

*The Shelter, Nurture
and Spiritual Fellowship
of the Children of God*

*Summer Series on the
Great Ends of the Church*

from the pulpit of
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Acts 8:26-40

²⁶Then 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.) ²⁷So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” ³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah.

He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³²Now 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. ³³In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.” ³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶As 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?” ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When 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. ⁴⁰But 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.

It was a cause of great debate. People were worked up. Folks became nervous. Some wondered if the whole idea was heresy. Others just didn't want anything to change.

It is the first major church fight recorded in Scripture. "Naturally, everyone likes a good church fight," said no pastor ever.

The author of Acts writes in Ch. 15 that "no small dissension and disputation" arose among them concerning the whole deliberation. The debate revolved around the question of who counts.

Who counts in God's kingdom? What qualifies a person to be permitted entrance into the Christian community? Who is invited to participate in the holy and salvific economy? That's what gets Philip in trouble here. He gives an answer to that question.

Of course, the angel told Philip to go. And so he did, down that road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza; if you could even call it a road. Just past the town limits, the road turned into what could barely qualify as a cow path, with the only discernable trail being the small ruts of packed earth.

In any event, Philip kept going, wondering if God was sending him somewhere to be robbed blind or run over by a herd of heifers. And that's when he sees the chariot, as they both were going the same direction.

God's Spirit says to Philip, "Catch up to this carriage and jump in." Hearing the man in the chariot reading from the prophet Isaiah, Philip asks him plainly, "Do you understand what you're reading?"

New Testament scholar Robert Wall writes, "At one level, such a question asked by a stranger of a literate man seems condescending. Philip's question, however, presumes that Scripture is more than a literary text..."¹

Wall points to the fact that Philip himself sees the passages of the Bible as something that require interpretation, often in consultation with others, in

¹ Robert W. Wall, *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume X* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002) p. 143.

community. That Scripture is something we live into, and decipher, and perhaps even wrestle with, together.

Which makes sense, because the man replies, “How can I understand what I’m reading, unless someone guides me?”

And it’s the words of Isaiah he’s reading that he strains to understand.

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter...justice was denied him...For his life was taken away from the earth.”

About whom is the prophet speaking, the man questions aloud.

“It’s Jesus,” Philip says. “He’s talking about Jesus. And let me tell you ever more Good News about him.”

Of course I’ve skipped over the most scandalous part of this story. This man is described as an Ethiopian Eunuch. Where is Ethiopia? It’s a nation in the horn of Africa, just north of Kenya, but I’m not sure it matters much where it is. That’s not why the author is telling us he’s an Ethiopian.

You see, as far back as Homer, Ethiopia has been used in the Ancient Near East as a kind of nickname, a byword to mean “the middle of nowhere.” Way out there.

Where I came from we called that place, *Timbuktu*. We weren’t sure if was a real place, but we knew it wasn’t anywhere close to where we lived. “Well you know, his farm is all the way out in Timbuktu.” “Why don’t you just buzz off and go to Timbuktu.”

It means as far as you can go, and then a little bit farther. Ethiopia is literally the ends of the earth.

For Philip to greet this man, who scholars believe was probably much darker skinned than most of the inhabitants of Israel-Palestine, was to see for himself the quintessential “Other,” a stranger from a strange land.

Not to mention the fact that he was a eunuch. Eunuchs were frequently employed in royal houses, often in the service of queens. They didn’t pose a threat to women; because whether by choice or force, they were rendered sexless, genderless, unable to father children.

The Ethiopian Eunuch has served as a representative voice for marginalized persons for generations. The outsider becomes an insider. But how?

Deuteronomy makes clear where eunuchs stood. The 23rd chapter declares, “A eunuch shall not be permitted to enter into the assembly of the people of God.” Period. They aren’t welcome. That’s straight from Moses’ mouth. No argument. It’s God’s will. Yet here we have a Eunuch, who was returning home *after* worshipping at the Temple.

What does that mean? What does it mean when the Scripture says he was worshipping at a place where he wasn’t allowed? Why does he even want to be where he isn’t welcome?

And look what happens next. As they continue on the road, they come upon some water. It doesn’t say how much, but it was enough for the eunuch to cry out, “Look! Here is water? What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

Now what is Philip to do? He knows what the Hebrew Bible says about eunuchs. Everybody knows. They aren’t welcome. It’s not appropriate to have them in the Temple or the synagogue or the church.

Yet here is this one, asking to be baptized.

Who’s fault is this? According to Acts, the fault is entirely God’s.

