
BELIEVING AND BELONGING

ACTS 8:26-40

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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In our first lesson read this morning we met a disciple named Phillip. We have been journeying through Acts a few weeks now and some may be thinking that the name sounds familiar. Phillip was one of the men chosen by the apostles to work in the service of food to the widows. Yet when we get to Acts 8 we see Phillip has clearly gone beyond the responsibilities of his job description. He teaches and preaches in Samaria and when we arrive at the end of Acts 8, the Lord is instructing him to journey even further into the wilderness to do divine work. I'm not sure if they had alleys in this community but I would imagine this kind of assignment felt very similar to being sent to the alley. Travel was not the luxurious enterprise that we know it as today, but it was indeed risky business as our Gospel text highlights today. One ran the risk of being taken advantage of and left for dead when they dared to travel isolated places alone. An angel appears to Phillip and tells him to take the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza. All we are told is that God told him to go, and he went. As he is traveling this road there is an Ethiopian man who is also traveling. This man is headed home and leaving Jerusalem which the Bible lets us know is where he had gone to worship. We are told where this man is going, and we are also told what he is doing as he travels. He is reading the prophet Isaiah while seated in his carriage. It is through the prompting and the pull of the Holy Spirit that we witness two very different men encounter each other on the same journey.

This man that Phillip encountered has been a subject of inquiry and debate since he appeared on the scene. It's very simple but also very profound that Luke reveals all aspects of his identity and not just a few qualifying factors. Luke does not just identify this person as an Ethiopian man although that alone would have been significant. He does not only name him as a court official although that alone would have been significant. He doesn't only call him a eunuch although that alone would have sent a message, but he takes the time to recognize him as all three. Here in this one body are a plethora of stories. He is a court official of the queen of Ethiopia. A financially secure treasurer in the administration of a black female leader. He is traveling in a chariot that belongs to him which would be the ancient symbol of status or power. He is literate and he also owns his own copy of the text, which at that time owning the biblical scroll was quite expensive. Since he is sitting in his chariot and reading, he likely has his own chauffeur. He is one of high social esteem politically, publicly, and we can even assume financially in the nation state yet even with his status, even with his financial security, even with his proximity to the most powerful HE IS ALSO a eunuch. While some argue that the word eunuch was just another word for high officials, many would come to know the word eunuch as a man who had been castrated. We don't know whether he was born this way or whether he was made this way but since he is a court official, we can assume the latter. Usually when men who were enslaved or without power were appointed roles within the royal court, they were made infertile so that they could not impregnate anyone in the royal court and tamper with the purity of the royal bloodline. Here in scripture, we see a vulnerable man who has had decisions made about his body by those who do not have to live with its consequences. He has had choices made about him, yet no one consulted him and this is the type of person that the Spirit sends Phillip to encounter. As a eunuch even with his proximity to the Queen he had to live with restrictions in his religious community. Eunuchs were men but not quite men in the eyes of society so he could not enter certain parts of the temple. Yet even when he is not allowed full inclusion in his community, scripture tells us that he went to Jerusalem to worship anyway. He made the decision to show up and be present in a faith community even when his identity hindered his full acceptance by the community. Luke wants us to know that he is Ethiopian, he is a court official, and he is a eunuch. His professional status does not cancel out his marginal identity. We cannot only claim certain parts of who he is while overlooking or casting aside other parts. We cannot pull out the pieces of his story that feel the safest and most appropriate to us while laying aside the parts that are complicated and complex but if we are going to remember him, we must remember ALL of him. In a world wrestling with bodily autonomy, it would do us well to remember the Ethiopian eunuch. We must remember the blackness of his skin. We must remember the complications of his labor. We must remember the choices made about his body. We must remember the complexity of his gender identity.

That is the difficulty of honoring the diversity of God's creation. Yesterday, I had the privilege of being at the Pauli Murray Center here in Durham. It really made me think about how historical figures like Pauli lived at the intersections of so many identities and yet their legacy is often robbed of its complexity. Some choose to emphasize Pauli's blackness while ignoring their gender identity. Some choose to emphasize Pauli's religious identity as a priest while neglecting their artistic genius as a poet. Some choose to emphasize Pauli's assumed queerness while neglecting to talk about their blackness. Yet the center is committed to reclaiming who Pauli was holistically. So many times, we become frustrated when we can't clearly categorize people. When we can't place them into clean cut boxes and label them as completely this or only that. We are often tempted to only parse out the parts of someone's story that feel comfortable to us while ignoring the parts that make us uncomfortable. So many times, we become perplexed when people's narratives are complex and how they show up in the world doesn't fit the misconceptions and stereotypes that we haven't unlearned. Often we are so comfortable living and thinking in binaries such as male or female, ugly or pretty, up or down, black or white, that it's hard to realize that there are some people who confidently live in the gray, but the work of the Spirit leads us to see the complexity in human identity. The spirit pushes us to see people from places like Ethiopia as people with rich histories of resources and resilience even when the American narrative would paint them as destitute. The spirit pushes us to see that people can be both faithful worshippers and sexual minorities, even when our churches have taught us to see evil in certain sexualities. And when the spirit brings us to the complexity of human identity, our job as disciples is to love people fully and to love them unconditionally. To love them unconditionally in all of their complexity. To love them unconditionally in all of their ambiguity. To love them unconditionally in the complicatedness of their story. Recognizing that even when who they are pushes against my limited understanding that they are fully loved, fully valued, and fully cared for in the eyes of an all seeing, all-knowing, and all-embracing God!

