

## Can I Be Included? \*

Acts 8:26-40; John 13:31-35

Fifth Sunday of Easter, (May 15) 2022

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This morning, I want you to think about how we read the Bible and how we interpret the Bible. Notice how the Bible interprets itself. The Bible has never been a handbook answering every single question we have. But it shows us how the faithful people of God have sought to take the Bible and, by the leading of the Holy Spirit, have interpreted it anew in their contexts. That's what we do. That's what all the church does whether we want to admit it or not. So pay attention.

Not long before his arrest and right after Jesus had washed his disciples' feet, he said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

For the rest of the New Testament, the disciples of Jesus, the church wrestles with Jesus words. Everyone agrees that Jesus commanded us to love one another. But the struggle begins over disciples asking, "Who is everyone?" And "Wait, we kind of know what this looks like on Sunday but what does loving everyone look like on Monday?" ... "Let me get this straight, you really mean everyone?" "Perhaps I can love everyone spiritually but keep them outside of the church so I don't have to be around them?"

The book of Acts shows us what this struggle looked like in the early church. And the church was not all in one place about it. The church was divided, and the argument focused over a single issue. Should we love and embrace, admit into full standing and fellowship of the church foreigners, outsiders, persons who have never belonged to the People of God, never read or believed the Bible (the Old Testament), who have never believed in God, and have never followed any of the moral and ethical standards of biblical people? Or shall we admit them and include them fully into the church based upon their confession of faith that Jesus Christ is Lord? Is that enough? In the book of Acts, the young church was asking, shouldn't you have to become Jewish in order to follow this person Jesus or can you bypass becoming Jewish and go straight to being a Christian?

The church was divided. Dear friends were divided, and people were divided in their own hearts over it. What had happened is that Christians, the people of the Way, were scattered out from Jerusalem and they told others wherever they found themselves about this Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified and resurrected. And the word spread, people believed, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they were baptized. Soon some Samaritans, half-pagans in the eyes of the Jews, believed and the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they were baptized. Samaritans! And eventually full-blown Gentiles heard the Good News, and they too experienced the Holy Spirit and were baptized. Gentiles no less!

People were divided. "Can you include Gentiles and Samaritans in the church? What does the Bible say? This doesn't feel right?" "But I've seen the Holy Spirit work in these people. I've seen it." The Apostles themselves were divided. Peter, at Pentecost, where Jews from every nation were gathered, Peter was empowered to say that "this promise is not only to you but to your children and

your children's children and to all that are far off Gentiles, as many as God shall call" (Acts 2:39). Later, Peter had a vision and heard a voice from heaven telling him to preach to Cornelius, a Gentile, an officer in the Roman army. As a result, Cornelius and his household were all baptized into the fellowship of Christ, the church. Luke writes, "Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every people anyone who fears him, and lives justly is acceptable to him'" (Acts 10:34-35).

But this was hard. Paul tells us that Peter himself, even after all that he experienced and preached still struggled. In Galatians Paul tells about a time when both he and Peter were at a dinner in Antioch eating with Gentile Christians. Some travelers from Jerusalem came in; Jewish Christians came in and went over and formed their separate table. Peter sort of looked around and got his plate and joined the Jewish table. And Paul let him have it. "You hypocrite! You can't preach one way and live another!" (Galatians 2:11-21).

James, the very brother of our Lord Jesus, said, "No! You can't just let them in. They need to become Jews first. They need to study the Bible. They need to be circumcised as signs they are joining the covenant people and they need to learn what it means to be a covenant people. They need to learn morals. They need to go through therapy, be de-programmed, be properly vetted. No, the Gentiles must become Jewish first." The very brother of Jesus – James, said that.

This was hard. Eventually, the church called a big meeting in Jerusalem. Delegates came from all over. Luke says in his own modest and understated way that there was much debate and "no small dissension arose among them" (Acts 15: 2, 6). It was tough. It was hard. They prayed. They searched the Scriptures and

they heard testimonies. They tried to figure out who started it all; whose fault was it. Some said it was the deacons Stephen and Philip. Others said the fault was Paul or Barnabas.

Whose fault is it? Luke, here in Acts, says it was God's fault. That God sent the Holy Spirit to push and prod, drag, and shove the church to move beyond ethnic borders, national borders, social borders, economic borders, racial borders, every kind of border that separates people from God and each other. Jesus called them and the Holy Spirit pushed them to go and preach and make disciples of all nations, of all people.

Luke shows us the Spirit of God pushing the church beyond its own comfort zone and shows us the church divided and trying to discern what to do. This was not because some leaders like Paul or Peter were tolerant or inclusive or by our modern terms, "liberal." It was because the Living God, through the Holy Spirit, pushed and prodded the church and this same Holy Spirit came upon outsider after outsider.

