

A House Open to All: Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

Acts 8:26-39

The theme of my sermons this Eastertide is “The Church Alive in the Spirit”. And one mark of the church alive is becoming a house open to all. One of the most important words in the book of Acts is the very last, an adverb—which is an odd way to end a book! The adverb is “unhinderdly”. It is a clue to the whole book. The gospel is going out to all people “unhinderedly”.

Today’s passage is a beautiful picture of the spread of the gospel to all people, the welcome of all into the house of the Lord. There are two characters: Philip, one of the first seven to be ordained as a deacon by the Jerusalem church, and an Ethiopian eunuch traveling back from Jerusalem to Ethiopia. Oh, and one more character, the Spirit of God. What does the Holy Spirit do? Watch and see!

I

Our story begins with a split screen, two things happening at once. On one half of the screen is Phillip. An angel of the Lord tells him: “Rise and go south to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza.” Phillip rose and went.

On the other half of the split screen is the Ethiopian eunuch, returning from Jerusalem where he has been to worship. “Lo and behold”, the text says, he was going down the same road as Phillip!

To the first century Jew, Ethiopia was the foreignest of foreign lands, the place where the world dropped off—as we might say “Outer Mongolia” or “Timbuktu”. But the gospel was on its way to Timbuktu—or as the book of Acts describes it, “to the uttermost parts of the earth!”

Let’s look first at the Ethiopian, a foreigner of foreigners, an African, with skin darker than the darkest Bedouin shepherd. Not only that but he was a eunuch in the service of the Queen of Ethiopia, Queen Candace.

This man is different sexually, ethnically and religiously. He was either born a non-sexual man or had been castrated so that he could serve in the Queen’s court. We could call him *sexually non-typical*.

He races our anxiety motors. There’s this human malady called xenophobia, the fear or hatred of the stranger, the immigrant, the one who is different, who is “other.” Do you ever feel “different”, “other”, that you don’t quite belong, really belong?

Politicians can exploit that fear. And too many Christians go along—even though one of the most oft-repeated commands all through scripture is to care for the stranger.

II

Our story gets more interesting as it develops. The Ethiopian is returning from Jerusalem where he had traveled to worship, and he is reading Hebrew scriptures.

Why had he gone to Jerusalem to worship? He is not a Jew, he is a foreigner, a man of a different race, a eunuch. And as Deuteronomy 23:1 explicitly states, a “eunuch shall not enter the assembly of the Lord.” According to the holiness codes, the Ethiopian is clearly among the most unclean of the unclean.

Why would he go then to a place which so clearly banned his entrance? And why would he be reading the scriptures that so clearly defined his exclusion? The Psalmist asks, “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord, and who can stand in God’s holy place?” And answers, “Those who have clean hands and a pure heart”, But who qualifies? It is grace alone that brings us here.

Why do we come? Why do we worship despite scriptures that exclude and oppress? There are verses about slaves obeying their masters, and women

keeping quiet in church. There are passages that call homosexual conduct an abomination.

Why do we come despite all the exclusions we meet in scripture and church? Is it because in spite of these exclusions, in spite of all the messages that say, “You do not belong here”, we sense a deeper inclusion; that behind, beneath every “no” there is a “yes”? Is it because there is more inclusion in the scripture than we often know? Because there’s something in the words of Jesus, his life, his face, his voice, that gives us the glimmer of the truth that we are loved and we belong?

The Ethiopian is returning home, reading aloud from the scroll of Isaiah. He is reading a portion of Isaiah 53, a poem that describes God’s Suffering Servant. Perhaps in this scripture the Ethiopian has found his place of inclusion, a place to belong.

He was despised and rejected,
as one from whom people hide their faces....

As a sheep that is led to slaughter
or a lamb before its shearers
so he opens not his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied to him,
and as for his genealogy, he was cut off with no offspring.

The Ethiopian was in his chariot reading this aloud when “Lo and behold”—“Lo and behold” means, “Hey, look what the Spirit is up to!”—Phillip is traveling down that same road at the same time! Then the Spirit tells Phillip to pull up beside the chariot. What Phillip heard was probably the last thing he expected to hear, the cadences of Isaiah: “As a sheep that is led to slaughter, like a lamb mute before its shearers.”

Phillip heard the words and said, “Do you understand the words you are reading?” The eunuch replied, “How can I unless someone guides me?” And he invited Phillip into the chariot. As they read the scriptures together, the eunuch asked, “About whom, pray, does the prophet speak these words?” Could he himself be among the “whom?” Could he have felt a kinship with Isaiah’s Suffering Servant?

I love the way the writer describes what happened next: “And beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus.” Philip began where this man was, with this text and with the tremblingest part of him and led him to who Jesus was.

