

Before we turn to the Bible once more, I want to give a bit of background on two of the three characters in this story which occurs in the early days after Jesus' ascension into heaven.

You probably gathered from the cleverly titled sermon in your bulletin that one of the characters is The Ethiopian Eunuch and you probably already know what 'eunuch' means and as I don't want to force any parents to have conversations with their children that they are not yet ready to have, suffice it to say, eunuchs likely had done to them at a young age and without their consent a procedure in order that they, as males, might be employed as attendants for women but also given positions as trusted officials and commanders.¹ While the text says the nameless Ethiopian Eunuch came to Jerusalem to worship, due to Jewish law which regarded men such as himself as unfit for worship, he would not have been permitted into the Temple in Jerusalem.

The second character is Philip, a Jewish evangelist for Jesus, meaning he's been preaching the good news about Jesus to other Jews in the area. He's also performed some healings and there really isn't very much about him in the Bible beyond this story.

I'll let you guess who the third character is. Let us listen again for the word of the Lord.

[Scripture]

Let us Pray: Holy Spirit, truth divine, dawn upon these souls of Thine; word of God and inward light, wake our spirits clear our sight. Amen.

I.

Isaiah 53 is the scripture passage Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch read together, seated side by side in the royal chariot on its way back to Ethiopia on that wilderness road. It must have been a really important piece of Holy Scripture for the Ethiopian Eunuch. Do you have one of those; a little passage that has taken on a lot of meaning for you? One that really makes you hope that all this stuff is really true? I'd love to hear what that is sometime if you'd be willing to share. I'd love to hear why it matters so much to you.

The passage Baron read from 1 John is one of those for me: "we love because God first loved us." I find such comfort in that: God loved us first, before we even knew God. And now, as a new father, that scripture has taken on even more meaning. God loved us first and so we love.

I wonder what it was about Isaiah 53 for the Eunuch? Did he see himself in that text which also says, "He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering, acquainted with infirmity, one from whom others hide their faces; he was despised, and we held him of no account," but then goes on to say, "yet, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days, out of his anguish he shall see light?" Did the Eunuch hear holy scripture naming his own personal pain? Had he felt at times despised,

¹ *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, 1954, Entry for "The Ethiopian Eunuch."

rejected, infirm, held of no account? I think we can safely assume so. Maybe on that trip to Jerusalem. His question: “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” is pretty telling that he is one who is use to having organizational structures and rules and situations not of his own making, preventing him from full inclusion. He sees himself as one who is prevented much like many African Americans in our country are beginning to speak about the systemic issues and implicit racism that seems to prevent them from all of the privileges whites in our society experience. Did the Eunuch find a voice from the depth of scripture that sounded like it felt the same as him? Did he find hope in an impossible promise; comfort in a redeeming light which will outshine his anguish?

And more importantly for this story is this question: Was Philip listening closely enough to the stranger’s secret longings to hear the truth and pain and beauty of this man’s life? Could you hear it? Do you listen for the secret longings and quiet beauty of the stranger, the other, the one on the other side of the political, theological, denominational or worship style preference aisle? Do you feel others listen and really hear you? This is what we call compassion- feeling with the other- and it goes beyond saying we support full inclusion or we aren’t racist, it is the radical transformation that an encounter with the good news of the gospel creates: where one who has seen himself as always having been prevented by someone or something, finally experiences, in the waters of baptism, the answer to the question: “What is preventing me this time,” as “NOTHING!”

It’s a strange supernatural story but the characters within the story, each encountering the supernatural and strangeness of God, *and* the strangeness of each other, are a model for how we can connect to the otherness of the story and how God desires *us* to reach across the divides among us and connect to the other, the stranger, the folk we just don’t get and frankly don’t care to. Along the wilderness road in this encounter with a total stranger who is totally other to him, Philip opens the relationship with a question about a piece of scripture that means the world to this man. Could gathering around God’s holy word and reading and asking questions with both friend and stranger alike be a way God is healing a broken world? Is the church to be the place where God’s work of reconciliation starts? Yes. The answer to that is yes. As we gather around God’s word, Philip asks us, “Do you understand what you are reading?” and the Eunuch invites us to not walk away or dismiss this vision as naïve and idealistic but rather to climb into the chariot and sit beside them and ask questions and listen for the truth, the Truth of the gospel.

II.

I don’t know if you picked this up but Philip is a little bit of an over achiever. Ellen had a name for people like Philip when she was in college- gunners. Gunners were the ones who sat in the front and were the first to raise their hands to answer a question. Philip was a gunner, one of the very few in the Bible, springing into action as soon as the Spirit acknowledges his already raised and frantically waving hand. God calls on Philip to get up and go, he’s gone before the angel can even finish giving directions. When God says go join that chariot, he ran! When they come across an oasis in the desert and the Eunuch asks if he can be baptized, Philip didn’t pull out his Book of Order or ask Daisy to call a Session meeting, he didn’t even have time to answer the question, they were both waist deep in the water before the bulletins could be printed. Philip was a gunner in the

best sense. I kind of think that may be why Luke wrote him out of the story after this; he was making the rest of the crew look bad.

