

“Gender Freedom and Responsibility” by Pat Conover

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Sermon for First Congregational Church, Long Beach, California
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Scriptures: [Deuteronomy 23:1-2; Isaiah 56: 3-7; Matthew 19:10-12](#)

Gender Freedom and Responsibility

Introductory Words

I am a transgender person, specifically a bigender person. That means I am a person who strongly feels the need to claim both gender realities as part of who I am. I know myself to be both a man and woman and know that I need to be open and sharing about all that I am. This may seem impossible to some of you, and difficult to understand for many of you.

However, this sermon is not about me, it is a presentation of the Gospel as I understand it. I have been an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ for 38 years, and for 38 years and more I have needed to think a lot about the relationship between gender and Christian faith, just as many of you have had to think about your choice of life partner as it relates to Christian faith. As some of you know, I have written a scholarly book on transgender concerns called *Transgender Good News*. That book and this sermon are about lifting up the good news, the Gospel, for everyone, however you understand yourself as a man, a woman, or as a transgender person; the good news is that God loves you and wants you to be the best kind of man, woman, or transgender person that you can be. However, you think of yourself, you can consider your gender style, your gender commitments and expressions, and hold them up to the light of the Gospel. However, you understand yourself and act as a man, a woman, or as a

transgender person, you can sense what is full of grace and love, and what stands under God's judgment because it is irresponsible or unloving. By gender expression, I mean all the activities that are influenced by gender considerations, including your choice of partners for sexual activity.

This sermon is organized around following two tracks of biblical tradition to Jesus and then considering some of the implications. Both tracks deal with scriptures concerned about eunuchs. You might think this is obscure biblical work because you are not aware of how often the Bible deals with eunuchs. That is understandable because all English translations that cover the whole Bible obscure most of the eunuch passages by substituting words like "official" when the clear meaning of the text is eunuch. By my count, there are forty-five or more biblical passages dealing with eunuchs, but I plan to spare you and deal only with three.

By eunuchs, I mean people identified as males who, for one of many reasons, had no testicles and sometimes no penis. Some were born that way, people we now call intersexual. Some were castrated when made slaves after a battle. Some were castrated when they entered the service of a foreign king and became officials in a foreign court, people like Daniel and his companions in the court of Nebuchadnezzar. Some were castrated as an act of religious expression, both in religious cults of the time and among both Jews and Christians. Therefore, there

were different kinds of eunuchs and most of them probably should not be thought of as being similar to transsexuals today. I speak to transsexual people as people who radically alter their bodies as part to their journey from one gender and sexuality to another, and eunuchs are certainly not similar to people who were identified at birth as female and grow up to become men. Eunuchs did not take on the status of women but, in different ways, had other gender roles. So tracing the situation of eunuchs in the Bible does shed light on postures toward people who moved outside of the gender role they were assigned at birth.

Here is Deuteronomy 23: 1-2 as translated in the Revised English Bible.

No man whose testicles have been crushed or whose member has been cut off may become a member of the assembly of the Lord.

No descendent of an irregular union, even down to the tenth generation, may become members of the assembly of the Lord.

Deuteronomy means literally, second law. This section of the law was written in the time of King Josiah following the hard time of Assyrian domination and during a brief period when Jerusalem and the temple were being rebuilt. Deuteronomy repeats many of the laws found in earlier editions of the

Torah but there are several interesting things about this second edition.

Many of the laws in Deuteronomy have reference to the challenge faced under King Josiah of reestablishing the dominance of the temple cult in Jerusalem, controlled by the priests and Levites, in contrast to other expressions of Judaism centered in the numerous Jewish tribes and focused in hillside shrines. This very same tension lasts all the way to New Testament times and distinguished Galileans from Samaritans.

