

April 29, 2018
OT: Isaiah 56:3-5
NT: Acts 8:26-39
Inclusion and Wholeness
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Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards 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. 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. *Words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. The grass withers and the flowers fade but your words stands forever, O God and for this we give you thanks. Amen.*

An Ethiopian Eunuch. That's what this bible story is about. An Ethiopian Eunuch.

First off let me just say that there is no good news in the Old Testament about being an Ethiopian. Isaiah, 2nd Chronicles, Ezekiel and Amos all give us the distinct impression that Ethiopia was the ancient version of Timbuktu. It was the last jumping off place on earth. No Jew went there if he didn't have to. To a Jew, an Ethiopian was not much better than a Samaritan. It was just that Ethiopia was easy to avoid. You had to go out of your way to go around Samaria.

And forget about Eunuchs. Deut. 23:1 reads, "A Eunuch may not be included in the assembly of the Lord." It certainly was not very likely that anyone who became a eunuch was born a Jew. Such a one could not possibly meet the established standards for converting to the Jewish faith.

But suppose the eunuch of our text doesn't know that. Suppose the Spirit of God has hold of this eunuch and won't let go until he has gained entrance.

This morning, I would like for you to take a journey with me back in time as together we look at the world, at religion, at God from the point of view of the Eunuch...

Imagine, if you will, that you were born to parents in a poor village in Ethiopia. As you grow and become more conscious of your surroundings you really don't know you are poor because everyone around you is in the same way. In fact, from your perspective, you have great life – great that is until your 10th year. For just shy of your 11th birthday a traveling band of royal courtiers comes to town. This is a big deal. For they travel in a chariot laced with gold. They come to the center of the village and call for parents to bring their children forth. The court of the queen is seeking bright children under the age of 12 to train and educate in order to serve and advise the queen directly. You are brought, along with several of your younger brothers and sisters. Tables are set up and interesting puzzles are set before you and the other children. You are asked to solve these puzzles as quickly as you can. This is fun and you solve them all with ease much faster than anyone. Afterward you return to play with your friends. But you notice the courtiers speaking with your parents.

The next thing you know, your mother is crying and she is telling you that you have been chosen to bring great honor to your family by serving in the court of the Queen. You will be educated and will become rich. However the price is that you may never see your family again. So you are taken from the home of your parents to live in a place that is far away from anything familiar to you. And not only that but not long after you arrive, the unspeakable happens. Men come into your chambers. They hold you down. They operate on you as you lay frozen with fear. You feel the searing pain of castration and suffer a long recovery. Afterward, you are separated from all other children and educated by the finest teachers in the kingdom.

As you grow into your teens, you see boys around you mature, but you do not change in the same ways. As a result your encounters with the other males are terribly painful. They make fun of you. You are terribly lonely feeling now like your parents abandoned you and that you belong no-where.

You begin your work in the royal court of Ethiopia when you are only 16. You long to be in a family again, and even to have your own children. But you know that is impossible. Besides, you continue to be quite busy with studies that will allow you to better serve the queen and a life now laid out before you by others.

As it turns out, learning comes quite easy to you and it becomes apparent among the court tutors that you are the brightest among all of the eunuchs chosen to serve the royal court. As a result, you are given immense power at a very young age as direct advisor to the queen. You are put in charge of the royal treasury which is practically unheard of for a Eunuch so young. You are excited because you believe that perhaps this finally will help others to accept you; but it doesn't. In fact, it has the opposite Effect.

The non-eunuchs in the court respect you but they also mock you, sometimes at the same time. Both the Eunuchs and non-eunuchs alike envy your elevated status in the palace. The non-eunuchs jeer you for being less than a man. The eunuchs whisper about you and plot against you behind your back. You therefore spend most of your time alone feeling rejected and excruciatingly lonely. Your heart still longs for a connection to a home that has all but eluded you here on earth. You begin to wonder about the possibility of a heavenly home.

There is one bittersweet perk to being a royal eunuch – the ability to travel freely. It both lifts your spirits but also reminds you of your life as the consummate outsider – no matter where you go. Still, your elevated status allows you unlimited access to people from all over the world.

And this is how you first come into contact with devout Jews. You meet people from other religions, but none impresses you like the Jews. Here is a people who are often persecuted but who seem to know a God that lifts them above all that. You therefore find yourself drawn to *them* and drawn to their worship.

