

2018 04 29 – Philip & the Eunuch

Acts 8:26-40

The story of Philip and the Eunuch is found in a book of the Bible called *The Acts of the Apostles*, or more concisely, *Acts*. This book tells the story of what happened to Jesus' followers after his death and resurrection. At first the apostles stayed in Jerusalem and built a large faith community in that city. But then they began to spread out. Philip went to Samaria where he healed the sick, preached the good news and baptized those who believed. Philip had just arrived back in Jerusalem when he was visited by an angel. The angel told him that he needed to be on the road to Gaza at noon the next day.

It was on that desert road that Philip met an Ethiopian eunuch. In those days the term "Ethiopian" referred to anyone with dark skin, particularly to people who lived in countries south of Egypt. So this man was a long way from home. He was also a eunuch. He had probably been castrated at a young age and then groomed to work in the Queen's court. He was obviously intelligent and dedicated since he was now in charge of the Queen's entire treasury.

This Ethiopian eunuch had travelled to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage. He had come to worship the God of the Jews. When Philip met him on the road the eunuch was sitting in his carriage reading from the book of Isaiah. When Philip asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The eunuch replied, "How can

"I unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to join him in the carriage and they read the scripture together.

It is a confusing scripture passage because it sounds like Isaiah is talking about the humiliation and eventual death of one person. It includes lines like: "You are like a sheep being led to slaughter... you have no one to defend you.. your life on earth has been cut short." But, in actual fact, the author is talking about the Israelite people. He is lamenting the exile of the Israelites from their beloved Jerusalem and comparing that exile to death itself.

Philip was Jewish and would have known the history of his people. He would have understood what Isaiah was referring to, but he also recognized how closely these verses paralleled the story of Jesus' death. So Philip took the opportunity to talk about the life and the teachings of his mentor, Jesus. He shared the good news of God's promise of peace and justice. He talked about what it meant to be baptized.

Obviously, Philip's words were convincing. He must have touched his companion's heart and mind because further along that desert road they, miraculously, came across a pool of water and the eunuch said, "Is there anything to keep me from being baptized?"

"Is there anything to keep me from being baptized?"

Philip had to make a quick decision. He could easily have said, "Well, yeah... there are lots of reasons. Let me list them for you." You see, the Jewish faith had rules. One obvious barrier was that a man who had been castrated could not be included in their faith community. This was clearly written in the laws of Moses. Second, they had lots of laws about what you could wear and what you could eat. This man was from a totally different culture... no doubt his clothes and his eating habits were outside the norm. Not to mention the fact that he had dark skin. He was obviously was not an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham and Jacob. He was a foreigner, an alien, an outsider. Finally this Ethiopian eunuch didn't know their scriptures, their songs, their traditions. He wouldn't know what to do in their synagogues and their temples. How could someone like this be allowed to be baptized, to belong to their faith community?

But Philip was silent. None of these barriers to belonging seemed to matter to him. Instead, the carriage stopped and Philip and the eunuch both went down into the water and Philip baptized him.

This is an amazing story that illustrates the growing openness of that earliest community of Jesus' followers. They started out as a group of Jewish apostles but they knew that Jesus' message was not just for them. They realized that the good news of God's promise of peace and justice was a gift that to be shared with the world. They understood that the good news was for everyone.

Isn't it incredible that nearly two thousand years later we are still trying to live out this vision of God's community. Here we are in 2018 still trying to understand

what it means to be a truly open faith community. It was just a year ago that our Affirming Ministry Committee introduced their vision to our congregation. In the Affirming Intro document the committee wrote:

It's not our place to welcome anyone because church is not a private club and we are not the gatekeepers. In the church, by God's grace, everyone ... is already included in the celebration.

Over the past year we have explored what it means to be open. We have talked about differing abilities, oppression, privilege and racism. We are one year into a process that usually takes two or even three years. So I thought this would be a good time for us to check in with ourselves and see how we are doing with this Affirming Ministry process

I am going to read a welcome statement. This is the kind of welcome statement that we might offer if we were to become an Affirming Ministry. As I read the statement, I want you to notice what thoughts and feeling arise for you. Think about what the statement means, what our congregation would be like if we truly reflected all the diversity that is mentioned in this statement. Think about how that would that make you feel? Notice what come up for you. There are no right or wrong thoughts or feelings... just notice what is real for you.

I want to welcome you to First United Church this morning. I'd like to welcome those of you who came from a distance to be here, and also welcome those who live nearby. Welcome to the youngest among you. Welcome to the children and youth. Welcome to those of you in your

twenties, and in your thirties, your forties and your fifties, your sixties, seventies, eighties and even nineties! Welcome if this is your first time here and welcome if you've attended First United all your life.

I'd like to welcome you if you are First Nations, Metis or Inuit, if your ancestors immigrated to this country in the last couple of centuries and if you are a newcomer to this land.

Welcome to those of you who are female and to the males and welcome to you if the usual gender categories don't work for you. Welcome if you have a lot of schooling in your background and welcome if you haven't done much with school. Welcome to the lesbians here and the gay men and bisexuals and queers and those whose sexuality doesn't label easily and welcome also to the heterosexuals.

I'd like to welcome those with hidden disabilities as well as those whose disabilities are apparent. Welcome to those with limited income and those who are wealthy. There's a lot of diversity here and I'd like to welcome those parts of ourselves which might show up in today's service: the sad parts, the cheerful parts, the anger and despair, the hopefulness, the silliness and the solemn parts – we can be ourselves here.

And finally I'd like to acknowledge the fact that we are meeting on Treaty Four land and welcome the ancestors who lived on the part of the prairies that we now call home. Welcome.

Take a minute or so to think about what came up for you as you listened to that welcome. Again know there are no right or wrong thoughts or feelings. In a moment I am going to invite you share what you are comfortable sharing with the person beside you. But first, just a few moments to gather your own thoughts. *(give them 30 seconds on their own and then 4 minutes in dyads)* Now is there any part of your conversations that you would like to share with the congregation? *(leave time for sharing)*

I just want to say thank you and invite the choir to share their gift of music with us.