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Acts 8:26-40

Living Together: Open Arms

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Acts 8:26-40 Common English Bible

An angel from the Lord spoke to Philip, “At noon, take the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a desert road.) 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. (Candace is the title given to the Ethiopian queen.) He was reading the prophet Isaiah while sitting in his carriage. The Spirit told Philip, “Approach this carriage and stay with it.” Running up to the carriage, Philip heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you really understand what you are reading?” The man replied, “Without someone to guide me, how could I?” Then he invited Philip to climb up and sit with him. 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. 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? The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, about whom does the prophet say this? Is he talking about himself or someone else?” Starting with that passage, Philip proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him. As they went down the road, they came to some water. The eunuch said, “Look! Water! What would keep me from being baptized?” He ordered that the carriage halt. Both Philip and the eunuch went down to the water, where Philip baptized him. 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 rejoicing. Philip found himself in Azotus. He traveled through that area, preaching the good news in all the cities until he reached Caesarea.

For the last few weeks we have been looking at the story of the early church community from the book of Acts to learn about living together better. This was a community of people that opened themselves up to live together differently than they had lived before. Forty days after Jesus’ resurrection, Jesus ascends to heaven declaring to all who follow him that we are to “be my witnesses… to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). We are witnesses through our words, our actions, and how we live together in community with one another.

The early church teaches us that we can live together better by having greater generosity with our personal resources. Our witness as Christians is about what we do with our money. Through our generosity we help all people thrive. The early church teaches us that we can live together better by increasing our willingness to forgive others and forgive ourselves because forgiveness changes us from the inside out. The early church teaches us that we can live together better by praying more for others and praying more for ourselves and as we pray always remembering that the good news of Jesus Christ of Nazareth means that we are never alone.

Today we hear a story about how God’s mercy embraces those who have been lost, pushed away, and forgotten. An Ethiopian man is traveling in his chariot after worshiping in Jerusalem. He is headed back to the queen he serves as a prominent official. He is headed back to his wealth, his power, and his particular role and context. At the same time, Philip is coming from Jerusalem where he lives, from his company of brothers and sisters in faith, when an angel came and called him elsewhere.

The Ethiopian is wealthy enough to ride in a chariot, educated enough to read Greek, devout enough to study the prophet Isaiah, and humble enough to know that he cannot understand what he is reading without help. When this scripture was written it was customary to read aloud, rather than silently. It was not until the time of Augustine who lived from 354-430 CE that silent reading developed.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Philip responds to the urging of the Holy Spirit and asks the Ethiopian man if he understands what he is reading. Do you get it? Without someone to guide me, how could I? The man invites Philip to come sit with him. Can you imagine that? Imagine a diplomat in Washington, D.C., inviting a street preacher to join him in his Lexus for a little Bible study.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is so easy for us to live in our own echo chambers that we have created. It is so easy for us to never leave our neighborhoods and only see people who look like us, and talk like us, and have similar stories to us. How much richer would our lives be if we opened ourselves up to listen and hear the stories of other people? If we could be brave enough to loosen our grasp on the worldly things that define our contexts, expectations, privilege, and realities so we could see what binds us, the love of God that claims us all and never lets us go.

This story gives me hope. The Ethiopian man was rich, he was a man of means, a person of influence in the court of the queen, and he doesn’t understand the scripture. But, he willingly opens himself to learn something new from someone else. He seems to understand a basic principle of a life lived in humility. We need guides. We need mentors and conversation partners in community. We need other voices who have heard other stories. We need other people willing to share their successes and their failures. None of us, no matter how educated or powerful or influential or smart, will be able to navigate a life of faith on our own. And I give thanks that the Ethiopian man accepted Philip without asking for his credentials. He didn’t ask where Philip went to college or if he had written any bestselling books. He didn’t ask Philip how long he had been in ministry. He asked him to share with him what he thought. He was open to learning from someone else.

