

The Costs of Invisibility

Isaiah 56:3-8

Acts 8:26-39

March 27, 2022

Rev. Robert R. Howard

Community Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Tempe, AZ

Recently Florida governor Ron DeSantis said he refuses to acknowledge the historic win of Lia Thomas, a transgender swimmer for the University of Pennsylvania, at the NCAA women's swimming and diving championships. The governor instead recognized *the runner-up* as the "rightful" winner of the 500-yard freestyle.(1) With his words, this cis-gender man just wiped away her achievement. Made her invisible. And what I don't see, I don't have to care about. Last Thursday, the Arizona Legislature passed bills to prohibit gender reassignment surgery for minors and ban transgender athletes from playing on girls sports teams, joining nineteen other states that have passed bills restricting rights for transgender persons.(2) These are days of backlash, taking a chain-saw to hard-won rights by LGBTQ+ activists. Do you see the *need* for this Thursday's "Transgender Day of Visibility"? A day to say: I see you. I will stand with you. I will stand up *for* you.

Well, what does our faith have to say about this nation-wide resurgence of legalized prejudice? The Bible, for instance? Words that somehow reveal the will of God for humanity. Over a dozen years ago, this congregation began a process of discernment, listening to each other's stories, searching the scriptures, and seeking God in prayer, on the way to becoming an "Open and Affirming" congregation. And we are continuing that journey, seeking to discover deeper ways to make a welcoming home for *all* people – especially LGBTQ folks who have been told over and over that God hates them. A few minutes ago, we heard two scriptures that are part of the story of God-with-us, that underscore what welcoming really means. Christian transgender activist Austen Hartke says he grew up "treating the Bible like a Magic 8-Ball. Our pastor said all answers could be found in Scripture, so I'd squeeze my eyes shut tight, open it at a random page, stick my finger down, and then open my eyes to see what God had to say about my particular circumstance." Over a decade later, when he was troubled with trying to fit into gender-roles that were just not right for him, trying to figure out just who he was, one night he balanced the cover of the big book between his palms and let it fall open on its own. And, he says, "right smack in the middle of the page on the right-hand side, Isaiah 56:3-8 floated slowly off the page and into my heart." He was stunned, and set right to work exploring the scene Isaiah set. He discovered, he says, that eunuchs, physically damaged males, "in the ancient world found themselves in many of the same kinds of in-between spaces that transgender people often experience today." They were excluded from worship, from any kind of participation in the community of faith. They were cut off, in ways far more hurtful than just physical. But here, here in Isaiah's vision, came a promise directly from God: "[w]ith just eight verses God had given them both an assurance of a part in Israel's future and a place within the community in their own lifetime." More than that, though, he discovered, "God was giving the eunuchs a story to connect to. . . . That was the story I needed to hear," he says. "I needed to know that my problems were like the eunuch's problems, . . . and that all of these complications were

overcome by God's great love. . . . [T]hrough Isaiah God gave me a sense of belonging that I couldn't shake."(3)

And then Hartke came across the second scripture we heard today, from the Acts of the Apostles. Another eunuch, but this one from Ethiopia, a people of color. Although the eunuch sought to worship the God of Israel, he was not Jewish, not a full convert, and, yes, he was also a eunuch, unable to worship with the people. He, too, was excluded, for a host of reasons. An official of the queen of Ethiopia, traveling in an expensive government chariot – he was still an outsider, shoved away. And yet, there he was, nevertheless, reading from Israel's holy book. Smart enough to be able to read, and in a language foreign to him. And suddenly, in the middle of nowhere, he finds a man running alongside the chariot. "Whatcha reading?" What? Who are you? "Isaiah," he says. "Do you know what it's saying?" "How can I, unless someone helps me?" So Philip hops on and begins to explain the scripture. And the eunuch found himself wondering if this suffering Servant Isaiah was describing might have experienced something like his own life. Excluded, made to suffer, and denied justice. He saw himself in the Suffering Servant. And, Hartke adds, maybe transgender people might see themselves in that Ethiopian eunuch. "Trans people experience humiliation when we're . . . kicked out of our homes," he says, "when we're accused of being dangerous to children and cisgender women. . . . We are denied justice when we're fired from our jobs because of our gender identity, when laws are made to keep us out of public bathroom facilities. . . ." And, like sheep led to slaughter, "the lives of Black transgender women and other trans people of color are violently taken from this earth."(4) But, again, God's will is for inclusion. In fact, the story of Jesus as explained by Philip prompts this eunuch to ask, "what's to keep me from being baptized right now, right over there in that water that just appeared?" And Philip scratches his head and says, "Not a thing." So the deed is done, and one who had formerly been shoved outside is brought inside. Hartke suggests that there were *two* conversions that day. The first was the eunuch who got baptized. But, under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, it was Philip who had to "change his metric for who's in and who's out."(5) The entire book of Acts is a testimony of God's Holy Spirit pushing the community of faith to the ends of the earth – and breaking down barriers to bring *everybody* in.

