

"Beyond Inclusion to Belonging" - Rev. Dr. Adam Hange | July 12, 2026

This morning, for our celebration of Pride Sunday, I would like to widen our understanding of the Biblical text. As a straight, cisgender man, I want to demonstrate how queer people and identities are—and have always been—a part of the Christian story.

Conversations about sexual orientation and gender identity often begin with defending against "clobber passages" in Genesis, Leviticus, Romans, and 1 Corinthians. This church studied those passages twenty-five years ago when called to become Open and Affirming. This Thursday at Pub Theology, we will explore other scriptures through which queer members see themselves. But today, we turn to one of my favorite stories about boundaries and belonging: Acts 8.

After Pentecost, a divine messenger sent Philip not to a city, but to the desert road from Jerusalem down to Gaza. Always a borderland, always a place of tension and marginality far from power's centers. Looking back, it seems God sent Philip into the wilderness for a divine appointment—to meet someone so that all of us might know their unique story.

Philip hears a man reading aloud. He overhears Isaiah—the Suffering Servant text Christians now read as messianic, though its meaning was still unfolding then. When Philip asks, "Do you understand?" the man replies, "How can I, unless someone teaches me?" and invites him into his chariot. Who is this man? To answer, we must look closely at who he is—and why his story matters deeply for us today, especially as we celebrate Pride and twenty-five years of being an Open and Affirming congregation.

He is described only as an Ethiopian eunuch. Those words are significant. First, they speak to origin. "Ethiopian" likely referred to Cush—southern Egypt, Sudan, or South Sudan. My childhood flannel graphs don't do this justice. This was a highly developed civilization with a rich Jewish community dating back centuries. While race was different in the ancient world, this man was very likely a dark-skinned African traveling through the arid Negev, far from home. He may have been Jewish, a convert, or a visitor. In a world where proximity to Jerusalem equated to purity, he was an outsider.

The second descriptor refers to his body. He was a eunuch. Mentioning the word brings back middle-school sex ed, but policing gender and genitals is nothing new. Eunuchs appear throughout Scripture—in Deuteronomy, Kings, Daniel, Esther. Some scholars suggest Potiphar was a eunuch; Midrashic tradition suggests Potiphar's wife pursued Joseph precisely because he was. Jesus speaks of eunuchs in Matthew 19: some born that way, some made that way, some choosing it for the kingdom. Historically, castration served royal courts. Beyond the physical reality, the social consequence was profound. Deuteronomy 23 barred eunuchs from the assembly of the Lord. His body marked him as imperfect, structurally excluding him from religious life. Crucially, the term translated as "eunuch" included sexual minorities we might now call queer or LGBT—a catch-all for those who did not fit rigid binary expectations of masculinity and reproduction.

With two words, his intersecting identities mark him as "other." Other in origin, race, culture, and body. If you're a queer Christian, you know what it's like to be deemed "other" by family, faith community, or even fellow LGBTQ+ folks who don't understand your faith. But remember: binary-breakers have always been here. God's radical grace went out of its way through Philip to welcome us from the beginning, without conditions.

Scholars like Tyler Connolly and John Miner argue this story exemplifies early Christian inclusion. The eunuch's baptism demonstrates God's message is open to all, regardless of orientation or identity. Did you notice? Philip did not hesitate. He imposed no conditions. He recognized the barrier was not the man's body, but rigid religious rules that had forgotten

God's good news. Maybe you're not LGBTQ+, but struggle with mental health, trauma, economic insecurity, or immigration status. Everyone has experienced otherness. Everyone knows standing outside the circle, wondering if you truly belong.

We need to correct a common image: the poor, downtrodden person of color begging for scraps of grace. Read on its own terms, and we see wealth, education, and high status. The Greek *saris* was interchangeable with "court official." A chariot signifies wealth—he was riding, not driving. He carried his own scroll, which was expensive. Yet despite his wealth, he was barred from the temple. Money couldn't buy belonging. Status couldn't silence the law drawing a boundary with him on the outside. Like many women, foreigners, and marginalized people in scripture, we never learn his name. We only know his otherness and exclusion.