Five times the writer of Acts refers to the Ethiopian man as “the eunuch.” The sexual state of this man seems to be important. In ancient times a eunuch was a castrated male servant who was trusted to perform social functions for royalty. A eunuch was seen as safe to serve among women of the royal household. The Bible says in Deuteronomy that a eunuch was not welcome in God’s assembly (23:1). They could never be a full member of a Jewish worshipping community. But the Ethiopian man was reading Isaiah and in Isaiah it says God will “recover the remnant that is left of his people … from Ethiopia” (11:11), and that “eunuchs who keep my sabbaths” will be welcome in the house of God and will receive “a name better than sons and daughters” (56:4-5). So which is it? Deuteronomy or Isaiah? In or out? Welcome in the household of God or not? And welcome in the household of God? In the back pew? In the balcony? In a special room for people who are different? The Ethiopian man needs someone to guide him who not only knows Scripture but also knows the God of Scripture. He needs someone to teach him who has felt the embrace of God, who can read the words on the page in the light of God’s Spirit.

I love the Ethiopian’s man question to Philip about what he is reading in Isaiah that day, about whom does the prophet say this? Is this passage of Scripture talking about me or someone else? Is this only about Isaiah and his situation, or is this passage about me as well? Is this a word from God for someone else, or is this God’s word for me, today? Philip tells him that not only does the scripture have to do with him, but also with Jesus who was like a sleep led to the slaughter and who was himself humiliated and denied justice. The eunuch sees that his personal story is tied to Jesus’ story of redemption, restoration, and hope because of the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

There are some folks in this place who have heard from the larger Christian Church and the larger Methodist Church that there is no love for you here. The Christian tent is not big enough unless you change to fit in it. Change your sexuality, change your personality, change your doubting, your addictive patterns, your story, your brokenness. And if you can’t, then just pretend. And yet here you are.[[3]](#footnote-3) We hear the Ethiopian man say, “Look! Water! What would keep me from being baptized?” What would keep someone with the wrong personality or the wrong socioeconomic status or the wrong gender or the wrong immigration status or the wrong politics to fit under God’s tent?

Philip assures the Ethiopian man that there is nothing preventing him from baptism. There is nothing about him that would keep him from being a full participant in the people of God. When Philip baptizes the Ethiopian man, walls of prejudice and prohibition that had stood for generations came tumbling down, blown down by the breath of God’s Holy Spirit, and another man who felt lost and humiliated was found and restored in the wideness of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. We don’t get to decide who is welcome because God welcomes us all as friends.[[4]](#footnote-4)

We celebrate Communion in the Methodist Church as an open table. All are welcome. We come to the table with those we love and those we distrust. We come whether or not we feel worthy. God makes us worthy in the invitation. “There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). The Ethiopian man was not able to worship in the temple, and yet here he is reading Isaiah that says that all nations, all peoples, will worship together. How can his faith tradition tell him one thing, but when he reads the books of that faith tradition it tells him that there is hope, freedom, and inclusion?

Philip shares with the Ethiopian that God is always moving toward greater inclusion. The family of God is always getting bigger. And if being a Christian doesn’t make you more compassionate, then I think that you might be doing it wrong. There are many people who need to hear about God’s love. If we aren’t speaking God’s love, the people who are wondering if God loves them are going to be stuck listening to someone who wants to claim God is about hate, prejudice, or exclusion. Living together better begins with open arms, it begins with love. As the Methodist slogan says, “Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors.” The Ethiopian man went on his way rejoicing, may we leave this place rejoicing because we know, with certainty, we are loved. Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. Baker-Fletcher, Karen. Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 2. P. 454. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Taylor, Barbara Brown. Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 2. P. 457. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber. https://queermergent.wordpress.com/2009/06/08/sermon-on-phillip-and-the-ethiopian-eunuch/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber. https://queermergent.wordpress.com/2009/06/08/sermon-on-phillip-and-the-ethiopian-eunuch/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)