It was not and is not because people in the church are progressive or open and it is not because the so-called outsiders are nice or spiritual. It is because of who God is. It is because God in Christ has broken down the dividing wall, and created in Christ, one new humanity (Eph. 2:14). It's called the church. God is at work, and we are called to join in that work.

In the midst of it all, Luke also gives us a picture of some of these outsiders. He gives us a glimpse of the people who were the recipients of the grace and mercy of God, who received the Spirit and were baptized into the full membership of the church.

Here in Acts 8 Luke tells of the Ethiopian eunuch in his chariot riding from Jerusalem to Gaza. And he tells us that God sent Philip to speak to him.

He was an Ethiopian, which in that day and time was equivalent to saying he was from the end of the world. Ethiopia was far-off and distant. An Ethiopian was the ultimate foreigner. These early Christians were dark-skinned Jews, but this Ethiopian was not simply dark, he was black skinned. Exotic. Maybe a little suspect but certainly different. An outsider.

And he was a eunuch. A eunuch is a man who either by accident or by surgery was rendered sexless. Often such persons found work serving rich and powerful women, especially working in palaces for the queen. Since they were sexless, they were considered to be trustworthy with no sexual interest in the queen they were serving or anyone else. They were not distracted but were devoted with single-minded loyalty. This particular eunuch Luke tells us was the chief of the treasury for Queen Candace. Such a man, in his own right, was rich and powerful.

And Luke also tells us that he had been up to Jerusalem to worship. Why? Why had he been up to Jerusalem? The Bible says in Deuteronomy 23:1 “The eunuch shall not be permitted in the assembly of the people of God.” The Bible, here in Deuteronomy, is clear, the eunuch is not welcome, cannot be included, and is not to be included in the assembly of God’s people. That’s what the Bible says.

Yet he had been up to Jerusalem to worship. He had stood outside the wall of the Temple, listening, trying to see what was going on inside, trying to hear the hymns sung, trying to hear a word or two of the Bible read, asking people who came out, “What did they say in there? What happened today? Who is this God?”

Probably some of the worshipers from inside of the Temple were kind and answered some of his questions, but they all agreed, “You can’t go in. The Bible says you cannot be part of the assembly of God’s people. The Bible says it.”

Luke tells us that this Ethiopian eunuch was out on the road going home from Jerusalem, but he had stopped and was reading a Bible. And what he was reading was unbelievably good news which made his head spin. In Isaiah chapter 56 it says, “No longer let the foreigners say surely the Lord will separate one from his people. No longer let the eunuch say I am but a dry tree for thus says the Lord God. ‘The days are coming when the eunuch, who hears my voice and obeys my law and keeps my covenant, I will give him a place in my house, and I will give him a name and it shall be to him as generation and generation and generation of children. Better than sons and daughters it shall be to the eunuch’” (Is. 56: 3-5).

Right there. It’s in the Bible. Deuteronomy 23:1 says “No!” but Isaiah 56 someday “yes.”

He keeps reading Isaiah trying to make sense of all this. He turns the page back to chapter 53 and reads, “As a lamb that’s led to slaughter, as a sheep before the shearer is dumb, he didn’t open his mouth. Who will declare his generation? Who is going to declare his generation? He was cut off out of the land of living. He had no children; he had no generation. He had no one to remember him. He had no one to carry his name. He was just cut off, killed without any children. Who’s going to declare justice for him?” (Is. 53).

Meanwhile Philip comes up and asks, “Can I help you? Do you understand what you’re reading?” And the eunuch says, “No, I need some help. I think I’ve found something important, some incredibly good news but it is almost too good to be true. Who is the prophet talking about?”

And Philip said, “This is Jesus Isaiah was talking about. He was cut off without any children. He was led like sheep to slaughter. He had no other generations to keep his name.”

“It sounds like Jesus knew exactly what I experience. And what about this other verse over one page in Isaiah? It says that the eunuch who keeps the covenant will be included in God’s people. I know I’m just a eunuch and I know what it says in Deuteronomy but here in Isaiah it says God will bless and remember and include the eunuch.”

“Philip, I’m just wondering ... I know I’m a foreigner and I know I’m a eunuch, but do you think ... do you think I might become a member of the Way of Jesus? Could I be in the Lord’s assembly, the church? Has this day promised in Isaiah come to pass in Jesus? Because of Jesus, do you think that I can be included?”

And Philip swallowed hard and said, “This is going to make a lot of people back home mad. And to tell the truth, I don’t know how I feel about it. I’ve never been in this situation before and I’m sort of surprised to hear myself say this but, who am I to say no when it is clear that God has already said yes. Here is some water, let’s stop and I’ll baptize you.”

What do you think? Do we need to put this to a vote? Or may we accept it by acclamation?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.

\*Thanks to my teacher, Fred Craddock for much of this sermon.