However, once again castration is considered an act that leaves you less than human in the eyes of everyone – especially the Jews. As an Ethiopian *and* a eunuch you are denied entrance to the temple.

But for some reason, you just keep coming back to Jerusalem and to the temple. Just being near to it is a comfort. In fact, that is where you found yourself earlier today – at a temple stall. Though forbidden to enter, this time you decided to purchase a scroll of scripture because as a royal Ethiopian officer, money is the one thing you have plenty of. The scroll you chose is from the prophet Isaiah because the place where the scroll was rolled open, you noticed, was about a man of sorrow acquainted with grief. Chills ran down your back as you read those words. It is like you were looking in a mirror.

He was like a sheep being led to the slaughter.
He was quiet, as a lamb is quiet while its wool is being cut;
he never opened his mouth.

He was shamed and was treated unfairly.
He died without children to continue his family.
His life on earth has ended.

You felt the weight of these words as you read them. You continued reading and came to chapter 56. You discovered an extraordinary promise from God to both foreigners and eunuchs. An actual promise from God to you.

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say,
“The Lord will surely separate me from His people.”
Nor let the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.”
For thus says the Lord,
“To the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths,
And choose what pleases Me,
And hold fast My covenant,
To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial,
And a name better than that of sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off. (Isaiah 56:3-5)

You are shocked and wonder now why you were denied entrance to the temple when these words from God could not be any clearer. And then you look up, and as if in a dream, there is a man suddenly standing there who has just seemingly come out of nowhere. He’s been listening as you have been reading out loud these same words over and over: “He was like a sheep being led to the slaughter. He was quiet, as a lamb is quiet while its wool is being cut;”

The stranger says, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

Not use to being directly addressed by anyone, you are suddenly awakened from your semi-trance; you forlornly reply, “I don’t have anyone teach me.” The man introduces himself as Philip, a disciple of z

Jewish rabbi named Jesus. Again, as if in a dream, he tells you that the Spirit of God led him to you. Because of your slight frame and androgynous look, most of the time the people in Jerusalem just stare and shake their heads at you. Rarely has anyone approached you and never with such familiarity. So you eagerly invite him into your chariot. You read the passage out loud again and then you ask, “About whom does the prophet say these things, about himself or about someone else?”

And then the stranger from God tells you that Isaiah was referring to Jesus – a man who had no wife and family of his own just like you, who came to establish a new all-inclusive family of faith by way of his suffering on the cross. Philip tells you further that entrance into this family of God is by way of baptism into the same baptism by which Jesus was baptized. At that very moment, the chariot is passing a stream and you know from what has been happening that this is no coincidence.

You say, “What are we waiting for? Baptize me right now.” The stranger does it and when you turn around, he is gone. But your life has been changed forever; you go home filled with joy barely able to contain yourself. You soon become a part of the newly formed church in Ethiopia. You become a leader there, and kind of father and mother to the orphaned children that your church cares for...

And now I want you to journey back with me to the present – in this room with me right now. Are you with me? If so, my question for you is, “Who are the eunuchs of today?” Who are those who by nature of their non-normative gender or non-normative race, or non-normative lifestyle or non-normative religious thinking almost always feel like the consummate outsider peeking in our windows never really feel like they are allowed to be fully in?

Robert J. Karris, is a catholic monk and author of the book, “Jesus and the Marginalized in John’s Gospel” (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990). Karris reminds us there that the Gospel of John was written out of a particular community crisis. John’s community was being threatened with expulsion from the synagogue because Jesus’ broadened view of “election” called into question the unique relationship of the Jewish people to God.

“I maintain,” writes Karris, “that the religious leaders oppose the Christians of John’s community because they perceive them as watering down the standards of election by bringing into their communion Samaritans and Galileans, the physically incapacitated, the ‘people of the land,’ people who are ignorant of the law and the language of scripture” (p105).

Karris continues: ... “the question of the nature of Jesus’ Messiahship was crucial for the evangelist and his community. Jesus was an “inclusive Messiah,” one who came for the marginalized. And being such a Messiah he caused the sacred notion of ‘election’ to totter and crash to the ground. Jesus’ followers were ‘put out of the synagogue’ for confessing Jesus as an all-embracing Messiah” (p107).

