

When the Family Line is Cut Off

A sermon on Acts 8:26-40 by Nathan Nettleton, 28 April 2024

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Message

In baptism we are adopted into a new family that is radically inclusive of those who have been cut off.

Sermon

The dominant religious tradition in our society is worship of the family. There's nothing new about that. Most societies throughout history have done the same. Ask most people in our day or in times past what they would be willing to lay down their life for, and the most frequent answer, by a very long margin, will be their family. Their country will probably come second, because nationalism is a strong religion too, especially around its major sacred days like Anzac day, but no religion can compete with the worship of family.

Other religions have often taken the “if you can't beat them, join them” approach in response to this, and try to subsume worship of the family into their religious systems. So, for example, the Christian faith is often described as pro-family. Preachers exhort us to embrace traditional family values and campaign to defend the family from perceived threats. Churches market themselves as being “family friendly,” and see “family ministries” as not only being a sure fire growth strategy but as integral to the nature and purposes of the Church.

The emphasis on families and family life can be quite alienating for some people. If perfect happy families are the ideal image of the Christian life, not everybody is able to measure up. For some, the experience of family life has been one of oppression and fear, or even outright brutality. Witness our growing horror over the prevalence of family violence. For others, family has just been awkward and disappointing.

Many have been determined and courageous in their attempts to partner and parent perfectly so as to do the family thing right, but have ended up picking up the pieces of shattered dreams after torrid battles in the family courts. Many others have longed to create families of their own, but for any number of reasons have been unable to partner, or have partnered and then found themselves unable to conceive a child. And the more we enthrone the family as the centre and pinnacle of the Christian life, the more we leave them feeling like failures and misfits.

In our first reading tonight, we encountered just such a person; someone who was finding himself on the outer of family focussed religion. We are told he was a high ranking public official, a man of considerable political accomplishment, and probably quite wealthy as a result. But he was also a man with a hunger to find his place in the life of God, and he had travelled a long way to make a pilgrimage to the Jerusalem Temple to worship God.

You probably noticed that when we picked up his story, he had departed again and he was travelling away from Jerusalem on the road to Gaza, which almost seemed worth a sermon in itself. It's a detail we might not have even noticed a year ago, but it jumps off the page right now and, if nothing else, reminds us that the places where these stories are set are real and often significant. Certainly the plight of families and children in Gaza has been a major focus of our prayer in recent months.

But before we meet him on the road to Gaza, the person in our reading has made a pilgrimage to the Jerusalem Temple to worship God. We are not told what had happened when he got there, but we are given enough detail to know that he would not have been made entirely welcome. We are told that he was from Ethiopia, he was an African. He was, therefore, a gentile, and there were ethnic barriers to full participation in the worship that took place in the Jerusalem Temple. Gentiles could only go into the outer court, so as an African, he could come only so close to the centre of the religious action. The law barred him from coming any closer.

But he was not only an African. We are also told he was a Eunuch. His genitals had been cut off, probably when he was a baby or a very small boy. The practice of castrating boys of a certain servant class was not uncommon in the ancient world. Eunuchs were often the preferred candidates for various positions of political authority, precisely because of their inability to father a family. Their lack of family commitments made them more available to their monarchs, and their lack of offspring meant that there was no danger of them establishing any sort of rival dynasty. They were especially favoured as the high officials of female monarchs, because their obvious sexual impotence served to prevent salacious rumours about the relationships between the queen and her closest officials. And indeed the eunuch who we encounter in this story is a top official of Queen Candace of Ethiopia, so he certainly fits the description.

Now although being a eunuch may have had some political advantages in Ethiopia, it certainly had no social or religious advantages in Jerusalem. Like many religions, Judaism had a very binary view of sexuality, and eunuchs do not fit the binary categories. They are sexually other, queer people, who would be expected to be excluded from the religious narrative.

Even for cis-gendered, straight people, being unmarried and childless can be alienating in the religious world. Bearing offspring was pretty much socially obligatory in Jewish society. My Jewish friends tell me that nothing much has changed there, and it certainly seems that it remains true in many Christian churches too. Many passages in the Hebrew Bible speak of a sizeable brood of children as the most desirable of possessions and a sure sign of God's blessing.

The Apostle Luke makes no attempt to downplay any of this; in fact, he emphasises it. After first introducing the character, Luke could have thereafter referred to him as "the Ethiopian", or "the official", or even just "the traveller", but his chosen shorthand throughout the rest of the story is "the eunuch." Luke is emphasising that this is a story about a queer person, who being unable to father children, was pitied and despised, and who was regarded with deep suspicion for his abnormal sexual identity.

