When going through the ordination process in The Episcopal Church, one has to meet with a lot of committees. Like, *a lot* of committees. There’s the local discernment committee – usually at the parish level - or “L.D.C.” There’s the Commission on Ministry of the Diocese, or the “C.O.M.” There’s the Standing Committee, sometimes an executive committee, and all the committees you meet with in seminary. Each is charged with supporting aspirants in their discernment – that is, listening for God’s voice, God’s direction, God’s call – something we as Christians affirm always happens in the context of community. We need help, and we need each other, to discern where God would have us go.

For people discerning a call to Holy Orders, a big question is simply whether or not the full exercise of one’s ministry requires ordination. After all, we believe that, by Baptism, every lay person in the Church is *already* a full equipped and empowered minister of the Gospel. As a result, these committees are fond of asking questions that go something like this: “if you are ordained, what do you most look forward to doing?” If the aspirant says, “preaching,” “running a food pantry,” “community organizing,” “leading retreats,” “serving the wider Church,” “taking communion to the sick,” “crafting liturgies,” “planting Churches” “writing prayers,” “leading the daily office,” “becoming a monastic,” or “inviting others into the faith,” someone is likely to gently point out that you don’t need to be ordained to do any of these things. In fact, the majority of the Church’s mission is accomplished by those reborn by water and the Spirit, not the ordained.

So though there’s no “right” answer to a question like this, clergy often joke that the expected answer is “celebrating the Eucharist.” After all, this is the ritual remembrance at the heart of our Sunday worship over which a priest in particular presides. When I was asked this question in the basement of the seminary in Berkeley about ten years ago, – “if you are ordained, what do you most look forward to doing?” - I thought for a moment before responding, “proclaiming blessings and absolutions.” This is also something only priests do, but the committee was surprised by my response. I explained that, on the most basic level of daily, lived life, it is in and through the endless rhythm of receiving God’s blessings – such unexpected,
undeserved gifts – and God’s forgiveness – a prodigal, holy mercy – that I have most known God’s presence, and so I find the ritual of including this in our liturgy particularly powerful. It was a good answer. And at the time it was a very true answer. But there is life as we imagine it and then there’s life as we live it, and a few years into priestly ministry, as much as I love pronouncing blessing and absolution and celebrating the Eucharist, I have to say there is just nothing like baptizing someone.

The first time I celebrated a baptism I had been a priest for just a few weeks. A few months into my first call, I went on maternity leave. Seventeen days later I was ordained a priest. And a few weeks after that, though still on leave, I came in to officiate our January baptisms. I didn’t know what to expect, really. I’d assisted at several baptisms as a Deacon. I even remembered my own baptism, since it had happened when I was seven. I went over the bulletin studiously in the sacristy, feeling particularly concerned that in my sleep-deprived state I could barely remember my own name, and nervous I’d forget the names of the ten babies I was about to welcome into the body of Christ. But then we lined up for the procession, and the service began, and suddenly I was standing at the font, leading the Baptismal Covenant, saying the thanksgiving over the water, recalling the waters of creation, the waters of the Red Sea, the waters of the Jordan River in which Jesus was, himself, baptized by John.

And then I had a precious baby in my arms, so soft and so new, and I took a handful of water and let it run over her forehead - once, twice, three times - baptizing her in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. I had no trouble remembering her name as I made the sign of the cross on her pink, perfect forehead and said, “you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever.” Just thinking about that baptism, and every baptism since, gives me goose bumps. What a ridiculous, breathtaking promise – to be marked as Christ’s own forever, no matter what. The kind of promise you can stake your life on. The kind of promise that echoes in your bones, almost enough to make us wonder - priest, presenter, parish, person - if the words make it so or simply remind us of what has always been and could never be undone: our chosen-ness in God, accomplished already and forever.

I wonder if this is how Phillip felt when he baptized the Ethiopian eunuch on the side of the road. After all, this might have been the first time he baptized anyone, too. And the circumstances – well, they were far more unusual than my own. The Book of Acts is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke and recounts the experiences of the early apostles – aka, the
disciples — following Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. It serves as a bridge between the Gospels, which focus explicitly on the life of Jesus, and the rest of the New Testament, which assumes the existence of various Christian communities stretching from Jerusalem to Rome, from Greece into Turkey, from North Africa throughout the fertile crescent. But where did these communities come from? Who planted them, who invited their members into the faith? It all comes back to those first followers and friends of Jesus, whose stories are found in Acts.

