

A number of years ago I officiated at a funeral for a fellow I didn't know. I try generally to know something about all of the members of the congregation I serve, but this fellow had been absent from the life of the congregation so long that no one knew him. They couldn't tell me anything about him – and were a little startled at the family's interest in a church funeral.

I generally make it a policy not to talk about folks that congregations would recognize and certainly not to criticize ministers' actions after the fact, because I wouldn't want it done to me. So before I proceed, I want to attach a caveat to what I'm going to say next. Y'all don't know who I'm talking about. Even if you think you do, trust me when I tell you, you don't: different congregation, different city.

That said, what was fascinating to me was that this particular fellow, though I didn't know him, had a file. It was a relic from the great filing age of the late fifties, when everything that was ever written about or to or from someone went into a file. The church kept this file, it was a sort of "permanent record" the likes of which I think we all hope we left behind in elementary school. (If you're worried about your permanent record, we do not employ such a filing system at Morningside.)

I went to his file to try to learn something – anything – about him to keep it from being a John Doe funeral.

In it were the old carbon copies of type-written communication between the minister of the congregation and every member of the man's family. Much of it was the mindless stuff you and I would e-mail each other about today. (Apparently, in the great heyday of filing, carbon copying was equally exciting, yielding an endless archive of mostly

mindless communication, preserved for posterity in case something in it someday should prove important if the vellum didn't disintegrate first.)

As I leafed my way through the reams of correspondence it was a study in minutia.

But there was one string of communication that I've never forgotten.

It was a scrap of conversation between the minister and the man's son, away at college, who had visited home, and visiting, had heard a sermon about desegregation in the civil rights years here in the South.

He wrote a note to the minister thanking him for his delicate treatment of a complex issue that didn't have an easy answer.

And I realize that I was reading only the perception of the sermon, and as I have shaken enough hands after church to know, sometimes what happens between the preaching and the hearing is lost in translation.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that I had seen something the minister wouldn't be proud of now.

I suppose one could say that desegregation was complex. I suppose one could say that there were charged emotions surrounding it. I suppose one could say many things regarding the deprivation of basic civil rights from people.

One could say many things. But in the end unless one said segregation was wrong, one would not have preached the Gospel. It was wrong to make some folks live as second class citizens. It was wrong to hide behind "complex issues" rather than take prophetic stands. It was wrong to hide behind what was easy or politically expedient.

As I read the correspondence, I felt almost guilty, as though I were viewing someone's naked shame. Because, I thought to myself, God knows I wouldn't want anyone to judge my ministry based on one half of a rough correspondence.

But at a deeper level, I think what struck fear into me was the realization that someone could read through my words and find that in preaching the Gospel, I was found wanting.

"Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

I can tell you right now, I don't like the direction this is going. There is a reason that some preachers avoid hot issues. It's called political expediency. It's called a mortgage. It's called a car payment. It's called lack of confidence.

I wish I could tell you that the Lord laid it upon my heart to address all the hot issues of the church this morning. I wish I could tell you that, but in fact, it was the revised common lectionary that did it.

And I'm not going to address all the hot issues of the church, well, not directly.

But don't breathe a sigh of relief yet. I know you are all astute enough to let the Gospel speak for itself. So my prayer for you this day is that this passage will disquiet you.

Really, I think that is probably what happened to Philip. I don't know, I can't know, but it almost seems as though the Gospel jumped up and bit him.

He was preaching, you see, in Samaria, among the freaks and lunatics and unclean spirits, when unclean spirits were being driven out and lame folks were being cured. There was great joy in the city. There was JOY in the city. Joy. Is that the fundamental expression of Christian faith? It is if you suddenly are invited in where never before you had been welcome. Now, Luke, the author of Acts, clearly has an axe to grind in his telling of the Gospel. Luke is dead set that the Gentiles are going to be let in. The thing is, though,

he's getting just a bit carried away. You can let the gentiles in without getting all up in Samaria. You don't have to get out of hand. Samaritans and Jews didn't get along, you see...back in the day, when Babylon was in charge, when the Jews had all their best and brightest dragged off into captivity and slavery, there were some who were left behind, who intermarried with their foreign oppressors, had children...that's who the Samaritans were. (When the best and brightest are dragged off, who is left behind? That's right, the dullest and the dimmest. You will understand a little bit of snobbery directed at the Samaritans.) That's Philip's audience when he is preaching! Proclaiming the Messiah to them and telling them that there is good news, and they listened eagerly. You know that's what we preachers live for, someone, anyone to listen *eagerly*.

Then 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." Yes, that's right, Gaza. And it wasn't any more prime real estate then than it is now.