Jesus may have watered down election but what he did was to pave the way for the restoration of wholeness in humanity. As long as humanity is fragmented into haves and have nots, the deserving and the undeserving, heterosexuals and all the rest, Anglos and people of color, the good and the evil, we remain broken individually.

Jesus therefore is symbol, not of a warrior leading the chosen to victory, but of a humble servant God willing to die so that all may find that empowering link to God.

The great poet Maya Angelou once said, “Of all the needs a lonely child has, the one that *must* be satisfied if there is going to be a hope of wholeness is the unshaking need for an unshakable God. Maya Angelou, as quoted in *Emerging Trends*, June 1997, 3.

In what ways are we going out of our way to meet such deep needs in those that are quite frankly just not good church material? And what might we be missing out on because we aren't?

Consider this. When Mahatma Gandhi was a young man, he was a student in South Africa. He was fascinated by the words of Jesus. So he presented himself at the door of the Anglican Church in Johannesburg as an inquirer.

He was promptly told that people of color were not welcome in their church. As an Indian, he would be considered in the same category as the black South Africans. For the rest of his life, Gandhi never attempted to enter a church again for the purpose of being taught. Rev. E. Stanley Jones, missionary to India, became a friend of Gandhi's and reported him saying once, “You Christians really have someone in Jesus, but you do not know it, and you do not use His power (of inclusion) that is available to you to bring people of every kind together .”

What if Gandhi had been allowed entrance into that church? What did we Christians miss out on because of it?

What Gandhi recognized is that the entrance into God's heavenly family is right here among us at Trinity. There are people out there who are yearning to be a part of it. Wait. Listen. If you listen very carefully, you can hear them like Philip heard the Ethiopian Eunuch. They are reading; they are searching; they are knocking hard at heaven's door.

Catholic monk Rich Rohr knows that we have a very hard time opening our ears to hear. He says, “The ego does not know how to receive things freely or without logic. It prefers a worldview of scarcity, or at least *quid pro quo*, where only the clever win. It likes to be worthy and needs to understand in order to be able to accept things. That problem, and its overcoming, is at the very center of the gospel plot line. It has always been overcome from God's side. The only problem is getting us in on the process! Full inclusion of us all is the greatest testimony to God's humility, mercy and love.” Richard Rohr, adapted from *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality* (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2007), 155-57.

And what does it take to live out this vision of full inclusivity? The full acceptance of everyone. *Everyone*. Living in the footsteps of Jesus requires of us an awareness of our links with all living things. Living with a whole heart that seeks to include everyone requires of us an appreciation for each moment and for all the wonders of creation that conspired together to give *this* moment to us. We can't do that if there is some part of life, some part of ourselves, some part of humanity that we are denying access to the creator because we think it is not worth the trouble. It is only when we see that we are all one body, that we are freed to live now, *before* death connected profoundly with every living person. Bryan Travis Hooper, “Mysterious inclusion,” January 5, 2003, *Washington Square United Methodist Church Web Site*, wsumc.org.

I end this morning with these words from the late Bishop, Desmond Tutu: “All over this magnificent world, God calls us to extend his kingdom of shalom-peace and wholeness – of justice, of goodness, of compassion, of caring, of sharing, of laughter, of joy, of reconciliation. God is transfiguring the world right this very moment *through us* because God *believes* in us and because God *loves* us. What can separate us from the love of God? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And as we share God's love with our

brothers and sisters, God's other children, there is no tyrant who can resist us, no opposition that cannot be ended, no hunger that cannot be fed, no wound that cannot be healed, no hatred that cannot be turned into love, no dream that cannot be fulfilled. Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (Doubleday, 2004).

Let us pray. Gracious God, we are recipients of your grace and love. For this our lives have been changed for the better. We cannot imagine what we would do without our connection to you and your church. Unfortunately we act as if this means we have arrived and can rest on our laurels. Show us the difference between what it might mean for us to understand the church as more than just a place of personal emotional and spiritual security. Help us to understand it also as a risky crucible of human wholeness – a wholeness that cannot be reached without all of the missing human parts – and that it is our calling to seek those and bring them to the pot even though that very act will surely upset the security now enjoy.

And we pray that you will use these gifts to help connect the deep search for God that is going out there with the Christ we have surely found in here. We pray in his name, Amen.