What's the common thread here? Simple: the struggle for a home. For legal equality and social acceptance. And grounded on the solid rock of God's radical welcome of *anybody* made in God's image. So each of these stories, God's promise to eunuchs in Isaiah, the Ethiopian eunuch's inclusion and Philip's conversion – each of them is about *finding a home*. And what else, I ask you, is the community of faith, but a home in which each beloved child of God can *thrive*? Where they can be who God made them to be? But that does not happen by accident. We *decide* to welcome folks. So that means adding pronouns to our name-tags. More than one LGBT+ person has told me that those little letters mean so much. The pronouns signal: "We get it. We stand with you. And we will honor your own pronouns." Also, we will honor your gender identity by calling you the name you are *now*. We will not use your former name. But even more, we will guard you by following your lead, by *not* outing you before you are ready. We will love you, *as you are*, and follow your lead. But just creating a safe harbor in a hostile world is not enough. It is time to use all our resources to *push* for change in society. Like emailing our governor, "Do not sign these cruel bills!" In these days when trans persons are seeing prejudices toppling hard-won rights, it is time to speak up. In the words of Sam Garman, used with his permission, "The things our community

still needs to have anything resembling equal rights is a constitutional amendment making plain that no person can be discriminated against because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. With that we could work without fear of being fired for being LGBTQ, seek housing without fear of discrimination, be paid equal wages and so much more.”(6) And we do so not because we are “nice,” or even because they “deserve” it. But for those we love in our larger families. Those we love in this congregation. Those we know at work — and especially those we *don't*. And for those who are this very minute struggling to become *who they really are*, rather than the gender identity assigned by some doctor. We will *join* their struggle to create a safe home, a just society for our beloved whom we know, and *all* LGBTQ folks, because it is the *will of God* for all humans, welcoming each other as beloved members of God’s New Humanity. To create a welcoming home.

Friends, I won’t kid you. It is a struggle. And it won’t be over soon. But, because trans people are targeted for violence, standing with them — because “they” belong to “us”! — is so important! We see you! In God’s design, we are better together. Stronger. More splendid. So we will struggle for justice in the wider society, for the time when each person is legally accorded their God-given dignity as a human being. We see you! You are beautiful just the way God made you. You are *beloved* the way God made you. And *with* you, we will struggle for justice.(7) Amen.

Notes

(1) “DeSantis rejects transgender swimmer Lia Thomas’s NCAA victory,” by Brooke Migdon, *Changing America*, 3/22/22; accessed online on 3/26/22 at

<https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/599262-desantis-rejects-lia-thomas-ncaa-victory>

(2) “Arizona Legislature passes 2 bills to curb transgender rights,” National Public Radio; accessed online on 3/24/22 at

<https://www.npr.org/2022/03/24/1088624777/arizona-legislature-passes-2-bills-to-curb-transgender-rights>

(3) Austen Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 89, 94, 97, 98, 99.

(4) *Ibid.*, 114-15, 123-24.

(5) *Ibid.*, 127.

(6) Email from Sam Garman, 6/13/19.

(7) A few websites useful for those who would be allies:

8 Ways to Be an Ally for the Trans Community

<https://www.pride.com/trans/2020/11/17/8-ways-be-ally-trans-community>

Guide to Being a Trans Ally, *Straight for Equality*

<https://straightforequality.org/sites/default/files/Guide%20to%20Being%20a%20Trans%20Ally.pdf>

Tips for Allies of Transgender People

<https://www.glaad.org/transgender/allies>

Trans 101 - Being a Trans Ally - Episode 3

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9av5WbSSlyM>

Transform: Beyond the Transition is the podcast where we explore the stories and experiences of folks who are transgender beyond the transition.

<https://transformpod.podbean.com/>

A Guide to Being an Ally to Transgender and Nonbinary Youth

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/guide/a-guide-to-being-an-ally-to-transgender-and-nonbinary-youth/>