

Acts 8 – Discernment

This is probably my favorite Holy Spirit story in all of Acts. This shows Philip being guided by the Spirit – or the Spirit’s messenger. Angel simply means messenger.

The story gives us the opportunity to explore discerning where the Holy Spirit is at work and where the Spirit might be leading us. The last couple weeks, I’ve asked you to pay attention to places you think the Spirit is working, and to places where there are forces that oppose the Holy Spirit.

Later, I’ll lead you through a type of spiritual exercise that aims to help us see those places. We’ll have time for a couple people to share if they’re willing, but nobody has to.

So, to our story. We’ve got four key characters – the eunuch from Ethiopia, Philip, the Holy Spirit...and the Spirit’s angel. The place is a wilderness road.

Let’s zone in on the eunuch first. A eunuch is a male who has been castrated...at minimum the testicles have been crushed or removed.

In the ancient near East, there was a long history of appointing eunuchs to various positions in a royal court. Sometimes boys, or their families, would volunteer themselves to become a eunuch for the prestige and potential wealth of such a position. Some were men captured in battle and kept as slaves.

As someone not really thought to be a man, a eunuch was considered less of a threat to the king – or as a rival for his harem.

Deuteronomy forbade eunuchs from being a part of Temple worship. So, although making men eunuchs was a common practice among other near East kingdoms, it was forbidden in Israel.

But after the exile, a problem arose. During the exile, the Babylonian rulers probably did castrate many of Israel’s young men and boys to appoint them to various positions in the royal Babylonian court. When they were released to return to Jerusalem, Israel’s leaders now had to figure out what to do with their own eunuchs.

So, in the prophet Isaiah, we learn that the prohibition on eunuchs in Temple worship was reversed. As a side note, this reversal is used by transgender people and their allies as one of the scriptural bases for the acceptance of transgender persons.

Anyway, even though he was a eunuch, our Ethiopian appears to have been allowed to worship in the Temple.

Eunuchs often rose to significant status within the court. They appear to have been paid well and some likely became wealthy. Some had considerable power. This one was given authority over the treasury of the Queen Mother of Ethiopia.

In spite of all that, eunuchs were ambiguous characters. In societies where procreation was very important, they were considered deficient. They were sort of in between people – not women but not really quite men either. And if their castration was done against their will, they were very traumatized indeed.

The scene between Philip and the eunuch takes place on a wilderness road – in an in between space. There was no other reason for Philip to be on this road other than that the Spirit wanted him to meet this eunuch.

So, that gives us our first clue to how the spirit works in this story, and elsewhere. The Spirit takes Philip to a wilderness place – a liminal, or in between place to a man whose place in society was ambiguous at best. It was a liminal space and a liminal person.

When the Spirit guides us, we need to be prepared for the possibility that we too could be sent to an uneasy place to meet with people at the margins.

The next clue about the work of the Spirit lies in Philip helping the eunuch interpret scripture. This in and of itself is important for discerning the work of the Spirit. God speaks to us through scripture. We can read scripture to hear what the Spirit is telling us. There is a spirituality practice that does that in a way that doesn't really require much interpretation.

But in most other situations, it can be a risky business interpreting scripture without guidance. Scripture is best interpreted within a community. Here, the eunuch has Philip to help him. And behind Philip is all his time within the community in Jerusalem, learning from the Apostles and each other.

The particular passage used here is also important.

This passage about the suffering servant in Isaiah has raised questions for the eunuch. He's trying to figure out who this is about.

But perhaps even more important, the eunuch wonders if this suffering servant could be good news for him. Perhaps he sees himself as one who has suffered as a result of his status as a mutilated servant. And though perhaps he still lives, the chance for future life from him is gone.

Philip begins from this story to tell the eunuch the story of Jesus. The story leads to a suffering servant – to Jesus on the cross. Jesus’s suffering in solidarity with those who suffer, his death, and then his resurrection – opens the door to the kingdom to a person who might have ordinarily been excluded.

When we discern where the Spirit might be leading us, we need to have a center.

And at that center for Christians should be the same story Philip told the eunuch...the story of Jesus whose immense love for humanity...for us...led to death on the cross. Jesus’ command to love one another as I have loved you then flows from that.

The Ethiopian now sees that this suffering servant, Jesus, is someone who stands with him. He asks, is there any reason not to baptize me? He already knows the answer is no.

The work of the Spirit leads to new life and growth of the community, sometimes in surprising ways. That growth may come from the very roughest and uneasy margins of society. So we too, also know the answer to the eunuch’s question...there is no reason not to baptize. There is no reason to exclude.

Now, we’ll try an exercise to help us see where the Spirit is working – it’s called an examen and it’s from The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola.

Ignatian discernment is the method my spiritual director was trained in and what she used to help me work through the decision to leave medicine and go to seminary.

The examen is a good beginning point to practice seeing the Spirit at work. It’s useful to look at your day or week to see what the Spirit is doing

First, take a quick look at the works of the spirit on your handout.

Now on the back, List at least 3 events that you can recall from your last week. They don’t have to be extraordinary

When you do this on your own, you can list as many as you like, but it can be hard if there’s too many things. Look for the ones that stand out. And don’t overthink it – the things that come to mind the most easily have stuck with you for a reason. For purposes of the exercise today, make sure at least one is negative

Using the list of works of the Spirit as a guide, how do you see the Spirit working in those events?

In the negative one, what is the Spirit doing? Could be forces opposing the Spirit – but it could also be the Spirit showing you where something is wrong...or where you are wrong

End with prayer from examen