

Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch

26 An angel from the Lord spoke to Philip, "At noon, take the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.) 27 So he did. Meanwhile, an Ethiopian man was on his way home from Jerusalem, where he had come to worship. He was a eunuch and an official responsible for the entire treasury of Candace, the Ethiopian queen. 28 He was reading the prophet Isaiah while sitting in his chariot. 29 The Spirit told Philip, "Approach this chariot and stay with it."

30 Running up to the chariot, Philip heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you really understand what you are reading?"

31 The man replied, "Without someone to guide me, how could I?" Then he invited Philip to climb up and sit with him. 32 This was the passage of scripture he was reading:

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent
so he didn't open his mouth.

33 In his humiliation justice was taken away from him.
Who can tell the story of his descendants
because his life was taken from the earth?

34 The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, about whom does the prophet say this? Is he talking about himself or someone else?" 35 Starting with that passage, Philip proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him. 36 As they went down the road, they came to some water.

The eunuch said, "Look! Water! What would keep me from being baptized?" 38 He ordered that the chariot halt. Both Philip and the eunuch went down to the water, where Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Lord's Spirit suddenly took Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way [full of joy]. 40 Philip found himself in Azotus. He traveled through that area, preaching the good news in all the cities until he reached Caesarea.

The new fledgling group of followers of the Way was growing. Acts is Luke's

story of the early days of the Christian faith. From a small, but expanding group of dedicated believers, Jesus's message continues to be told and demonstrated by faithful people. Jesus preached and lived his message, that all of us, ALL of us, are beloved children of God.

In chapter 6 of Acts, we learn

6 [Some time after the death and resurrection of Jesus], while the number of followers continued to increase [to more than 5000], a complaint arose [among the leadership]. [It's so reassuring to know that they had their differences, too] Greek-speaking disciples accused the Aramaic-speaking disciples because their widows were being overlooked in the daily food service. 2 The Twelve called a meeting of all these disciples and said, "It isn't right for us to set aside proclamation of God's word in order to serve tables. 3 Brothers and sisters, carefully choose seven well-respected men from among you.. We will put them in charge of this concern. 4 As for us, we will devote ourselves to prayer and the service of proclaiming the word." 5 This proposal pleased the entire community. They selected Stephen, a man endowed by the Holy Spirit with exceptional faith, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. 6 The community presented these seven to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. 7 God's word continued to grow. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased significantly. Even a large group of priests embraced the faith.

So one of these seven faithful was Philip, sometimes known as the Evangelist. Later in Acts, we are told he had four daughters who were prophets, so they were a strong family of believers. Like others, Philip was traveling through the towns preaching this message of God's inclusive love.

Entering our story is an unnamed African eunuch, a court official in charge of

the treasury for Candace, queen of Ethiopia. He was returning home from a trip to Jerusalem where he had gone to worship. Philip saw him sitting in his chariot reading a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Since he is in Jerusalem to worship, he may have been Jewish. “According to one tradition, the Ethiopian Jews (Beta Israel, "Falashas") trace their ancestry to Menelik I, son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. An opinion which appears to be more historical is that the Falashas are the descendants of those Jews who settled in Egypt after the first exile, and who, upon the fall of the Persian domination (539–333 B.C.E.) on the borders of the Nile, penetrated into the Sudan, whence they went into the western parts of Abyssinia.” (Wikipedia) He is very likely wealthy, or at least prosperous enough to have a chariot and a scroll. He must have been very intelligent, capable with figures, and a good communicator, as he was trusted in his line of work. (Though we are put off by this today, castration was performed then to insure a level head and dedication and commitment in a position of high level responsibility). At the same time, he also knows very well that he is a stranger in a strange land. He must have studied scripture enough to know that he has several strikes possibly against him - a foreigner, an African, a eunuch. In the widely accepted and faithfully followed law book Deuteronomy in chapter 23: 1 - it states that no one who has been sexually mutilated shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. In spite of all these things, he is a seeker, seeking greater spiritual depth in his life.

Philip notices the chariot and was drawn to this man, by the voice of the Holy Spirit. And noticing he has been reading the scroll, Philip asks if he understands what he's reading. Much of Isaiah as we know is often read as a foretelling of the coming of the Messiah, and specifically, Jesus. But the eunuch might be thinking this passage was also written for him... and for all of us who have felt the sting of exclusion. The eunuch answers Philip saying, “how can I really understand without guidance?” He may be implying, “Am I welcome into the household of God? Or not...” He must know well what it means to be unwelcome. I imagine he longs for the embrace and acceptance of God.