Both of these verses in Deuteronomy are rules about who can be part of the Assembly of Israel. This is not just about who can come into the church on Sunday. This is about who has standing as a Jew and who is an alien, a distinction with life-threatening implications. The verse about the descendants of irregular unions probably refers to incest. A law about incest in the first edition, Leviticus 18:6 simply says that a man should not have intercourse with a woman of the same bloodline. This restatement of the law specifies a punishment, no membership in the Assembly of the Lord. The law referring to eunuchs says that the punishment for being a eunuch is exclusion from the temple and from the people Israel. The punishment in both cases is shunning, not belonging.

About one hundred years later, we get the writing of Third Isaiah, who was a prophet in the School of Isaiah writing after the beginnings of the return from the Babylonian exile after Cyrus of Persia had conquered Babylon and given the Jews their religious and political freedom under his general control. The exiles returned in weakness to confront the local tribes who had ravaged Jerusalem and were competitors for local control.

Another tradition of writing during the time of Third Isaiah, exemplified in Ezra and Nehemiah, followed the purity codes of Deuteronomy and demanded the purification of Jews from their time in exile, starting with the forced divorce of Jews from foreign wives. Third Isaiah, beginning with Isaiah 56, takes a different path. In the first verse, the prophet calls for a commitment to "do justice and maintain what is right." Then, in verses 3-7, he immediately makes clear in two examples that this is not meant to be understood as a simple obedience to the law.

The foreigner who has given his allegiance to the Lord must not say, "The Lord will exclude me from his people." The eunuch must not say, "I am naught but a barren tree."

These are the words of the Lord: the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose to do my will and hold fast to my covenant, will receive from me something better than sons and daughters, a memorial and a name in my own house and within my walls. I shall give them everlasting renown, an imperishable name.

So too with the foreigners who give their allegiance to me, to minister to me and love my name and become my servants, all who keep the Sabbath unprofaned and hold fast to my covenant: these I shall bring to my holy hill and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their offerings and sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.

Instead of shunning and exclusion, Third Isaiah offers welcome and asserts that the right spirit and right practice override less important matters of the law.

Both traditions carry forward to New Testament times. The tradition of purity and exclusion is exemplified in three ways: by the Sadducees with their emphasis on the practices of

the temple cult in Jerusalem, the direct inheritors of Ezra and Nehemiah; by the Pharisees, who emphasized adherence to the moral law and purity practices as taught in the synagogues; and by the Essences who withdrew into a tight community of monks cut off so they could be ultra pure. We have them to thank for the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The tradition of inclusion based on following the spirit of the law is found again in Matthew 19: verses 10 to 12, and particularly verse 12. I read from the Scholar Translation, the only modern translation not to obscure the reality that eunuchs are being discussed.

The disciples say to him, "If this is how it is in the case of a man and his wife, it is better not to marry.

Then he (that is Jesus) said to them, "Not everyone will be able to accept this advice, only those for whom it is intended. After all, there are castrated men who were born that way, there are castrated men who were castrated by others and there are castrated men who castrate themselves because of Heaven's imperial rule. If you are able to accept this advice, do so."

This was an important and troublesome passage for the early Christian church in a couple of ways. Some read it as a command to celibacy. They have used it to promote an anti-

sexual ethic that, down to this day in the Roman Catholic tradition makes priests a separate class within the church. In addition, they claim the right to control the church, because they are presumably spiritually superior. The anti-sexuality theme has also caused great havoc and bad guidance in many protestant traditions.

The early church had an additional problem. Origen, an important early church leader, took the passage literally and castrated himself. Other church leaders opposed such practice and insisted on interpreting this passage only as a call to celibacy and not to castration, except for the castration of little boys with fine voices to sing in the Pope's special choir.

To work out the understanding of this passage it is important to separate out the 12th verse from its strange place in Matthew's writings about marriage and divorce. This verse is the kind of saying that could easily have circulated in the oral tradition going back to the very words of Jesus. Matthew offers this saying as an example of how to get out of the problem created by allowing divorce in the case where one's spouse has been unfaithful. Should remarriage be allowed? Answering Matthew's question about divorce and remarriage deserves its own sermon and I am going to stay with the question of eunuchs in the church.

