



Minister  
Dan Yeazel, Preaching  
Kim Johnson

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5th Sunday of Easter  
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Acts 8:26-40

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### Where's Philip?

Intro: In our reading this morning we find Philip, one of the lesser known disciples providing the church with a classic story of evangelism. We see him taking a chance to speak the Good News and share his faith out on a wilderness road. In this story we catch a glimpse of how far reaching God's grace is, and how people can respond powerfully to the Spirit.

There is a well-worn joke that has been around for years to help one religious tradition take a light jab at another. It is one of those multi-use jokes, that is basically a fill in the blank. A good guy, I'll use Presbyterian today, dies and goes to heaven. He is taking a tour around and notices a high wall in one corner of heaven and just has to ask, "What's with the wall?" And Saint Peter says "Oh that's for the ..... (fill in whomever you like), they think they are the only ones up here." Unfortunately, churches can be especially good at building dividing walls, and setting up rules to declare who is in or out. It can be in written legalistic ways or more subtle ways just as powerful, that send signals of who fits in

and who doesn't.

In our story the Ethiopian eunuch is a man who truly doesn't fit in, he is a man excluded by the formal rules of religion. The laws of the day are all stacked against him. He is a Gentile, he is a foreigner, he is a black man, and most offensive of all, he is a eunuch.

There could hardly be a better description of someone so completely "other", so totally foreign to the Jewish community, than this Ethiopian eunuch. Yet he is considered to be one of the earliest converts to Christianity. That is the great news of this passage and yet it would have fallen hard on the ears of the

first hearers of this text. Ethiopia, or Nubia, was considered by the first-century world to lie right on the cusp of the edge of the world. It was the very last outpost of human civilization before a great nothingness. Nobody came from there.

This nobody had worked quite hard to become somebody. The Ethiopian had achieved the status of being in charge of the queen's treasury, a great responsibility. He would travel widely on royal business. And he would have been exposed to all sorts of religions as he went. In spite of his wealth, there must have been some void for him though. For there was something about the God worshipped in Jerusalem that stood out to him. Something led him to go back there and worship, and he was moved enough to pay extra to buy a scroll to take with him as he traveled. Something about this faith called to him, even though he would always be seen as an outsider.

As he is drawn to this faith, the law makes it clear that eunuchs are not allowed in the Temple. He has been to Jerusalem, wanting to worship, trying to fit in, and he has already been pushed out. The obvious question we may ask is "Why does he want to have anything more to do with a faith tradition that doesn't want to have anything more to do with him?" Why is he wasting his

time with an institution, and with a group of people, who don't want him?

The answer comes later in the story, as we find the eunuch reading the Bible. With great courage and curiosity, he has followed the direction of his heart. Since the institution won't feed him, since the devout won't acknowledge him, maybe he can find what he is looking for somewhere in the scriptures. Sure enough, after reading through the Torah and the prophets, the eunuch stumbles across an obscure passage in Isaiah that reads: "Like a lamb led to slaughter, in humiliation justice was denied him and he was cut off from the land of the living, cut off from all progeny." Here is someone else who has been denied a full life, cut off from God and people, condemned to have no generations to follow and remember him. And so the eunuch is curious. Who is this being described? What has he done? What is going to happen to him? Of course, what he really wants to know is what is going to happen to himself, the eunuch.

It is as if the scripture has become a mirror, and the eunuch recognizes his own face in the glass. He sees himself right there. The joys and frustrations, the concerns and issues of his life are right there in the words before him. These stories, these people in scripture have real lives that look like his in some way. So he wants to know more. In

psychobabble of today, it was what we might call a "teachable moment."

Now, it "just so happens" that Philip, one who has been commissioned to spread the Good News of Jesus, is right near by when the eunuch has this moment. But as is often the case when events in our lives "just happen," we know that it is the Spirit of God that has brought these two together.

Now I don't know how he was reading the scriptures while riding along in the chariot. I know I get sick trying to read a map in a moving vehicle. And it is almost comical to envision Philip running along side this chariot saying, "what are you reading?"; but he does, the spirit leads him to take the risk and to approach this utterly different, utterly outside man.

And look at the exchange between them. Philip goes to him, meeting him where he is at, running along side with him at first until being invited up, and Philip responds to the questions that the Eunuch is asking rather than trying to tell the person what he thinks the other ought to know. That's a model for sharing the faith. Walk, or run alongside someone, establish a relationship of trust and respect. Find out where they are on their journey of faith; find out what their questions are, and then offer anything you may have. Share your foundations

of faith, and your questions and uncertainties as well. Its OK to say this is what I know for sure, this is what I still wonder about. Philip shared his stories of Jesus. He told of the good news, that the Jesus' death and resurrection has led to new life for all people.

Small wonder that Philip's interpretation of the text was truly perceived as good news by the Ethiopian. This Jesus that Philip is talking of would know me, know my suffering and humiliation, and he would still love and welcome me? Amid this spirit filled moment, the pair suddenly come upon some water on this desert road. In his enthusiasm the eunuch proclaims Look, here is water! asks "what is to prevent me from being baptized?" "Nothing", Philip says. Nothing stands in the way of God's grace. Nothing separates us from the love of God.

We can almost see the eunuch's ears perk up. All people? Does Philip really mean that? New life for all people. The question "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" What is to prevent me from becoming part of this living, welcoming Body of Christ? What indeed—except that the eunuch doesn't fit in. Remember what the law says? No foreigners, no Gentiles, no black men, no eunuchs are to be included within God's exclusive people. What should Philip

do? Philip baptized the eunuch. He touched the untouchable, he accepted the unacceptable. Philip embraced the spirit of the law—and so transformed the letter of the law. Just as Jesus showed us.

Nothing separates us from the love of God, that's what Philip shares with the searching eunuch. And it is an immeasurable moment of grace. The same spirit that brought them together now sends them each on their own way rejoicing.

There are plenty of people in chariots around us today. And maybe we identify most closely with the story of the eunuch. There are people who are accomplishing great things with their lives, who are feeling cut off from faith communities, longing to know more and wanting to feel welcome. People who are interested in scripture, and the possibility of the promise that they too, are included in God's grace. Some of us may be drawn to Philip's part in the story. As the church today we need Philips, who are willing to heed the Spirit's call to cross over the walls, to break down all that would try to exclude and prevent the movement of the Spirit. As the church, we are the ones to who should be extending the good news. If we are all bearers of the belief. If we are Philip, the chariots full of people searching are out there, people who might just invite us up to sit a while. People are looking.

The question is "where's Philip?" Amen.