His social acceptability has literally been "cut off". And when it comes to religious participation, he is legally "cut off". The law of Moses was quite explicit on this: "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD" (Deuteronomy 23:1).

So what was he doing making a religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem? Wouldn't he know that he would be refused entry? Well, probably. But he would also, in all likelihood be a person with a pretty strong desire to find a place of belonging, a place of acceptance, a place where he was

not cut off on racial and sexual grounds. And perhaps he had found reason to think that the God of Israel might accept him. After all, when we meet him, he is sitting in his chariot reading the writings of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, and not far from the passage he is reading when we meet him, we find the following promise:

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.

There is that word play again – it must have been common in those days – “not be cut off”. For a eunuch whose biological future and social present had been “cut off”, the promise of a welcome and an everlasting name that shall never be “cut off” was a promise too good to resist exploring. Perhaps he had come to Jerusalem in search of a people of God who had assembled as a living embodiment of that promise. But when we meet him, he is on his way home, and his questions are yet unanswered.

And now, as Philip draws alongside, he is scouring the words of the prophet again:

By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
 Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
 stricken for the transgression of my people.

He was “cut off” from the land of the living. “Cut off”, there it is again. Who is the prophet talking about, he wonders out loud. Who is this one who I can relate to so well, this one who has been cut off and despised by people, but who will be accepted and honoured by God? Who is this “cut off” one, and could he usher another cut-off one like me into the life-giving presence of God?

“Yes,” says Philip. “He sure could!” And starting with the words of Isaiah, he explains the good news of God’s love and acceptance made known in Jesus the Messiah. The story is remarkably brief here. We are told that Philip explains the good news, and then immediately we are told that the African eunuch spots a waterhole by the side of the road and asks if there is anything to prevent him being baptised right now. And whatever scripture might say, Philip knew there wasn’t anything to prevent him, so they stop the chariot and Philip baptises the queer seeker on the spot.

It is telling how he asks the question, isn’t it? “Is there anything to prevent me?” He is so used to hearing the promises and then being cut off from access to them, that it is as though he

can't quite believe that the same isn't about to happen again. But it doesn't. This time he is welcomed into the family of God's people. This time he is not refused the rite by which a person is adopted into the family.

And given that it is crucial to the point Luke is making – a point which he makes over and over throughout his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles – that this man had been excluded on both racial and sexual grounds, it is highly significant that were no special conditions put on his acceptance for baptism. Luke is no stranger to the language of repentance, but on this occasion he chooses not to use it. Those who are racially or sexually different from us are not offered an acceptance that is stridently conditional on their willingness to change and behave like us.

This new family is not founded on conformity to the established family values. And for those of us who have been loyal followers of the established family values, those who have not found themselves on the wrong side of the racial or sexual or behavioural norms, that is a challenge. We are being called, in no uncertain terms, to make sure we don't turn the new family of God into a mirror of the old exclusive families of favoured bloodlines and clear boundaries and exclusive inheritance rights.

But many of us come to this story from the other side. Many of us, though not physically castrated, know what it is to be “cut off”, to be unable to fit the stereotypes of picture perfect family lifestyle. Many of us have found ourselves cut off by dysfunctional families, or broken marriages, or lack of opportunity, or queer sexual identity, or disability, or any number of other reasons that have left us unable to participate in the lifestyle that society has baptised as the life of the blessed ones. And far too many of us have tragically encountered churches that mirrored, not the reckless acceptance of God, but the exclusive aspirations of society, and we have found ourselves held at arms length or even actively shunned by those who claim to be following Jesus.

For all who come to this story from that side, identifying with the “cut off”, there is a wonderful promise of hope here. Even if God's people sometime fail to embody it, God is more than ready to welcome you into the family. God welcomes you with open arms, and takes you without hesitation to the waters of baptism where you are formally adopted into the new family that gathers around Jesus the Messiah.

It is strange but true that the faith of Jesus is actually quite unimpressed with the importance of traditional families. Jesus speaks quite dismissively of family ties, and in the culture of his day, that was even more radical than it would be now. The early church was frequently criticised as being a threat to the family in family-centred Roman society.

Jesus does not give much credence to the idea that blood is thicker than water. But he does speak of a new type of family where all who follow the will of God are his mother and brothers and sisters. And the way into this new family, open even to those who have always before been cut off, is through putting our trust in Jesus the Messiah and being adopted through the waters of baptism. This news may be a stumbling block if you've done well in the happy families game, but to all who have experienced being cut off, this is the most extraordinary good news. Much to our surprise and against all conventional wisdom, in the new family of Jesus the Messiah, water, baptismal water, turns out to be thicker than blood!