And on the way, Philip met an Ethiopian eunuch. He was a respectable eunuch. He was in charge of the treasury of the queen of Ethiopia. He didn't flaunt the fact that he was a Eunuch, I imagine, one might not even know. Now, if you are wondering what a eunuch was, God knows, I can't believe I'm telling you this, except that it's relevant to understanding what the Bible has to say, it was a man who from a very early age was castrated. If by chance you don't know what that means, he was neutered. And if you don't know what that means, I'm not connecting the dots any more than that.

The reasons were simple. Only a man with no sexual desire or guile could be trusted to work anywhere near women. Eunuchs worked with women and for women. (That alone sealed their second class status in the economy of the first century.) He did not have all

his factory original parts. It was not a choice, it was determined from birth or from when he was enslaved or taken as a POW, and it was of course, unchangeable.

The temple purity codes strictly prohibited him from any more than peripheral involvement in the community of the faithful. He was relegated to second class citizenship in the kingdom of God.

The problem with those Levitical attitudes is that they just wouldn't go away. As God revealed more and more to the Israelites- because, you know, God is alive, as their understanding grew, as they adapted to the needs of the faith community, they were just like old blue laws that wouldn't go away. Everybody knew that if you were a eunuch, you didn't get to be a full part of the community. You weren't quite whole, you weren't quite welcome.

So Philip met this eunuch.

Now Luke, the writer of Acts, I've already told you had an axe to grind. He was concerned that the Romans not be offended by the Gospel. He wanted folks outside the temple to know that God had thrown the gates open and welcomed them. And he did a fine job in his Gospel account of assuring that things could be heard in a certain way.

Those Romans in charge, if they were willing to use a minimum of imagination, could hear the Gospel in such a way that it didn't challenge them at all.

He could have stopped there.

I might have stopped there. When you have a Roman centurion breathing down your neck, you know that the words you say could make a difference between life and death.

Therefore you make your point, you get out clean. You let the others fend for themselves, you know, let God be God and sort out the rest.

But an angel of the Lord said to him to go toward the south.

He encountered an Ethiopian eunuch.

The eunuch was reading the Prophet Isaiah, wondering what it all meant. Waiting for someone to make it all real, to give it teeth, and feet, and substance...

So Philip began to speak, to preach, I suppose. He proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

That's all it says. He proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

Then the eunuch asks the hard question,

"Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

I love standing up here and telling our visitors that when we say welcome, we mean it.

And what I want you to know, and to be able to share is this: we don't say in spite of scripture, we say it because of Scripture!

What prevents anyone from being a part of God's family?

Well, for starters, in the Ethiopian eunuch's case, attitudes and Levitical purity codes.

You can read about them yourselves – Leviticus 21 or Deuteronomy 23 will make the point nicely. Males must have all their factory original parts.

The Bible said it. You can go read it.

"Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

You're a eunuch! The Bible says things about that!

"Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

Do you think Philip really have a choice? Was there really a choice whether to baptize and include that eunuch? Or did Philip have a test, whether the Gospel was worth

anything or not. Was it a test whether the Gospel could withstand the possibility of human frailty and failings and prejudice and bad attitudes.

The last time I preached on this text, it spurred me to make my beliefs clear about the ordination of gays and lesbians in the church, a topic I had carefully avoided. And I did – my knees were knocking as I climbed into the pulpit - and the steeple didn't blow off and nobody poured sugar in my gas tank like some of colleagues experienced with they preached on desegregation in the sixties. But as I think of it, even though our denomination has finally changed its mind about matters of sexuality, there has always been an outsider. Before we spent forty years wandering around in the wilderness on the questions of homosexuality, it was the ordination of women. But we got that one wrong until 1959. And then women were ordained and the steeples didn't blow off. And before that, there was the controversy of just what, exactly, does “born of the virgin Mary,” mean? And we decided that there didn't have to be a doctrinal litmus test to be a Presbyterian and, yes, again the steeples stayed intact. And before that, it was whether or not white folks could worship with black folks – can you believe that was ever a question? We got that one wrong. It split the church clean in two and it took us a hundred years to get it back together again.

Here's the deal. I could dance around all kinds of topics today: marriage inclusion, economic inclusion – probably some blind-spots we can't even yet anticipate. And I kind of want to, but the simple fact is, God expects better of us – not because we're better people than everyone else, but because we're God's witnesses in the world, here to tell God's good news.

I don't want someone to read a correspondence of mine in fifty years and wonder how I handled any such a delicate matters with finesse.

I love the fact that I can stand up here Sunday after Sunday and try to come up with new ways to say that absolutely everyone is welcome at Morningside because absolutely everyone is welcome in the household of God.

Someone has to say it. Here in this sanctuary, but also in your homes, and in your offices and in your schools. You have to say it!

And someone has to ask the question, "who's not here?" And how are we going to let them know the good news of Jesus Christ?

So, when it comes to the good news of Jesus Christ, no finesse. The only opinion that matters is that of the one who set that table for us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.