

September 4, 2022
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 18, Year C
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 18:1-11
Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17
Philemon 1-21
Luke 14:25-33

Let me just say this up front: I'm preaching about *none* of the three scripture readings you just heard. That's because I decided to try something new: starting today, I will occasionally about people on the Episcopal Church's calendar of commemorations. For ten years or so, the Church has been actively seeking to expand the calendar to include populations who have been left out. The point of this preaching series would be to lift up those "saints" who are likely to be unfamiliar to most of us.

I'd been thinking doing this for a while. I was finally spurred on by two posts in my Facebook feed this week. I was already struggling with this week's assigned readings when the first arrived. It was from a seminary classmate. He wrote this:

TFW [that feeling when] when you're a preacher in an RCL[Revised Common Lectioinary] tradition, and you look at the lessons for the coming Sunday, and realize:

- the reading from the Hebrew scriptures (Jer 18:1-11) gets used foundationally [sic] for theologies of an abuser God,
- the psalm (139:1-5, 12-1) is a favorite of the anti-reproductive-rights crowd,
- the epistle (Philemon 1-21) was the go-to for chattel-slavery apologists,
- and the gospel (Luke 14:25-33) is currently being deployed to chastise folks drowning in student loan debt.

I like this book [the Bible], I really do.

But it is fraught.

Doesn't help all the ways it gets misread.

And I'm getting tired of arguing about it.¹

The second Facebook post was to the page called Episcopal LGBTQ Connection.² It spread the word that Episcopal Church is now commemorating Simeon Bathos, better known as the Ethiopian Eunuch, on August 27.³ I had somehow missed this news. He was added to the calendar by resolution of the Church's General Convention this past July. This is a trial addition to our calendar of commemorations, with final authorization set for the next General Convention.

So I'm ignoring today's challenging readings and instead kicking off a new practice of commemoration with this particular new commemoration. My original intent was to feature relatively contemporary figures who deserve our recognition. But Simeon Bathos demands our attention, and for reasons that might surprise you.

Let's hear another scripture reading, the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch from the Book of Acts:

... an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 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. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.⁴

Now I'll read the text of the materials prepared by the Episcopal Church for this commemoration:

August 27: Simeon Bachos, the Ethiopian Eunuch, *Evangelist in Africa*

In the eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, we find the story of Philip and the baptism of an unnamed Ethiopian Eunuch. In the second century, the bishop and theologian Irenaeus of Lyons referred to him as Simeon Bachos; this is the name by which this unidentified figure is known in many parts of the eastern church, including in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo church.

According to the Acts, he was familiar with the Hebrew scriptures, and his encounter with Philip took place as he traveled from Jerusalem, where he had worshipped at the temple. Some suggest that he was a Jewish convert, while others contend that he was a "Godfearer." Regardless of his previous religious affiliation, scripture records him as the first African person to be baptized.

Simeon Bachos was a person of great prestige, serving the Candace, or Queen, as both chamberlain and treasurer. His status as a eunuch indicates that he was a member of a sexual minority, either a castrated male, a deliberately celibate male, or a gender non-conformist.

Ireneus describes Simeon Bachos's life after baptism, "This man was also sent into the regions of Ethiopia, to preach what he had himself believed." In the fourth century, the historian Eusebius wrote that "The Eunuch became an apostle for his people." The tenth-century Synaxarion of Constantinople designates August 27 as the commemoration of Simeon Bachos.

As a person of a different race, ethnicity, and gender identification, Simeon Bachos stands at the intersection of multiple marginalized groups. His identity shows that the early church was able to transcend social categories in its evangelizing work and that the gospel's message would spread to the ends of the earth and to every person. Simeon Bachos calls Christians to be fully inclusive and welcoming of all people, empowering them for ministry and leadership.⁵

A third reason to recognize Simeon today is his importance to LGBTQ folks, most particularly people who are transgender. New Haven Pride is coming up in a couple of weeks, but at that time we'll be celebrating the Season of Creation. So I figured we could inject a little LGBTQ recognition today. There's a great chapter about this Bible passage in the excellent book *transforming: The Bible & the Lives of Transgender Christians* by Austen Hartke.

One of my seminary profs wrote a book called *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch*. I knew he'd done some scholarship on the subject, but I didn't know he'd published a book until I started Googling for this sermon. Let me at least offer this from the book's summary blurb:

[The author] shows that eunuchs bore particular stereotyped associations regarding gender and sexual status as well as of race, ethnicity, and class. Not only has Luke failed to resolve these ambiguities; he has positioned this destabilized figure at a key place in the narrative as the gospel has expanded beyond Judea, but before Gentiles are explicitly named in such a way as to blur a number of social role boundaries. In this sense, [the author] argues, Luke intended to queer his readers expectations and so to present the boundary-transgressing potentiality of a new community.⁶

The religious right has lately decided to tune its generalized anti-LGBT vitriol into a focus on trans people. Don't be fooled by their alarmist nonsense. Look instead to the Book of Acts, to Philip, to Simeon Bathos, and to all whose boundary transgression led to our arrival here. Look to Jesus, boundary transgressor extraordinaire. That's how we can continue to keep company with those who are birthing a new sort of Christianity into this hurting world.

The Episcopal Church also offers a Collect of the Day for the commemoration of the Ethiopian Eunuch. I'll close with that. Let us pray:

Holy One of love, you called your servant Simeon Bachos to study your word and led him to the waters of baptism, making him your evangelist to Ethiopia: give us the grace to follow where you lead, overcoming the barriers that divide and diminish your people, that we may behold you in all your glory; through our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reign for ever and ever. Amen.⁷

Notes

¹ Posted to the Facebook news feed of a personal friend, August 30, 2022.

² Posted to the Facebook group Episcopal LGBTQ Connection by Kittredge Cherry, August 27, 2022.

³ The commemoration of Simeon Bathos was added to the calendar by resolution 2022-A008, the text of which may be found online at <https://www.vbinder.net/resolutions/25?house=HD&lang=en> (accessed September 4, 2022).

⁴ Acts 8:26-40 NRSV.

⁵ This biography, along with lessons, psalm, and collects for the commemoration of Simeon Bachos, was prepared by the Episcopal Church Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music and is found in *The Blue Book* of the 80th General Convention, Volume 2, 518, available online at <https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/30554> (accessed September 4, 2022).

⁶ Sean Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch: Strategies of Ambiguity in Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013). This “blurb” is found, for example, on Amazon, available online at https://www.amazon.com/Queering-Ethiopian-Eunuch-Emerging-Scholars/dp/1451465653/ref=sr_1_2?qid=1662062741&refinements=p_27%3ASean+D.+Burke&s=books&sr=1-2&text=Sean+D.+Burke (accessed September 4, 2022).

⁷ *The Blue Book*.