Like Third Isaiah, Jesus makes it clear that eunuchs have a place in the realm of God and in the life of the church. This should not surprise anyone. It matches perfectly with numerous sayings of Jesus calling for the welcome and inclusion of other devalued or outcast groups: sinners, women, children, even prostitutes and tax collectors.

But verse 12 goes beyond Third Isaiah by drawing out this inclusion for all three types of eunuchs: those who are eunuchs from birth, people we would today identify as intersexual people in terms of their anatomy; people who were made eunuchs by others, that is people who couldn't help being eunuchs because they couldn't resist oppression; and people who chose to become eunuchs for a holy purpose, to draw closer to God.

Origen's act of castration was not an isolated act without precedence. Such holy castration was common among priests of Isis who castrated themselves to draw closer to the feminine essence of God. Since Jesus referred to a current reality in this saying, it was obviously a practice among his contemporaries, and he affirmed such practice for the Jews with which he associated.

If any of you are starting to squirm, please relax. I am not going to call for mass castration for the male members of First Church. Actually, I suppose I should relax, for if I was to call for... Oh let's not go there.

Let's do go to two basic implications of this long biblical exegesis. The first implication is obvious and relatively easy for First Church. You are following Jesus and drawing your circles to include rather than exclude. Thank you. Many churches have not taken this obvious step yet and are denying sexual minorities' access to the church as the body of Christ on earth. Time is precious and so I am going to focus on the second question, being intentional about your gender commitments.

As Christians, we want to feel close to God and we want to do God's will. Knowing Jerry as I do, I am sure he has challenged you repeatedly in this regard. Good preachers around the country open up the hard as well as the easy questions about how to draw close to God and how to discern God's will.

I suspect it may not have occurred to some of you, particularly the men among you, to take time to consider your gender commitments, other than perhaps with regard to the choice of partner. The feminist revolution was about the reconsideration of the role of women in contemporary culture so one could intentionally choose how one wanted to be a woman in this time and place. The hurtful restrictions of women's roles and images were held up for examination. Women claimed the desirable freedoms and roles previously limited to men, whether men liked it or not. So it is probably a little more comfortable for women in this congregation to consider the question, "What kind of woman do I want to be?" than it is for men to consider "What kind of man do I want to be?" However, there is a men's movement devoted to that question and perhaps some of you have taken that seriously.

Have you asked what guidance there is in the Gospel of Jesus Christ for such questions? Have you asked what aspects of judgment and of grace are carried in the gender choices you have made? Have you considered your compromises with the contemporary culture images of men and women, including contemporary gay and lesbian cultural images, especially the consumer images that turn gender toward idolatry, toward irresponsibility, toward exploitation of others? Questions about gender choices can open many doors and windows to spiritual growth, to drawing closer to the experienced presence of God, and to outward ministries and expressions of love, justice and compassion. How can you expect to be in harmony with God if you do not align your gender commitments with what God wants from you? If you refuse to be a nurturing

parent, for example, because it does not fit with your gender oriented commitments, you and your children suffer alienation and that really hurts. If you limit the expression of your nurturance because it does not seem womanly or manly to you are in danger of not giving your children what they need at the time when they need it. If you are timid when you need to be courageous because of your gender upbringing, we are all lessened.

Transgender people like me, and many other transgender people, are forced to think about gender reality and gender choices. Many of us have found great healing and great joy by dramatically remaking our lives to express better our revised gender goals. We have our distinctive gender paths to walk and we need your support, your accountability and your caring. You each have your own gender paths to walk and you will do so with greater or less intentionality. As you make your choices, including the basic choice of whether to pay attention to your gender path or not, please consider the words of Jesus our Christ and make your choices from a desire to do what God would have you to do: Look at the signs of judgment and grace all around you. Consider the demands of justice, stewardship and thankfulness for your created life. Hold each other lightly, with strength, and with love as you find yourselves journeying together.

Shalom.