Not only was Philip obedient to God, he was so graceful in his engagement with this stranger on the wilderness road. He asked questions and listened deeply, he received the hospitality of the stranger, sat beside him, told him about Jesus – which was really good news – and walked with him into the cleansing healing waters of baptism and a new life of discipleship. Would that we could all be a bit more like Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch.

God’s desire is a beloved community that includes those who are different than us, with different experiences, different opinions and passions; angers and pains. What does God’s vision of community on earth look like, sound like, worship like? Who would be seated at our supper tables and riding in our chariots? Who would we commit to reading scripture together with? **This is what The Family means for Christians.**

Recently I heard Professor Luke Timothy Johnson (who teaches down the street at Candler Seminary) tell the story of a time he was invited by a church to speak on the topic of Jesus’ call to disciple. He sent them the title: “God Doesn’t like Families,” which, I’m sure you can imagine some members of the community took issue with, not the least being their director of Children and their Families Ministries. When he arrived he noticed the title had been changed to “Godlike Families.” “This is the problem,” he said.²

You don’t have to have your finger on the pulse of Christian Media to know that “God Doesn’t like Families,” sounds like blasphemy. It’s hard to fathom as we are looking through what Johnson says is the idolization of the 1950’s American family unit, but if we actually take the Bible seriously we’d see that throughout the Gospel Jesus is constantly calling people to follow him, to be his disciples and *expand* their families to include others: the poor, the tax collector, the Syrophoenician, the woman caught in adultery, the Roman general, the wealthy and the marginalized alike, the oppressed and the oppressor, the Ethiopian Eunuch and the Palestinian Jew, the police officer and the protestor and the rioter as brothers and sisters. “Who is my mother and my brother?” Jesus says of his own family, “Whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” Who is the most difficult to deal with at work or at school? Who is the hardest political opponent to stomach? Who is on their way to prison? Who is silently facing a situation of abuse? Who is hungry or sick or bullied or lonely? This is family if you are a child of God. These are the ones who we should be inviting to sit next to us and read Scripture together and give an opportunity to speak and ask questions and hear and feel the good news of Jesus. God wants us to become as close as blood and walk together in and out of those baptismal waters, in and out.

The story of The Ethiopian Eunuch and Philip along with, dare I say, the *entire* New Testament drive home the fact that God calls us into intimate community and discipleship that is theologically, economically and ethnically diverse. **When we turn to Scripture looking for a vision of the kingdom of Heaven, God shows us a North African eunuch and a Jew from Palestine having a Bible study in a chariot and baptizing in a desert oasis. That’s quiet a different Focus on the Family.**

² Luke Timothy Johnson, panel discussion at Emory University, March 2015.

III.

This text isn't just about how great it is to be inclusive, it's about what actual inclusivity *acts* like. Welcoming all means welcoming *all* of all. To welcome someone into a community doesn't mean welcoming them to become just like you; to assimilate to your culture and customs and fit in; pointing them to where we are in the order of things and inviting them to fall in line. Rather it means welcoming and then giving the space to speak and question, to bring one's own cultural experiences and viewpoints and to know that they won't just be viewed as a merit badge for a "diverse" community but that they will be given the same amount of influence and power to affect the way things are done as anyone else in the community. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. See how she uses Philip for this kingdom expanding work?

Is there anything preventing someone from bringing their whole self into discipleship in this community? Do we say, "nothing?" Is that true? Are there unspoken barriers, privilege that prevents us from seeing where we might be excluding a child of God? Yes. The answer to that is yes, but not for God. For Jesus Christ says there is "Nothing! Nothing is preventing you from being part of his family! He welcomes all of all. The place to start living into this reality is to first realize that when we head to this table to have communion with the risen Christ, there are people missing from this place, but they are not missing before God. Second, we must hear that the Spirit is saying to us, "get up and go," for there are so many on the wilderness road who need to hear about the love Jesus has for them just as they are. This is what Philip does. Finally, we need to be reading scripture together and with folks who are not like us. We need to be like The Ethiopian Eunuch and invite someone to sit with us and share in this Holy Word. Salvation is found in these texts, just look at what happened in this story. "What is preventing me?" and then he goes away "rejoicing."

If you want to commit to this: commit to another person or a small group to gather regularly and just read the Bible together, we want to help you. Let me know, email me, text me. We can make it happen. There is light and life in the pages and you might find yourself walking through the healing waters with somebody and both of you going on your ways Rejoicing!