

Acts 8:26-40 5 Easter 4.25.24 Bill Uetracht

If you hear me preach often, you realize that I frequently begin a sermon with a story out of my life or the life of the church or some kind of attention-grabbing ploy. I am convinced that often if you don't grab people's attention right away you never get their attention. They zone out or fall asleep. From my perspective, I today don't need some kind of contemporary story; I just need to put before your face Luke's story from Acts, which speaks of a eunuch (a man whose testicles have been cut off), the sudden emergence of water in the desert, and Philip's magical disappearing act. This is enough to grab my attention. I hope it's enough to grab yours.

I don't know many stories about eunuchs. And honestly, I am not sure I want to hear them. Talking about eunuchs just brings a sick spot to my stomach. But there is something fascinating about Luke's eunuch. He is from Ethiopia in Africa, and his main job is to take care of the money of the kingdom. He is the Secretary of the Treasury, meaning that he is in the inner circle. He's a big deal, a big wig. He serves the queen. And he's also a eunuch.

Some eunuchs were eunuchs by birth. They just came that way. Some castrated themselves. Most became eunuchs because the job demanded it. There are a lot of jobs that I would take if I needed a paycheck, but this isn't one of them. This was a civil service job. You were working for the government, often among a group of women. If you were a eunuch, you weren't a threat to these women. Now I could tell you more about eunuchs, but I am afraid that the sermon would become R rated. But what you need to know, though, is that eunuchs were not viewed highly by Jews. They were thought to be unclean.

But it's a eunuch who meets up with Philip, a disciple of Jesus who was led by an angel to get off the couch in order to head south

from Jerusalem. William Loader says that eunuchs were thought to be “faulty forms of the human race.” They were considered mutilated people. They were cut off from their ability to aid in reproduction. They lacked the bodily fluids that held the very power of life. So, these sexually different people were often viewed with great disdain. Frankly, they weren’t allowed in the temple. The latter part of the book of Isaiah takes on this prohibition, dreaming a dream of when it will be eliminated.

Luke’s story is giving us a vision of the fulfillment of Isaiah’s dream as he tells us about the eunuch who meets up with Philip. Now, interestingly enough, this eunuch, so Luke tells us, had been up to Jerusalem for worship. Was he a convert to Judaism, a proselyte? Or was he just a God-fearer, an interested Gentile in the religion of Judaism. We don’t know. But it’s clear. The eunuch has been to Jerusalem for worship, Jewish worship. And as he is returning home, he is discovered by Philip, who finds him reading out loud the Jewish scriptures—the book of Isaiah, Isaiah 53, in particular. When the eunuch gets to the part that reads: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth,” he says, “Who is this about?”

Philip, responding like a good Lutheran, and probably not like a good Bible scholar, says, “Well, this is a living word. This is a word that speaks to us now. This is about Jesus. He was one who was innocent and who did not open his mouth. He was denied justice. His life was cut off from the earth. He was killed, crucified.”

The eunuch is so intrigued by the Jesus story that he, when he and Philip come upon some water that just so happened to magically show up in the desert, says, “What would prevent me from being baptized?” Well, you are a eunuch. That is what should

prevent you. But no. That is not Philip's response. Philip is being driven by the Spirit of God. And the Spirit of God is taking the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news of his life, death, and resurrection, further and further into the world. The Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, is not about collapsing people into their own little worlds, or keeping people out. The Spirit of Christ is not a spirit of exclusion, but inclusion.

I know that many of you realize that quite a few scientists these days, building on the big bang theory, are telling us that the universe is actually expanding. Now my little brain is too undeveloped for me to fully grasp this concept, but if it is true, I am struck by the notion that reality itself (the universe) is not contracting but growing. Reality does not support our human tendency to withdraw, to make our world smaller and smaller. Reality (Luke in Acts would say, "the Spirit") is pushing us toward a bigger world, a larger life. The Spirit of Christ is a spirit of inclusion.

So, is there anything that is preventing the eunuch from being baptized? After all, water has magically appeared in the wilderness, which, by the way, is how it often works in the realm of God. What's needed shows up. Odd, weird things happen. Old people have babies. The youngest and least experienced are chosen to be kings. Virgins conceive. Killed people are raised from the dead. When dealing with God, you should just expect water to show up in the wilderness. And it does for this eunuch. And so, there is absolutely no reason why he can't be baptized, which is what happens. Both he and Philip go down in the water. Both he and Philip are immersed into the depths of the story of Jesus. This discipleship thing is a shared journey. We get wet together—Philip and the eunuch alike.

The Gospel of John tells us today that following Jesus is a shared journey, that discipleship puts us in a dependent kind of

state. John tells us that Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. Getting where we want to go involves abiding in, remaining a part of, connecting with the vine and with one another, the other branches. Nadia Bolz-Weber says that “not only are we dependent upon Jesus, but our lives are uncomfortably tangled up together. The Christian life is a vine-y, branch-y, jumbled up mess of Jesus and others.” Philip mentors the eunuch. We all get wet together—Philip and the eunuch alike.

Now, am I the only one who thinks it’s weird that we don’t have a name for the eunuch? Honestly, this is often the case when we deal with people who are different from us. We often identify them with a label. That’s the bald guy, the gay guy, you know, the mentally ill woman, the band geek, the Democrat, the Republican, the ADHD kid, the jock, the brain, the widow, the divorced man, the stoner, the emo, the goth. We often don’t name people. We categorize them. We know the category that people fit into, and for many, that takes care of that. No, it doesn’t. When the Spirit of God is set loose, labels aren’t sufficient. As we are baptized, we are *named*. I want to give the eunuch a name. I’m going to call him Ahmed.

There is nothing that can prevent *Ahmed* (not “the eunuch”) from being baptized today. There is nothing that can prevent *Ahmed* from entering the Jesus story fully. There is nothing that can prevent any of us from going deep into the waters of new identity, deep into the waters of death and resurrection.

Nothing! Not my ethnic background. Not my history. Not my past. Not my sexual orientation. Not my skin color. Not my crazy family. Not my income or lack thereof. Not my superior formal education or my lack of education. Not my mental illness. Not my stupid or smart choices. Nothing! There is nothing that prevents me or you from entering the Jesus story fully.

The author of First John today would have us know that this Jesus story is fundamentally about love. “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. God is love. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent Jesus,” the crucified one, to reveal that love. To go deep into the story of Jesus is to go deep into the story of love. To be baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus is to be baptized into love—love that gives you a name, love that gives you an identity, child of God, and love that puts to death your little self-preoccupied self and brings forth a self that is freed up to serve a hurting and broken world.

Can anyone or anything prevent you or me or anyone else from being taken to that kind of love? No one! Nothing! The waters of baptism are deep and wide. So, by the way, should your hearts be. It all begins with love, God’s love. Let that love flow through you to others, others who might be remarkably different from you. The universe is expanding. Let your world expand, too.