That wonderful preacher, Fred Craddock, preached this text saying, “That God sent the Holy Spirit to push and shove the church. Push and shove the church beyond ethnic borders, national borders, social borders, economic borders. That repentance and forgiveness be preached to all nations, and the Holy Spirit pushed and pushed and pushed.”

Craddock goes on, “But every once in a while, Luke turns the camera around and lets it focus upon one of the outsiders whose future is at stake, one of those people whose fate is being debated in the church.

Shall we let them in or shall we not let them in? Luke turns the camera upon one of these people. What does it mean to the person standing outside waiting upon the word of the church? ‘How did it go?’ Will I be admitted or not?’”²

This is all God’s fault. God spoke from the prophet Joel, saying, “In the last days, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.”

Isaiah declares just a few chapters after the one the eunuch was puzzling over, “Don’t let the foreigners say, ‘Surely the Lord will separate us from his people’... To the eunuchs who keep my sabbath...and hold fast to my covenant...I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.”

If I’m that Eunuch, I know without a doubt, that verse from Isaiah is for me. Those are words for me. I hear God speaking my name.

Presbyterian minister and author, Frederick Buechner, says that what brings folks back to church Sunday after Sunday is, “the hope that somewhere out of all the words and the music and silences of this place, and out of a mystery even greater than the mystery of the cosmos itself, a voice that [we] would know from all other voices would speak [our] names and bless [us].”³

We don’t know this Ethiopian’s name. Like so many others in the biblical witness, he is unidentified. But God knew his name, and he heard God speak it so loud that day on that wilderness road with Philip, that he when he saw the water, the

² Fred B. Craddock, *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) p. 222-223.

³ Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*, (New York: HarperOne, 2006) p. 79.

question came out as fast as his brain could get his tongue to mouth it: What is to prevent me from being baptized? Do I count?

But Deuteronomy says... Yes, but Isaiah says... And then Leviticus says...

What do we do when the Bible argues against itself? May I suggest that we begin by looking together for signs in Scripture that point us to the reconciling love of God in Jesus Christ.

Princeton Theologian Dan Migliore says it this way: "Christians read Scripture as witness to the activity of the triune God. The God of the biblical witness is God the gracious source of all life, whose eternal Word became human to mediate abundant life to a world in captivity to sin and death, and whose Spirit of freedom and new life in communion is moving the people of God and all creation to the consummation when God will be all in all."⁴

Are we welcoming others in ways that point to this liberating Good News? How might we better declare that God's Spirit is pursuing people beyond lines of race, gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, geography? How wide is our embrace?

So Philip goes into that water; that little puddle, that stream, and baptizes this person who was as far from an insider as we can imagine. He was a stranger from a strange land. In the eyes of the religious in Israel: he was a nobody from nowhere. But he got a new name that day; was given a history and a heritage and a future.

In the story called "the River," the great Southern novelist Flannery O'Connor tells of the day that Bevel, a child of alcoholic and abusive parents, is taken to a baptizing by his sitter, Mrs. Connin.

I quote:

"Have you ever been baptized?" the preacher asked. "What's that?" he murmured. "If I baptize you," the preacher said, "you'll be able to go to the kingdom of Christ. You'll be washed in the river of suffering, son. You'll go by the deep river of life. Do you want that?"

⁴ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) p. 58.

"Yes," the child said, and thought, "I won't have to go back to the apartment then. I'll go on to the river." "You won't be the same again," the preacher said. "You'll count. . . ."

And without more warning he tightened his hold and swung him upside down, and plunged his head into the water. He held him under while he said the words of baptism. Then he jerked him up again and looked sternly at the gasping child. Bevel's eyes were dark and dilated.

"You count now," the preacher said. "You didn't even count before." The little boy was too shocked to cry. He spit out the muddy water and rubbed his wet sleeve into his eyes and over his face...

The air was so quiet he could hear the broken pieces of the sun knocking on the water.⁵

In truth, that's what the waters of baptism do. They tell us we count. As Presbyterians we believe that we counted before our baptisms as well, but at baptism, a faith community tells us that we count.

That we are loved by God. Cherished as a child of the covenant. And that when God entered the flesh in the person of Jesus, God affirms us in the muck and mire of our lives.

The Church of Jesus Christ is called to shelter, nurture, and invite into fellowship all of those children, from east and west, and north and south, as far away as Timbuktu, who belong to God.

And who belongs to God? Who counts?

According to the Acts of the Apostles...everyone. Amen.

⁵ Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, (New York: FSG Books, 1971) p. 168.