

“What is to prevent us from...?”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 47; Luke 24:50-53

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About a week ago, I was checking the church website, and clicked on the men's groups link. Lo and behold, the Scripture heading the page is a part of our Acts 8 account of the Ethiopian eunuch. One could speculate about the eunuch's connection with our men's group, but likely it is asking for understanding of the Scriptures.

Our lesson was a lectionary reading from two weeks ago, postponed due to my discovery Sudbury folks prefer worship to be contained within a sacred sixty minutes. I'm not sure where that hour time limit is in the Bible, but I saved my notes and decided to accord the Ethiopian eunuch a Sunday of his own.

Eunuchs in Scripture are often considered outcasts. Whether by birth or other circumstance, these castrated men were unclean by ritual, excluded by Torah law, and ridiculed by society. While they could worship as God-fearers, they were excluded from becoming full Jew, and their worship was restricted to the outer areas of the temple.

In his Acts commentary, Will Willimon does not dismiss the eunuch aspect, but suggests the man being Ethiopian – from a distant land and with darker skin than those in Palestine – may have made him more a subject of wonder, mystery, even admiration, rather than despised or depraved. (Willimon, William, *Acts*, John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1988, p. 71) Then, as now, there was a mystery and wonder about those from far away; in a similar way, I sense this each Epiphany as we read of unnamed magi coming from the East, bringing gifts to Jesus.

As we hear of this Ethiopian eunuch, we have one excluded from full participation in Jewish ritual, likely due to no choice of his own. Yet, Luke is clear he has power and responsibility. He is wealthy enough to own a scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and educated enough to read it. This is not your run of the mill eunuch!

The eunuch would seem to be the main character of our lesson. He is not. As he travels from worshiping in Jerusalem back to Ethiopia, he will meet up with the apostle Philip, who will reveal to him how a prophecy in Isaiah became reality in Jesus. But neither is Philip the main character. Our reading is in Acts 8, six chapters after the Acts 2, the Pentecost account we will hear next Sunday, celebrating the arrival of the Holy Spirit to the early church. So in our lesson, it is critical to see the Spirit of God as the main character, orchestrating this encounter between Philip and the eunuch in ways neither could predict.

Let us hear God's word to us in Acts 8:26-40:

²⁶*Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.)* ²⁷*So Philip got up and went.*

Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it."³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"³¹ He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

³²*Now the passage of the scripture the man was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth."³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."*

³⁴*The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?"³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.*

³⁶*As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.*

Early in our marriage, I noticed when Lynn made out the grocery list, she not only grouped items by department – dairy, produce, cereal, frozen, deli – but she put the groups in order based on the layout of the store. As I now do a good deal of the grocery shopping, I have adopted this listing method to more efficiently traverse the grocery aisles. Of course, the challenge comes in moving to a new community, and having to learn the layout of new stores, though I have learned the produce and dairy sections are almost always on opposite ends of the store.

Yet, even when one learns a store's layout, there comes that inevitable day when someone in the corporate headquarters, a person who may have never shopped for groceries, reads a magazine article on increasing profits with a new store design. So, the next time you go to the store, you find Clorox bleach where Classico pasta sauce used to be. When this happens, it can throw off our schedules, our lists, our plans. Oh, it could cause us to pause and ponder the meaning of life, but more likely it leaves us frustrated and angry enough to walk out, because we have had this trip all timed out. I say all that knowing there are those who are genetically engineered to be store wanderers, those who would not even notice a change in aisle layout, for they go with the flow, up and down every aisle, open to surprise. A part of me envies them, and they may indeed be more attuned to this morning's lesson.

When Philip obeyed the word of an angel, he had no idea what or who he would find along the wilderness road from Jerusalem to Gaza, but it is likely he was looking for Classico and ended up in front of Colgate. He had not been told he would come face to face with an Ethiopian eunuch riding in a chariot. He probably was kind enough to offer a “Good afternoon” greeting to the man and his entourage, but his eyes and ears were likely still searching to discover for what or whom the Spirit had sent him to that place. So, it take the Spirit to tap Philip on the shoulder and say, “*Go over to this chariot and join it.*” It is not what Philip expected, but he obeyed.

I wonder if I would have done the same. Would I have hopped up into a chariot to sit with an Ethiopian eunuch, or simply dismissed the instruction as a misreading of the Spirit’s direction? – one of those, “God, I must have misheard you,” moments.

