

“I Will Make You a Name”

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I've shared with many of you that I have found a recent personal hobby that brings me great joy: I auditioned for a community choir based in Hoboken called *Cantigas*, and they accepted me! I love the challenge of the music, working together with a community to make a beautiful sound, and allowing my body to feel what I am singing. In a sense, I guess I get some of what you may feel and I also feel from church, except it's not also my job, and most of the music is secular. However, two of the 17 pieces we will be performing in our May concert ARE religious, and one really reminds me of our gospel passage.

It is called Shen Khar Venakhi, and we have to memorize the whole thing in its original Georgian text. It's a song from the medieval Orthodox church, and it's dedicated to Mother Mary. The words are “You are a vineyard, newly blooming, young, beautiful, growing in Eden, A fragrant poplar sapling in Paradise. May God adorn you. No one is more worthy of praise. You yourself are the sun, shining brilliantly.” It is sung acapella, chanted in multipart harmony, and feels like a meditation. I am upheld by the sound of it, and the experience of listening to one another as we harmonize leaves my skin in pinpricks, in a transcendent kind of way. When I was first learning this song, I shared a video to my sister, who had lived with her family for two years in Tblisi, the capital of Georgia, and asked if she had heard of it. She hadn't heard it before, but she said, “How appropriate, that Georgians would attribute the holy to a vineyard.

And it's true- wine making and sharing is a really big deal in the Republic of Georgia. When I visited my sister and her family there, we learned that everyone who has a yard, keeps grapes, and harvests them to make wine for their family. We tasted some amazing wines. Even my expat family kept some vines of grapes in their yard, and had made their own wine; it was pretty good! Driving into Tblisi, a giant, 66 foot statue of a woman greets you, and in one hand she holds a bowl of wine, and in the other a sword— the wine is for her friends, and the sword is for her enemies.

My sister taught me a proverb she learned from local Georgians which speaks to their view of hospitality. It says, “My enemy is my enemy until they come through the threshold of my doorway. Then, they become my friend.”

As I think about the times in which we live right now, we need more doorways, do we not? But I will get to that shortly- hold on to that thought.

When Jesus speaks of himself as the true vine and God as the vinegrower, Jesus tells us that we are the branches. God prunes us so that we can yield fruit. When we abide in Jesus, and Jesus in us, then we become bearers of fruit.

One of the reasons you may make church a regular practice in your life is to tend to those branches, to learn to abide in Christ... and to witness the fruitfulness such a life may bring. The fruits may be 230 hungry and unhoused people fed with a hot meal, prepared with care by a community that prays for them. The fruit may come through the kind of grace that prunes away shame, so that you can release the withered remains of self-judgment and drink in the nourishment of God’s love. With such careful tending, a branch can bloom and fruit can blossom. The fruit may be belonging to a community, realizing that you are not on your own on the branch, but clustered with others and seeking growth together.

Paul speaks of the fruits of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. These are all fruits we can try to cultivate, with holy help.

But as you may know, the word “fruit” has not always been used in a generous way; “fruit” sometimes gets used as a slur against men who are perceived to be gay or not masculine enough. The word “fruit” has been used in that context since the early 1900’s, perhaps because fruit can be soft and tender. Perhaps the eunuch from Ethiopia, whom Philip had encountered on the road to Gaza, might have been called a fruit– certainly, he was gender-divergent.

He was described as working for the Candace, who was the queen of Ethiopia. Her name was not Candace; Candace was her title, much like Caesar was the title of the Roman Emperor. We do not know how he became a eunuch, whether

by birth, by choice, or by coercion, but we can imagine that his body was altered in such a way that made him be seen as more appropriate to serve the Candace.

We also know that the man, who had just been to Jerusalem to worship, would have not been allowed entry into the Temple, because the Torah listed men whose bodies are altered in the way the eunuch's was as unfit for entering the Temple.

This person, to whom the Bible gave no name, may have been the first African convert to Christianity. I find it very telling that Philip encounters the Ethiopian pondering the scroll from Isaiah, more specifically these verses: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. ³³In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." Philip uses these words from Isaiah, which was written centuries before Jesus' birth, as a starting point for sharing the good news with the Ethiopian about Jesus Christ.

There is something about the story of Jesus that wrapped itself around the imagination and heart of the Ethiopian, much like a vine shoots out tiny tendrils that take hold of the branch by winding around the branch repeatedly. Though the tendril is small and weak, it offers strength in its repeated wrappings.

As Philip and the Ethiopian walked, there suddenly appeared a body of water. The Ethiopian called out with enthusiasm, "Look! Here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" And so they stopped the chariot, and he and Philip went down to the water, where Philip baptized the Ethiopian.