So Philip takes this as an invitation and joins him in the chariot. As they ride

along, Philip shares the good news of the life and ministry of Jesus. And as the story is told, the eunuch understands the Isaiah passage in a new way, “Out of his own anguish, he shall see the light... and many will also come to know this truth.” (My paraphrase)

The eunuch has likely heard about the significance of baptisms and has probably seen people gathered along the rivers and streams in his travels. So, inspired by Philip’s tales of Jesus and the power of transformation possible, he asks, “Look, there’s a stream. What is there to stop me from being baptized right here and now.” When we think about this, again we remember that the eunuch probably knew well why baptism may not have been acceptable for an Ethiopian eunuch who is seen in violation of the purity codes. It’s like he was saying, “Is there anything about me that might keep me from being a full participant in the family of God?” The Holy Spirit spoke again to Philip, saying there was Nothing.... Absolutely Nothing at all that need get in the way of this man’s baptism. So the chariot was stopped and the two men went down to the stream, and walked together into the cool water. Philip willingly baptized him, in name of God, and Jesus the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Thomas Long has summarized it this way -

“Walls of prejudice and prohibition that had stood for generations came tumbling down, blown down by the breath of God’s Holy Spirit... a man who had [known what it felt like to be] lost and humiliated was found and restored in the wilderness of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.”

I wish we knew his name, because I would like to give the eunuch the respect he deserves. I am really taken with this story of dramatic inclusion and the equally powerful transformation that both men must have experienced. All are welcome.... All lives matter.

Certainly, we can name many sad and disturbing ways that we humans, even though we are all children of God, see each other as less than.

In my story last week about the cab driver in Boston, when I was feeling

worried about catching my flight, for a fleeting moment I thought he might be taking advantage of me. I'm grateful God's nudging turned that thought from my mind.

We are hearing way too many stories about conflicts between citizens and law enforcement.... with too many injuries and deaths on both sides.

When riots erupt because people are feeling lost and hurt and abused, there are some who lose control and because of their own weak self respect, some resort to looting and hurting others. At the same time, there are many MORE peaceful efforts, prayerful vigils, supportive songs, arms clasped in unity. Sadly our news coverage is way more likely to focus on the negative giving us a skewed view of our fellows.

We have conflicts between nations that often originate from a place of believing that the other guy is less than.... or has land that belonged to OUR ancestors. Us and them!! It's mine!! Israel is hotbed of conflict. The rest of the Middle East stirs with discord. Many African nations are troubled. Our own city streets are too often drowning in poverty and anger.

Neighbors lock their cars and their houses, afraid someone might do something harmful. Do you remember living in a time or place when you didn't feel that was necessary? Do you now?

When others have very different opinions than our own about social issues or politics, we sometimes curse them under our breath...We are coming into a long political season as people vie to become the next president. Oh, the hateful things we are already hearing!! How can we stand up as advocates for honesty and civility?

Horrible earthquakes and other natural disasters happen. Too many lives are lost, and many are injured. Children are orphaned. And some people have the hurtful notion that God is punishing the victims. I believe instead that God

mourns and weeps with those who experience tragedy.... and counts on us to offer a hand of love and assistance.

In the US, I believe we have the highest percentage of incarcerated people of any place in the world. And another very sad statistic is that our population is about 13 percent African American, and our jails are about 40% African American. Is it any wonder that folks feel oppressed and disenfranchised? In our Tuesday morning Sojourners group, we have been reading articles about race. It is important for each one of us to accept our own prejudices and work to change them.

I long for a world where we are all willing to accept each other, even with our differences. I long for a time when we solve our differences peacefully.

What are we doing to truly be neighbors and accept and include others.? How are we learning to change our old perceptions to be open to ideas that build up communities, rather than tear them down?

There are several things that give me hope. Historians have said the we are actually living in one of the most peaceful times. That we really are evolving and learning.

I also have great hope in future generations who will one day run the world. Many young people today freely accept that we are all unique individuals who are due the rights of liberty and inclusion. I see this in my own sons and in my nieces and nephews.

We are asked over and over again in scriptures to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick. Our God, the God of us All, is a loving force for good in the world.... our work continues to be to pause in our busy days, to listen to the cries of others and to do our best to show God's welcome and kindness to ALL.

“As the gospel moves into the world, it gathers under the wings of God's mercy more and more of those who have been lost, pushed

away, and forgotten.” (Thomas Long)

I can see the sun glistening on the water as Philip and the eunuch enter the stream. Philip lovingly lays his hand on him as he goes under the water. As the eunuch rises from the water, he feels a change within. He continues on his journey home, with joy in his heart.

Our God loves all of us.... no matter what we have done or not done. No matter who we are... We are reminded again and again, that love is the cornerstone. Love builds community. Love builds lives. All lives matter!!

Call to Worship - Reading

God's Inclusive Love

Jesus welcomed and included all races and cultures. He gave healing and guidance to Gentiles and pagans as well as to Jews and the orthodox. ... He recognized no impassable barriers between himself and those considered heretics, such as the Samaritan woman with whom he talked at the well. A "good Samaritan" businessman became the model of courageous compassion in his most famous parable.

Jesus gathered into his warmth those [who were] labeled as outcast sinners to be avoided. He touched and let himself be touched by those whom society condemned as impure and contaminating. ... He treated destitute beggars with dignity.

Jesus emphasized that what flows from the heart is what matters most to God. We are set free to make choices and to set others free also to choose. We are free to speak to God without intermediaries. We are given freedom to thrust aside the walls of exclusion and give healing love directly to one another.

_ Flora Slosson Wuellner