For the Spirit to be in control, disciples need to relinquish control. We may not like it, but we can adjust when the Spirit changes the layout of the store, or the people we meet, or the plans of our travels, or the zones of our comfort. The church up to this time was marked by a sameness with its origins in Judaism, a busyness with its following of historic ritual, a judgmentalism with its obedience to the Mosaic law’s rules about exclusion and purity.

The Spirit is moving through and challenging the sameness, the busyness, the judgments and the rules. We are wise to be alert to the same challenges from the Spirit in our time, for what we believe defines us as a church may actually inhibit us in being the church the Spirit is calling us to be.

We can allow the comfort of our sameness – of race, class, culture, identity – to inhibit the Spirit at work among us.

We can allow the busyness of our lives and our list of church tasks to avoid hearing the Spirit sending us to travel new roads.

We can allow the judgments and biases we hold to be truth to skew the Spirit’s desires for full inclusion.

We can allow the rules we follow to corral the Spirit to our own definitions.

Our text this morning challenges our sameness, our busyness, our judgments, our rules when we use them to protect ourselves from the surprising leadings of the Spirit. That is not to say we break rules just to break rules for our sake, but we do break rules for God’s sake. We test the Spirit to discern when things are our doings and desires, or God’s.

Philip hopped into the chariot to be in the place the Spirit had led him. It marks the church beginning to welcome those previously considered outsiders, even impure. It marks the church being willing to be led to new places, without compass or GPS tracking, but only the Spirit’s directions. As Barbara Brown Taylor asks, “If we were to surrender total control of our own travel plans for even an hour, where might the Spirit send us?” (in Feasting on Word Year B, Volume 2, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2008, p. 459) Will Willimon echoes this challenge to the church when he writes, “If the good news is being preached out there, it is the work of God, not of people.... in being obedient to the Spirit, [disciples] like Philip find themselves in the oddest of situations with the most surprising sorts of people.” (Willimon, op. cit., p. 72)

In the chariot, Philip found the eunuch man reading Isaiah, and eager to understand the prophet's words about a man who was, *"Like a sheep ... led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him.*

Philip explained how the prophecy was of a servant, a Messiah, and how it was fulfilled in the person of Jesus. Yet, let it not escape us, it is quite likely the Ethiopian eunuch related to this servant who himself had experienced humiliation and denied justice. For while he was wealthy, educated, and had great responsibility, he was neither fully recognized as a man, nor accorded equal justice or access. While he could worship in Jerusalem, he could not be a full convert to Judaism. The rules of the book of Deuteronomy (23:1) excluded him from being admitted to the full assembly of worshipers.

Philip proclaimed to this eager seeker the good news of Jesus Christ. Then came the question. Traveling along this desert road, the eunuch sees water, and asks Philip, *What is to prevent me from being baptized?* At this point, if I were Philip, I would have thought I had stayed in this chariot one question too long. We've had a good meeting, but now he asks me this, *What is to prevent me from being baptized?*

Philip would know what is to prevent the man from being baptized. If he can't be a full Jew, how can he be a baptized Christian? Professor and preacher Tom Long the following as the reasons to prevent him from being baptized: "He was living in Ethiopia...so he was cut off from the land of Israel. He was a eunuch and thus in violation of the purity code. He was a member of the cabinet of the queen of Ethiopia, and therefore loyal to the wrong sovereign. He belonged to the wrong nation, held the wrong job, and possessed the wrong sexuality." (in *Feasting on the Word*, *op. cit.*, p. 458.)

One could say he had prevention protection. Philip had rules and traditions on his side. He could tell the eunuch his exclusion was biblical. While still encouraging the man to continue his study of the Scriptures and believe in Jesus, he would tell him to also accept the historic rules that limited his full inclusion.

As a church, we can be just as ready with reasons as to why something cannot happen. The reasons may be lodged in our sameness or our busyness, our traditions or our rules, or even our understandings of Scripture.

Yet, again, neither Philip himself, nor his Book of Order, nor even the book of Deuteronomy are in charge of this story. The Holy Spirit sent him to the Jerusalem-Gaza road, and the same Spirit boosted him up into the chariot of this stranger, and the same Spirit which gives him the answer to the man's question, "What is to prevent me...?"

He had the rules on his side, but as Tom Long concludes, "...Philip heard the voice of the Holy Spirit speak a different answer to the man's question, 'What is to prevent me from being baptized?'" [Into Philip's ear the Spirit whispered], 'Absolutely nothing. Absolutely nothing.' (Long, *op. cit.*)