

This Sermon is PG-13 (Hopefully Not R)
(12May19) Acts8:26-39

This old story is curiously current.

That it can seem an archaic artifact, admittedly still doesn't prevent me from squirming, and I'll begin apologizing now if it is uncomfortable for you addressing a guy whose private parts have been chopped off. It precedes next week's reading that also involves a question of what proper genitals are. Today the issue of circumcision is moot, though, for this person who'd been castrated. That severing may have served as part of an official role, to make this person be or become less disposed (to say the least) to put an heir on the throne or steal to support a family or to disrupt the harem, less likely even to be able to fit into society, and so maybe reliably loyal and dependent on a place in the palace.

Besides that unfashionable uncontemporary form of ensuring servitude, many other details in this story seem old. We don't much think of palace rooms filled with gold, counted by court officials (though maybe we do picture security guards and vaults?). This week we *were* confronted with a queen and behaviors around royalty; still, unfortunately, we might not be prone to picture Ethiopia or anyplace in Africa as having celebrated queens.

Even the detail of the chariot probably places this in some fairy tale olden time. Much less that the occupant of that chariot was passing the travel time by reading scripture. Thank goodness we've got phones and playlists and podcasts and Minecraft now, so we don't have to "waste" our time on trips by reading the Bible!

Yet this old story is also plenty present, curiously current. In the end, there's the stunning line, "What's to prevent me from being baptized?"

This exciting moment in the book of Acts is a new beginning in the sweep of the Christian story because it meant the good news was spreading, salvation from Jesus was reaching to all nations. Back in chapter 1, Jesus told the apostles they

would share the good news in Jerusalem, to the surrounding area, and on to the ends of the earth. Well, at that time Ethiopia was what they knew as the end of the earth.

For more breaking boundaries, in this book called "the Acts of the Apostles," Philip, the one conveying God's blessing, was not technically an apostle, not chosen as an evangelist or a pastor or a preacher, but merely selected as a waiter on soup kitchen detail. Yet here he was suddenly driven by the Holy Spirit to spread the preaching and the splashing of baptism farther than it had ever gone. It wasn't in his job description, but that silly, surprising Holy Spirit was ignoring the people's presumptuous rules.

A couple chapters later the central apostle Peter will baptize a Roman centurion, meaning that the Holy Spirit had clearly chosen to include a non-Jew into this saving movement of Jesus. Though this story today stretches to the ends of the earth, it might seem like some in-crowd. We notice that this Ethiopian eunuch was familiar with Jewish practice and with the Bible.

But to be sure we're hearing why that was still hugely shocking, we can't say that the eunuch was actually Jewish, because the scriptures kept this sort of person at least at arm's length. Having been in Jerusalem, the eunuch still certainly would not have been permitted to pray in the temple while there.

Again, apologies if this causes uncomfortable conversation on your family chariot rides home, but here's an exemplary verse from Torah, the teachings of Moses, the definitional law for Jewish religion. Ready? "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD" (Deut.23:1). I don't share that just for impropriety so we're all uncomfortable, but because that verse highlights what is going on in today's reading.

Now, I don't know if the chariot had a "eunuch on board" bumpersticker or something, but the story tells all the private details. So when the eunuch asked, "What's to prevent me from being baptized?" the only response is: you are clearly... definitely.... legally... unquestionably

restricted, in fact strictly forbidden from being included in the assembly of the LORD. That's the right answer. For the Bible tells me so. You are prevented. Period. You're out.

And yet Philip—not an apostle, not a pastor, not one who was supposed to preach, much less be baptizing—is nevertheless compelled by the Holy Spirit to go on with the baptism. What's to prevent you? What in the holy name of God Almighty? What for Christ's sake could get in the way of your baptism? Boundaries? The rules? The Bible itself? Aw, let's do it! Incorporating one from the ends of the earth into the community of Christ. Breaking down what clearly classified an outsider.

Wow. This is amazingly good stuff, so let's be clear we're recognizing it for a second with an Alleluia! Christ is risen! (It's the clearest boundary-breaking good news message, which is why I like saying it so much.)

That was shocking stuff then, but we'd better not hear it as an old, old story, but still curiously current here and now.

For simple starters, the Ethiopian was black. That's also part of the point. We admit we shouldn't picture Jesus as white. Jesus wasn't some blondish-haired blue-eyed northern European-looking dude, am I right? We have to acknowledge that when God chose to become incarnate, to be born into our world and appear in our lives and our skin, God chose brown Palestinian, Arabic skin and eyes and hair.

But the story still has what we would identify as a racial divide. This is a black-skinned person, very intentionally included into the church. The Holy Spirit isn't into identifying skin colors as barriers to blessing.

That racial inclusion is plenty difficult for us to live into, but maybe what sounds even more extraordinary is that this is a story about a person of ambiguous gender incorporated into the church, directly claimed and received by the Holy Spirit herself. This Ethiopian eunuch is without that body part that would most clearly identify a man, but is also not a woman. It breaks apart the gender binary.

Again that's curiously current, as our society is struggling unfortunately even on *whether*, but also with good intentions on *how* to incorporate people who have nontraditional gender identities or expressions. Here at the MCC, we're trying to figure out what to do with pronouns on our nametags and how to restructure our bathrooms. We keep trying to live into it, but there's no question that the Holy Spirit will bring us into the body of Christ no matter our body type and will extend salvation beyond—and as more important than—our old stale categories.

God is intent on chasing down these lost sheep, especially when religious people have been the ones who scattered them and refused to flock together. Our story is that this is who God is. Already three chapters after that passage the eunuch was reading, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed the word of the Lord saying, “To the eunuchs I will give an everlasting name that shall not be cut off, and foreigners I will make joyful in my house of prayer for all peoples” (from Isaiah 56:4-7). This promise of God is especially made known in Jesus, who joined the lost and injured sheep to extend salvation to all. This God's story continues as the Spirit sent Philip scampering after a chariot in the middle of the desert midday sun to catch a eunuch. And this story of a God in Jesus chasing along remains curiously current.

In the terms of this story, you may be a Philip, an unappointed apostle, finding yourself in unusual settings and circumstances, proclaiming good news. Playing catch-up to the God who breaks down barriers, you may get a part in extending an unexpected word of grace.

Or you may identify more with the eunuch, one who didn't expect to be incorporated, whose corporeal reality, whose very body and life kept you excluded, or who was on the outs for some nonsensical reason. You may have some inner yearning to understand this God and be surprised that God yearns for you, too.

Or you may be, admittedly, a combination. Our faith is shaped and guided along not just by insiders, not even just by unofficial insiders like Philip. Some of us who have been the insiders are

being taught about Jesus and salvation and what it means to share in the body of Christ by those who had been on the outside, had been excluded, by people we were even told were wrong, weren't allowed, who surprise even us as embodiments of grace. We can give thanks we are taught God's love in a richer way by companions who identify as LGBTQ+, by people of a different skin color, by people whose bodies are different, differently abled, or disabled, by people from elsewhere on the planet, by those who aren't as studied or learned as us, even by situations that may give us discomfort.

With this kind of God, there are always surprises, even about being in it all together, finding a place for everyone. What will prevent it? Nothing. Not even death itself. Alleluia! Christ is risen!