Following Pentecost, the disciples are empowered by the Spirit to continue Christ’s ministry, preaching with power, healing the sick, and baptizing people by the thousands. The first few chapters of Acts recount the energy and enthusiasm of this ragtag group, so idealistic and inspired. They sell all their goods, live in intentional community, and heal broken bodies and broken spirits, completely committed to “the way,” as it was called. But fairly quickly, they encounter resistance and persecution. After one of the disciples, Stephen, is stoned to death, the others are driven from Jerusalem into different regions, and Phillip is sent to Samaria. Now, remember that this is long before the early Christian communities start grappling with the question of whether or not Gentiles – or non-Jews – could be converted, which will be a big concern later in this book and an even bigger concern in the letters of Paul, which make up the bulk of the New Testament, but all of the first converts in the Book of Acts are Jewish. The disciples all understood themselves as Jewish. They saw Jesus as a Jewish teacher, the promised Jewish Messiah. And they saw their new movement as, still, an essentially Jewish one.

So the fact that Phillip goes to Samaria is interesting, because Samaritans are sort-of-kind-of-just-not-totally Jewish. Samaritans and Jews split in ancient times over where and how to worship, and though they had a great deal in common, including a shared history, there was bad blood between them. And yet before he and his friends even had time to wonder whether or not baptizing Samaritans was OK – to come to a rational, well-thought out position, weighing all the pros and cons – the Spirit took the lead, and they received the good news and accepted the word of God. Then, as if Samaria weren’t far out enough, Phillip is sent south on “a wilderness road,” which is Luke’s way of telling us that something unusual is coming, because God is particularly present and powerful in the wilderness, showing up where we’d least expect, sustaining us in ways we couldn’t imagine. And it is on that road that he crosses paths with a court official for the Queen of Ethiopia in charge of the treasury of this foreign monarch.
He appears to be, in pretty much every way imaginable, an outsider. An Ethiopian. A foreigner. A person of color. A eunuch, meaning a castrated man, but also implying someone who just didn’t fit into the male/female binaries of gender, sex and sexuality. Perhaps someone who would identify as LGBTQ today. And though the text doesn’t go so far as to say he was a Gentile, it’s unlikely he was a Jew. He appears to be familiar with the faith – curious enough to worship in Jerusalem, and to read the Book of Isaiah, but not involved enough to know how to interpret it. So he invites Phillip onto his chariot and asks him to explain the passage, which leads Phillip to proclaim the good news of Jesus. And the eunuch is so moved by his preaching that, seeing some water on the side of the road, he says, “Look, here is water. What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

What is to prevent him from being baptized? What a question, with so many possible answers. His skin color, perhaps? His gender? His sexuality? His ethnicity? His religion? His profession? His total lack of preparation for this rite? The text has been careful to point out the many, many ways in which this person is other - implying that any one of these identity markers could have reasonably prevented him from being baptized. Or so we might see it.

I read an article recently about the anniversary of the Supreme Court’s 1967 ruling in the case of Loving v. Virginia, which said that the state’s anti-miscegenation laws – those prohibiting inter-racial marriage - were unconstitutional. Apparently, several other similar cases had been considered as worthy of appeal for years before, but civil rights lawyers were waiting for just the right couple. Morally upright, likeable, camera-ready, of otherwise unimpeachable character. They didn’t want anything to distract from the issue at the heart of the case: that, regardless of race, we have the right to marry whomever we love. If the Jewish identity of the early Christian movement was a primary concern, and we have reason to believe it was, then the Ethiopian eunuch is not an obvious candidate for one of the first baptisms beyond the sect, with so many potentially objectionable, complicating factors.

Thankfully, God’s ways are not our ways. “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” he asks. And Phillip … well, he doesn’t even bother answering the question. The Spirit is already slowing the chariot wheels, moving them toward the pool. And then they both go down, together, into the waters – the waters of creation, the waters of the Red Sea, the waters of baptism - and emerge renewed, refreshed, remade. Rejoicing. Because this is how the Spirit works – and continues to work even to this day: surprising us, breaking down the divisions
between us, drawing ever wider the circle of God’s love and light, precisely when and where and how we’d least expect.

Which is wonderful and wild and sometimes wearying news for those of us marked as Christ’s own forever, because we will, at some point, end up standing in that borderland between what is known and what is new, what is acceptable and what is offensive, who is in and who is out, and God will use the ordinary, extraordinary things of everyday life – water and words, hands and hearts – to lead us into new life, to welcome the outsider in, probably leaving us breathless and exhilarated in the process, with most of our questions left unanswered. This is just the way God works.

Now if you find you’re not sure you’re in the wilderness or just plain lost, if the idea blossoming within you is courageous or catastrophic, if the word on the tip of your tongue is inspired or impulsive, well, this is precisely why we have been gifted with one another. A community within which to discern the movements of the Spirit, as we practice, together, living ever more fully into our baptism, receiving and offering blessing and absolution, sustained by holy food and drink.

What is to prevent us from being baptized, or from living ever more fully into our baptismal promises? Nothing. Nothing at all. Amen.