people queer. I also know in our wider culture the word queer is seen as a harmful moniker, something not to be said to one another, and certainly not in public.

But here it is.

Here it is in the middle of our long acronym LGBTQI. Here it is in the middle of our Open and Affirming discussion.

And so people ask me what's up with the Q? What does queer mean in the context of our discussion? How do we define this term? How can it be related to God's ever increasing invitation to wider and wider human experiences to join in the sacred body of Christ?

And today we get an answer. Today the story we just heard from Acts is not my response to the question what's up with the Q. Today we hear God's response to this question, or at least the response of our spiritual ancestors.

Because today we get schooled in what it means to be queer.

Because today we meet a sexual minority who is deeply searching to understand God's work in the world, and who desires to join in the community of believers to worship the very same God we come to worship.

Today we meet the Ethiopian eunuch.

We meet a man who has been castrated. Whose genitals have been removed as an act to guarantee that he will be unable to father children through the Queen of Ethiopia, the queen he serves.

Depending on when a boy, or a man is castrated the procedure can have a wide range of effects on the growth and develop of the male because of the disruption of the flow of testosterone. Castrated later in life there may not be many discernable effects. But castrated earlier in life a boy can develop with a higher voice, with less body hair, perhaps with changes to his bodily frame.

Our story doesn't tell us anything about the Ethiopian eunuch's physical features, but I love to think that this man seemed a bit...queer. He seemed to Philip as a man unlike many of the men Philip would have know and worked with, men like the other disciples, or even Jesus himself.

I love to imagine that when Philip first spoke with the man of privilege and power that he met out in the emptiness of the road he registered a difference in the man's voice, or in his mannerisms, or in his general composure.

I love to imagine that Philip was under no illusions when he got into the carriage with the eunuch, because I love to see this story as showing us an unapologetic engagement of the sanctioned ministers of the church with those of us who are sexual and gendered minorities.

And this story tells the truth about what it means to be an LGBTQI person of faith. It tells the truth that we are committed to learning more about our tradition, of traveling on pilgrimage to enter into the assembly of believers, of desiring to live out our faith in community, and with honest curiosity.

And this story also tells the truth about the experience many of us have had when we have tried to join a church. In the book of Leviticus, one of the 5 books of the Torah, there is a law that any man who has crushed testes, or no testes, shall be banned from entering the assembly of believers. This was a law given to Moses, and it was a law still operating in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine when the eunuch traveled to Jerusalem to learn more about God and her dreams for humanity. It is a law that still haunts the church today.

And so when this eunuch entered Jerusalem he would have been banned from entering the Temple precincts. He would have been banned from coming into physical proximity with God, even though he had traveled thousands of miles on pilgrimage. This is the experience of so many LGBTQI people of faith still to this day. Even though we come at God's invitation our faith communities deny us membership, deny us ordination, deny us leadership roles, deny and invalidate the possibility of our faith. That's why the eunuch leaves Jerusalem with questions unanswered. That's why many LGBTQI people today have such a disdain for the church. We've been barred by our some of our brothers and sisters in faith from the Holy of Holies, from the blessed experience of membership in a faith community.

But s with many of the stories in our tradition this isn't the end of the story; it's just the set up.

Because the good news is that what is happening in the community of the followers of Jesus is something different. In this story from Acts we see a new day dawning.

Philip, the representative of the church, ordained by God's spirit in an earlier story, meets the eunuch, climbs into his carriage, and they

begin to have a conversation about faith, about life, about God and her plan for the world.

And when the eunuch has learned all he needs to learn, he sees a pool and he asks for baptism. He asks to be admitted into the community of faith. He asks what could possibly stop him. And Philip's answer is nothing.

Membership in Christ's assembly is not denied to a sexual minority, is not denied to a man who may seem queer to those he meets. The eunuch's desire to follow Christ's way is all that is needed to welcome this man from Ethiopia into the church.

This story of being welcomed into community is unlike other stories we may remember from Jesus' ministry. In those stories Jesus would meet a man or a woman living as an outcast because of some physical issue: leprosy, or menstrual flow, or blindness. And Jesus would have compassion for this individual and cure them. Once the person was cured he or she would then be welcomed back into the community.

The story of Philip and the eunuch is not a cure story. Philip does not perform a miracle on the eunuch and undo his castration as a requirement for welcome into the church. The eunuch becomes a follower of Christ, becomes a member of the church, as a castrated man.

This is God's great work performed in the radiance of Easter.

The former laws have been overthrown. The former alienation is gone.

All are called to the table.

And the church is to welcome all those who wish to live into the message of Christ, regardless of the sexual and gendered identity. This is the work that Christ is calling churches like ours to follow right here, right in this community.

But our story doesn't simply ask us to welcome queer men and women into our midst. As with all of the stories of Jesus' early followers, it asks something more profound from us.

But it's easy to miss, because our translation of the Bible hides it.

There is a line in our story that tells us that after Philip and the eunuch spoke and discussed the message of Christ that the eunuch wanted to be baptized and Philip agreed. And then we're told Philip baptized him. Fortunately, that's not what the text actually says. What the text actually says is more unexpected, is more...queer.

The text actually says that he baptized him, without specifying who the subject is, and who the object is during the baptism. The translators take away the ambiguity of the text, and read it according to a tradition that has historically denied the place of LGBTQI people in the scriptures of our faith.

Now I have no doubt that Philip baptized the eunuch. But I wonder about the way in which the eunuch may have baptized Philip. I wonder about the ways that LGBTQI people will baptize us if we open our doors wider to more deeply accept them. I wonder at the ways this church will be changed as we open our hearts to the experience of sexual and gender minorities that will ask to join us in our shared journey of faith.

You ask me what's up with the Q.

That's what's up with the Q.

Amen.