But there is a gift in that anonymity. The Ethiopian eunuch is revered across Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions under various names. Recently, the Episcopal Church added Simeon Bachos to its calendar. These namings are beautiful reclamation. Yet perhaps there is a gift in not knowing his original name. Stripped of labels, we are left with the universal truth of his experience: longing for belonging amid systemic exclusion. He stands in for every unnamed soul who has stood outside the gates, hoping to be let in.

A Queer reading of this text—championed by scholars like our conference minister, John Tyler Connolly—reveals deeper layers. It asks us to look not just at his exclusion, but his agency. His difference didn't diminish his worth; it highlighted the narrowness of religious structures trying to contain God's love.

Here is this man, reading Isaiah. Just chapters later, Isaiah 56 speaks specifically to eunuchs—not "dry trees," but equally included in God's promise. Maybe he had already read that part. Maybe Philip knew it too. Philip comes alongside, offers relationship, shares good news. Then, something remarkable happens. They come upon water. The eunuch says, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

Notice the question: "What is to prevent me?"

In our church context, that echoes loudly. Especially for LGBTQIA+ members wondering if there is a place for them. What prevents me from being "out"? From being happily married, single, or raising children? From seeking ordination? From being a pastor? According to this text's ethic: Nothing. Except those who draw boundaries where none exist.

Open a pew Bible to Acts 8:37. Some translations include it; others do not. If present, it says Philip responded, "If you believe with all your heart, you may," followed by a confession of faith. But editors inserted that confession later. The earliest manuscripts omit it. Why? Because there was nothing to confess. Not on his side. He hadn't sinned by being who he was. He hadn't failed a theological test. The only prevention was the perception of others.

When scales fell from Paul's eyes on Damascus Road, disciples realized good news was for all. Peter learned this with Cornelius, learning not to call unclean what God called blessed. Philip learns it here. Good news is a circle of belonging extending wider, until all are welcomed into belovedness.

Twenty-five years ago, our church chose to welcome gay and lesbian people. Decades later, we've affirmed same-sex marriage, transgender and non-binary siblings, children, grandchildren. We've opened doors in extravagant welcome. That is powerful witness. Holy work. But here is the question: Have we moved beyond welcome? Beyond inclusion? To belonging? There is a difference.

Welcome can be polite: "You may come in, but please sit over there." Conditional hospitality. Inclusion is structural: "You are on the list. You have a place." Necessary, but potentially transactional. As some note, there's danger when we fight to earn our place through the

door, only to turn around and shut it behind us, excluding those different from us. Belonging is relational. It says: "You are essential to us. Your story is significant to ours. You are loved, not despite your difference, but in the fullness of who you are."

Using pronouns signals belonging: "I see you. I honor your identity." But pronouns aren't enough. We need hearts like Philip's, transformed by Spirit. We need to move from checking boxes to breaking bread. From tolerance to deep listening, understanding, appreciation. From mere inclusion to deep, abiding belonging.

So, how do we live this out? To those who feel like this man—excluded, questioned, told your bodies, orientations, or identities make you less than whole: hear this good news. You are beloved. You belong. Not because you earned it. Not because you convinced anyone. Not even because God's grace is "big enough." But because you are, and always have been, Blessed and Beloved of God. Your history, body, truth—are not up for debate. You are not a dry tree. You are an essential pillar in God's temple.

As we near our 25th anniversary as Open and Affirming, let's commit to widening our circle of belonging—as individuals and community of faith. Let's look for roads less traveled. Listen for living Word spoken by unexpected voices. Follow Spirit's promptings, even into uncomfortable places and conversations.

Next Sunday, our Central Pacific Conference joins Portland Pride celebrations. We've timed this worship as a primer—if you choose to participate, attend both. Amid resurgence in anti-LGBTQ, anti-DEI sentiment, our participation declares more than parade attendance. It publicly affirms all people deserve dignity and respect, self-determination rights, and that no one is outside God's love.

I invite every single one of you—whether LGBTQ+, ally, skeptic, or curious—to consider joining in some way. Come as you are. Wear your colors. Bring your questions. Bring your joy. Let's show our community what belonging looks like stepping out of sanctuary and into streets. Let's ensure whenever anyone walks through our doors, they don't just find a seat. They find a home. They find family. They find belonging. Amen.