Now we usually look at that story as one of conversion of the Ethiopian. But I believe it is also a story of conversion for Philip, and for the church of Jesus Christ. It is a **doorway**, if you will. In the encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch, the Holy Spirit brings Philip and the church through a doorway to enfold someone who is culturally different and graft them on to the body of Christ. Philip moves from the city to the wilderness to meet the Ethiopian. He moves from the north, where Jerusalem is located, to the south, where Gaza is. He moves from the pure male body that Philip possesses, to implied deviant body of the eunuch, who would have been considered ritually impure for worship in the Jewish Temple. In opening the threshold to all these doorways, the Holy Spirit shows

Philip and the church how to move from exclusivity to *inclusivity* and in doing so, allowing all to “cross freely into God’s salvation.”¹

Consider the power that this Ethiopian, who because of his physical condition would have been considered as a barren tree, actually helped to bring the church to a more fruitful knowledge of the generosity of God’s love and salvation!

In an essay in *Bon Appetit* magazine, a lover of food, Joseph Lamour, who comes from Haitian ancestry, speaks about being called a *fruit* as a slur.

“The first time someone called me a fruit I was nine years old and at my best friend Tim’s house. Our suburban adventures in Silver Spring, Maryland, often resulted in cuts and bruises. This time it was a near-concussion after riding my bike down a steep, grassy hill right into a fence, and catapulting myself face-first onto the sidewalk.

His mother applied hydrogen peroxide to my surface wounds as I sat on one of their painted rattan dining room chairs and the warm scent of cherry and almonds wafted from the kitchen. I asked what she was baking, as my own mother stuck mostly to chocolate cakes, and I could see an unfamiliar dessert through the oven window. I didn’t recognize my interest in her bubbling cherry crumble as a marker of my sexuality, but Tim’s stepfather, a middle-aged man who loved Marlboros and revving his Harley, let it be known.

‘Liking to bake is a little fruity, don’t you think?’

As a gay Haitian American, proud of all facets of my identity, fruit has many meanings to me. It represents abundance, almost infinite flavor, sweetness, and sustenance. But the word evokes childhood traumas and pain too, and it’s taken me years to reconcile my complicated relationship with it: the highs and lows, the memories both deliciously ripe and terribly rotten. Over the years I’ve reclaimed the word as one of empowerment and with it embraced the Caribbean fruits of my childhood that once made me recoil.”²

Philip discovered unexpected fruitfulness on the road to Gaza, and it turned out to come from just such a person that the growing body of Christ needed. The

¹ Manuel Villalobos, “Bodies *Del Otro Lado* Finding Life and Hope in the Borderland: Gloria Anzaldua, The Ethiopian Eunuch of Acts 8:26-40, Y Yo” in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* ed. Teresa Honrsby and Ken Stone 2011: Society of Biblical Literature, p. 199

² Joseph Lamour, “How a Gay Slur Became a Luscious Part of My Identity” in *Bon Appetit*, June 22, 2022.

fact that he was able to stand at that doorway and be open to whom the Spirit would let enter should teach us something.

I am thinking back to that towering statue that looks over the capital of the Republic of Georgia. The woman holds both a sword and a bowl of wine. I think that's how so many of us feel right now. We want to offer something soothing and hospitable to drink. But we also cling to our swords, ready to fight at a moment's notice. I feel this most profoundly right now with how we talk about Gaza. And the ones leading the conversation have dropped their bowls of wine, and are now holding their swords with both hands. In the past week, the university where I attended graduate school has seen students and professors who were protesting tasered, tear-gassed, and shot with rubber bullets. A close Jewish friend of mine has shared that their sense of the rhetoric right now feels like Europe in 1939. I am in solidarity with the humanitarian concerns of most of the protesters, and am sickened by the loss of over 34,000 lives in Gaza. At an interfaith Iftar I attended last month, I was in a room of hundreds of Muslims, and felt their sadness profoundly. But I also know my friend's fears are not baseless, judging by the history of America's silence as Naziism rose in Europe, and by the fact that antisemitic slurs and violence are becoming more and more commonplace, and of course how the traumas of the holocaust were reignited by the slaughter on October 7. But two things can be true; our hearts can break for two different groups of people, and still we can work and pray to protect lives and demand human rights and a peaceful future for Palestinians, as well as Israelis. We have to figure out a way to lay down swords so that we can drink together from a shared bowl— of non alcoholic grape juice, perhaps. We have to find the doorways where the Spirit can guide us to meet and receive one another, even when the other may be vastly different from us, and to be transformed by that experience to see that we are, each one of us, reflections of the image of God, seen from different angles.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God promised a time when the door to God's house and God's walls would be open: to the eunuch, to the foreigner; to the outcast; to you and to me. God promised that we would move from being nameless, to having an everlasting name that will not be cut off, a name even better than the name son or daughter. Let us be ready to enter *that* door, and also to hold it open for others who will come knocking.