

Baptizing Eunuchs

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Acts 8:26-38 — 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.) So he 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 worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

Now the passage of the scripture that he 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. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.”

The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 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?” He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

The Book of Acts tells the incredible story of how just a few dozen followers of Jesus became the early church, growing and spreading throughout the world. There are all sorts of surprises, twists and turns in this book’s story: there are healings and conversions, shipwrecks and rescues, arrests and trials, imprisonments and prison breaks, mobs and murders and—through it all—missionaries who will stop at nothing to share the good news, the message that God was with us in Jesus and that God is with us now in the Spirit.

But there’s this question that keeps coming up in the Book of Acts: Who is this good news for? Who will be invited into this new fellowship of faith? Where are the lines of membership for this emerging movement? Throughout the Book of Acts, people are wrestling with these questions, proposing different answers, fighting to draw the lines here or there. But the Spirit of God keeps showing up outside the lines that people draw. And this morning’s story is just one of many examples in the Book of Acts where the Spirit is at work in places and in people that some thought were out of bounds.

It all starts with Philip. We first meet him two chapters earlier, when he is appointed to be a deacon and helps distribute food to church members who are in need. Then, the Spirit leads him to go and preach the good news in Samaria—home to the Jewish people’s longtime archenemies,

the Samaritans. Even here, among these people, the Spirit moves and makes a home. So, by the time we get to our passage, Philip is on a roll: he's already done great work both as a deacon and as a missionary, and his success story in Samaria is starting to spread. But then, at the beginning of this morning's passage, Philip veers off in a different direction: he senses God telling him to pack a bag and head south along a wilderness road. Philip doesn't know why, doesn't know where exactly he's going, but he senses the call, and so he goes.

And on the way, he meets this person, whose name we do not know. We do know that this person is living as a Jew, because the story tells us that he came to Jerusalem to worship. We also know that this person oversees the treasury for the Queen of Ethiopia, which is why he is wealthy enough to own his own chariot and his own scroll of the Book of Isaiah, which he is reading aloud. Lastly, we know that this person is called a eunuch—but what exactly does that mean?

Well, there are two most likely possibilities: first, it may mean that this person was born biologically male, but that he was castrated at a young age, because he was intended for work in the royal Ethiopian court. Actually, this was a common practice throughout much of the ancient world: back then, there was a widespread assumption that eunuchs were inherently trustworthy, since they wouldn't act out sexually, and so kings and queens often hired eunuchs to perform duties that required a lot of trust—like overseeing the national treasury. The other most likely possibility is that this eunuch was not born biologically male, or was born not only biologically male: it's possible that this eunuch was born with some variation in biological sex characteristics—a variation in chromosomes, hormones, glands, or genitals. These days, the technical term for people who are born with any such variation is intersex, and it is estimated that 1.7% of human beings are intersex at birth. Although the term “intersex” didn't exist back in biblical times, Jesus himself acknowledged, in Matthew 19, that some people are born eunuchs.

Those two possibilities are probably the most likely ones, but there are other possibilities as well: perhaps this person was called a eunuch because, while he was biologically male, he was impotent, or celibate, or unlikely to procreate for some other reason. Or perhaps this person was called a eunuch because he had consistently lived against the grain of his society's gender norms. Perhaps this person experienced what today is called “gender dysphoria”: the experience of not feeling at all at home in the gender that you have been assigned. Perhaps, then, the closest modern parallel we have to this ancient eunuch is a transgender person: someone whose gender identity or gender expression differs from what society expects of them based on the sex they were assigned at birth. But regardless, whatever the reason or reasons why this person was called a eunuch, we can safely assume that this person did not fit all that well within society's sex binary of male or female and gender binary of boy or girl, man or woman. Especially if he was castrated at a young age for his work with the queen, this person's hormones would have developed differently than most men, and so in some ways he would not have looked or sounded “like a man” (whatever that meant back then).

So, with all of this in mind, imagine that you are Philip, traveling down a wilderness road, not knowing where exactly God is leading you, when all of a sudden, you see a chariot, and you

sense the Spirit telling you, “Go and join it.” With newfound missionary zeal, you start running towards the chariot, and as you approach it, you see what you assume is the body of a man, with skin a little darker than your own. You get closer, and you hear this man’s voice, because he is reading aloud—except, now you’re not so sure that this person is a “he.” The voice sounds much higher than you were expecting. You pause for a second, but then keep approaching the chariot. Then, you realize that you know what this person is reading. You recognize the words from Isaiah as words from your own Scripture.

You arrive at the chariot and greet this stranger. Now you see up-close what you had wondered about from far away: no facial hair, more feminine features. “Do you understand what you are reading?” you ask. In a high voice, the stranger replies: “How can I, without someone to guide me?” Then the stranger invites you to climb up into the chariot and sit next to him. You do, and the two of you talk and read together. You use the words of Isaiah 53 as a springboard to talk about Jesus, and eventually you get to Isaiah 56, where the two of you read these words: “Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, ‘The LORD will surely separate me from his people’; and do not let the eunuch say, ‘I am just a dry tree.’ For thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.”

Suddenly, the eunuch points outside of the chariot to a small body of water—in the middle of a desert. “Look! Here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” What, indeed? If Philip had wanted to, he could have turned the Scripture into a barrier for the eunuch. He could have pointed to biblical laws in the Book of Leviticus and the Book of Deuteronomy, more than a thousand years old by that point, which bar castrated men from full participation in worship. And even if he didn’t outright bar the eunuch, Philip could have punted: “Well, I’m not sure about your, um, status, or whatever, so I think we should consult with the church leaders before going any further on this.”

But Philip is wiser and more faithful than that. He knows that if he were to turn the Scripture into a barrier for this stranger, it wouldn’t be because ancient Scripture necessarily dictated this for the new Christian movement; rather, it would be because of Philip’s own discomfort with those who live outside of sex and gender norms. Moreover, Philip knows that his allegiance to God’s Spirit trumps his allegiance to his interpretation of biblical law. So, sensing that the Spirit is at work in the life of this eunuch, Philip baptizes him, for who is Philip, who is *anyone*, to say “No” to God?

Friends, the Book of Acts, and this story in particular, teach us that God dwells in and moves among people that we’ve been told are out of bounds. There is no gender expression, no sexual orientation, no cultural identity that is beyond the bounds of the God who is Love. Each of us is invited to receive that boundless love, and each of us is called to give it. May God’s boundless Spirit be our strength and our guide. Amen.