

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

Last week's reading ended with the stoning of Stephen. That was just the beginning of a widespread persecution against the people of the Way.

The persecution drove many of the apostles out of Jerusalem...and into their mission to preach the gospel through all Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. In the midst of danger, the Spirit met up with the apostles and led them to go where God wanted them to go.

We join one of those disciples in Samaria. Samaria. You know that the Samaritans were considered inferior by the Israelites. They generally refused to associate with them. The fact that the spirit led Philip to Samaria would already be a shocker.

But then there's this Ethiopian eunuch.

The Eunuch is a study in contrasts. He is possibly Jewish...there were Jewish people scattered all over the ancient Mediterranean region. But he could also have been a Gentile God-worshiper. Either way, he has just made the journey from Ethiopia to Jerusalem to worship.

He is also wealthy and holds power in his own country. But his status as a castrated man made him something of an outsider.

Enslaved boys and men who worked for royal families in many cultures of the time were castrated to avoid messing with the royal bloodline. It seems they were typically castrated young enough that they would have been very different from a normally developed male.

The other possibility is that the eunuch was born that way – there a number of genetic anomalies that result in failure to develop typical male body characteristics. This would have made him a candidate for service to the royal family more by nature.

Either way, his status was problematic in the Jewish tradition.

Here's the pertinent scripture from Deuteronomy: **23** No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD.

The eunuch clearly lacks for nothing in material wealth. He's made a trip in a carriage with a driver. Biblical scrolls were rare and expensive, so the fact that he's got one says something. And he's clearly well educated. He holds a position of power and responsibility.

But he's still seeking something. He has a hunger that prompted him to make the journey to Jerusalem to the Temple. And as he journeys home, he is reading...trying to get more. He seems to see some significance to this passage from Isaiah...something draws him in.

Is there something about this particular passage that captures his imagination?

Maybe there's a part of him that relates to the humiliation of the servant. Was the Eunuch's draw to this reading based on his own experience of humiliation?

This story makes it clear that God's intervention directed this whole scene. But why this man? What's the message to us?

I think there's a couple of different angles we can take.

First of all, What would it be like to hear this story for the first time as someone who could relate to the eunuch? Maybe someone in our own time who has never really fit the gender or sexual norms of our culture. What is to prevent that one from being baptized and becoming part of the community?

Nothing.

What if it's someone whose dress or tattoos or hair style makes them not really fit in to our usual image of church people. What's to prevent that one from being baptized and becoming part of the community?

Nothing.

God blew the apostles' earlier ideas of who was in and who was out of the water. Here's a foreigner...and to boot he's a foreigner seen by the world as at best incomplete. Yet that's precisely who God's messenger sends Philip to.

And he didn't have to change anything about who he was to be brought into the community of believers.

For someone who can relate to the eunuch, sitting on the outside of so many things others seem to be included in, the story brings hope that they too belong. That God notices them and considers them a part of this Christian community.

The second message is for those of us who might recognize ourselves more in Philip. Philip was a part of that early Christian community. They were tasked with the mission of the church which was to create a community devoted to care for one another and proclaiming the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Same as our call. But we sometimes have a pretty narrow idea of what that call means.

This story warns us that the spirit might send us to places we would never have thought to go – Samaria? To a eunuch from a foreign land? This story makes it clear that our mission involves crossing boundaries and leaping barriers to create a truly new sort of community.

But even once we are committed to that idea, we still get stuck trying to figure out how to go about it.

European and American Missionaries of the past, and even the present, have too often intertwined their mission to proclaim Christ with colonization. They wanted to convert people in far flung lands, and in our own native land...to draw them to Jesus. But they too often also wanted to make them more European...more white. The damage to Native Americans for example in such so-called missionary attempts was devastating to that culture.

There's a lot to tell us what mission work shouldn't look like. But is there still a place to proclaim Jesus' death and resurrection for the sake of the world without trying to make others into our image? Is the damage done by Christians in some of their attempts impossible to repair?

I don't have all the answers to those questions. This is one of the places where the church is going to have to do some hard and even painful work.

Not knowing exactly what to do is frustrating. But this is where we pray...we acknowledge the not knowing together and we pray for the spirit's guidance.

I do think the call is still there for us to proclaim Christ's death and resurrection for the world. But it will require much more humility than Christians have often used.

And if it doesn't start from a position of love and acceptance...and the ability to see Christ in the other...it's likely to be harmful.

Our mission today will require an acceptance of the ways people already experience God and practice faith. We will likely need to drop the idea that our mission is to get people to believe a certain way. Instead, our mission will rest on the creation of a new more diverse community...a community of mutual care and love. A community that models Jesus and doesn't just talk about Jesus.

The Ethiopian was longing for something...he had a real spiritual hunger. What Philip gave him was a way to connect his own story to God's story. That's the heart of our mission...to make connections to God's story and our own story...and draw others to make those connections for their lives.

Our mission really can only happen in relationship. It will involve sharing in the pain and suffering of others...to walk alongside and learn before trying to fix things in the way we think they should be fixed.

It will mean an openness to going where we're uncomfortable. Our mission will involve at least as much listening as talking.

The book of Acts makes the guidance of the Holy Spirit sound so much more clear cut than my experience has been. The reality is, I'm guessing it was murkier than Luke makes it sound even for them.

My daughter sent me the words from a blessing from their church council meeting last week. It struck a chord with her related to our anti-racist book group conversation earlier in the week. But I think it fits in here as we try to bring this story of Philip and the Ethiopian into conversation with our mission in our time.

Here's what she sent:

“May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and turn their pain to joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

Amen.”