Philip could have said, “Nope Mister, you’ve started at the wrong place in the Bible! You’ve got to go back to Deuteronomy 23:1, ‘A eunuch shall not enter the assembly of the Lord.’ The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it.” But Philip started where this man was, and from the tenderest part of him and led him to the good news of Jesus. Did he then say to the eunuch, “Let’s read more. Look here where it says down below”:

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say,

“The Lord will surely separate me from his people”;

and let not the eunuch say,

“Behold, I am a dry tree.”

For thus says the Lord:

“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,

who choose the things that please me...

I will give in my house and within my walls

a monument and a name

better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name

that shall not be cut off...

for my house shall be called a house of prayer

for all peoples.” (Isaiah 56:3-8)

Could the eunuch have heard any more welcome word? He would produce no biological children, but he would show many into the kingdom of God. He was welcome in God’s house, a house of prayer for all people. No amount of testosterone or estrogen qualifies or disqualifies. All are welcome here.

Did Philip then tell him about Jesus and his glad welcome of all, how he ate and drank with tax-collectors, sinners and prostitutes, how he befriended the irregulars of his day, how he crossed the boundaries of gender, religion, race and nationality to bring God’s love to all? Did he tell him about the day Jesus cleansed the temple in Jerusalem, throwing out the money changers and quoting Isaiah 53: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people!”

There are two ways to read scripture. One way is to read it to see how many you can exclude; the other is to read it to see how many you can include. If you read in the spirit of Jesus, with his words and his life in mind, you read the second way. That’s how Philip read the scripture to the eunuch.

Then the startling part! The chariot comes to an oasis and the Ethiopian asks, “Here is water! What hinders you from baptizing me?” (There’s that word “hinder”) Note, it was not Philip who said, “Here is water, how about me baptizing you right now?” It was the eunuch who took the initiative. What was Philip to do? He had no cell phone to call back to Jerusalem and get permission. He did not say, “I have to check with headquarters first, so not now.” He had to wing it, led only by the Spirit! But Philip was Spirit-led, not rule-led, so he said, “Stop the chariot!”, and they went into the water, and the Ethiopian was baptized.

Talk about an unhindered gospel! The text says that when they came up out of the water, the Spirit “snatched” Phillip up and sent him north to spread the gospel there. And it says that the eunuch “went on his way rejoicing.” The ancient historian Eusebius reported that he became an evangelist, carrying the gospel to his people.

It was our Saturday night Easter Vigil at Broadway Baptist Church in Ft. Worth, a service based on one of the most ancient Easter traditions of Christianity. Outside on the front porch of the church there was a fire blazing in a large kettle, the Great Fire of Easter. We lit our candles from it and processed inside, into the darkened sanctuary. There were seven readings from scripture of the great deliverance events depicted in the Bible culminating in the baptism of Jesus. Those who had prepared for baptism were baptized. Then we all

reaffirmed our baptismal vows, “Jesus Christ is Lord.” The Easter gospel was read, the lights came fully on, we sang our first Easter hymn and processed out in joy! Easter had begun!

After the service, as I stood outside on the front porch of the church, a stranger came up to me, wearing rather rough clothing. He had hitched a ride on a train and hopped off at the train station a few blocks from the church. He saw at a distance our Great Fire of Easter and said to himself—as he told me his story—“What the hell?!” and walked toward the fire to see what was going on. When he got to the church he went in and sat on the back row, watching and listening. He was particularly moved by the baptisms.

And then he asked me, “Would you baptize me?” “Now?” I asked. “Yes”, he said, “tonight.”

What to do? Seminary courses had given me no instructions on this! So after going through a hundred scenarios in my head in one second, I said, “Sure, I would love to baptize you!”

I gathered up a makeshift congregation to be witnesses to his baptism. He and I went back to the baptismal robing room, where he put on his new clean white baptismal robe and I slipped back into my wet robe. We went into the pool and I baptized him. Then we all sang one verse of *Amazing Grace*. What a

transcendent moment. After the baptism he and I met on the front porch of the church to say our goodbyes. With a face full of happiness, he thanked me and went on his way into the night.

I thought later that night about the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch and their impromptu baptism. It was as if the centuries were spanned that night and the two stories overlaid one another and became one.

Many years ago, my daughter Ann had finished first grade, and we were at the “end of the year” award ceremony. There was a program, and the names of all the awardees were printed there.

Ann began to read the program, going down the list to see if she could find her name there. When her finger got to her name, her face lit up. “There’s my name!” Then she glanced across the table at her best friend Thea, and began to search for her name. When she found it, she pushed the program over to Thea. “Here’s your name!” Her friend’s face lit up, and they both began to giggle in delight.

Perhaps this is one of our deepest longings, to find our name there in scripture and know ourselves the beloved of God. And this, our highest calling: to help others find their names there too and know themselves God’s Beloved.