So this Ethiopian eunuch was seated in his chariot and reading the prophet Isaiah. It is at this moment when Phillip sees the man that the Spirit gives him his next step. The Spirit tells him to go over to the chariot and join it. Some translations say catch up with the chariot and climb on it. The Spirit tells Phillip to chase after the chariot, to catch up with it. This text runs so contrary to what many teach about the relationship between God and people. We are taught that we need to find God. We are taught that we need to chase after God. We are taught that we need to change this or shift that in order to pursue a relationship with God but in this text, we see an Ethiopian eunuch who traveled to worship God and, on the way back through the desert, God sent somebody to catch up with him. Even as he was in pursuit of God, God was also in pursuit of him. While he was faithful in his journey towards God, God was also faithful in sending the spirit towards him! It was a mutual seeking, a mutual journeying towards, a mutual drawing near to each other. It's good to know that in our spiritual formation, God does not leave us to do all the work alone. It is not solely our work to chase after God. It is not solely our job to pursue a relationship with God. But the incarnation of Jesus and the impartation of the Spirit is always a reminder that even in our humanity when we struggle to feel near to the presence of God, God knows how to draw near and bring God's presence to us. Even in desert locations, even in wilderness experiences, even as we journey through the places that feel forsaken by the world, we must always remember that we are right within the reach of God.

When Phillip arrives at the chariot he hears the Ethiopian eunuch reading the scriptures and asks him what can seem like an inappropriate question. *Do you understand what you are reading?* He brings into question his comprehension, his competency, and his capacity. The Ethiopian eunuch, a man of power and position, responds humbly saying How can I, unless someone guides me? It is here that the Ethiopian eunuch invites Phillip to sit beside him and they begin to deliberate about the text together. Here they are two different men, from two different worlds, traveling the same road and reflecting on the same text. What would happen in our world if we made a conscious effort to not read the words of our sacred texts in our own echo chambers. We need the reflections from the margins. We need to be reading sacred texts in sacred communities. The story of God's people is meant to be read together.

And although the Ethiopian eunuch responds humbly to Phillip, I hope that as a Greek man, Phillip recognized the privilege in his question. This question "Do you understand what you are reading?" is also about accessibility and power. New Testament scholar Dr. Mitzi Smith argues that the Ethiopian eunuch was likely

reading the translation of the text in Greek although Greek was likely not his native language but his second language. The reason why he probably acknowledged his need for someone to guide him so quickly is because he was forced to read the scriptures in a language other than his own. Unlike the day of Pentecost where the Spirit encounters people in their own languages and their native tongues, here we see a man who in order to comprehend the scriptures he must not only master his native tongue, but he must also learn how to assimilate to the language of the dominant culture. A big reason why Philip was able to be the guide and the instructor in this story is because the text was already written in Philip's primary language.

I remember one of my former coworkers telling me Racquel you don't recognize how much of a privilege it is when people all over the world will adjust to your tongue, but you never have to completely adjust to someone else's. Instead of Philip only questioning the Ethiopian eunuch's ability to comprehend, I also hope Philip recognized the language barriers that this Ethiopian eunuch likely had to overcome every day. So many who sit at the margins of our world and our society have to learn how to adjust their life to the languages, the rules of engagement, the customs, and the practices of the dominant culture. They have to learn how to speak another language in addition to their native tongue in order to secure jobs and to excel in school. They have to learn how to code switch when they enter professional environments. They have to learn how to master standardized testing that was not created by people who look like them. They have to struggle to get around on college campuses and in public facilities that were not created for people who are differently abled. They have to learn how to adjust to another way of moving in the world because so many textbooks, so many institutions, so many laws and so many practices were created and upheld without their culture, their disability, their identity, or their community in mind. Those of us in positions of privilege, must not only offer help to those on the margins but we must also recognize the barriers that many of them have to overcome in a world that was not built with them in mind.

So as they read this passage from Isaiah about a sheep being led to the slaughter and a lamb silent before its shearer. As they deliberate these words about a figure who was denied justice and humiliated by society. As they reflect on one who was denied a biological lineage because his life was taken away from him, the Ethiopian eunuch gets curious and wants to know who this person is. Is the prophet talking about himself or somebody else and Philip used this scripture to talk about the good news of Jesus Christ. This eunuch was not curious about a wealthy figure. He was not curious about someone with status. He was not curious about someone with fame. He was not curious about someone with popularity, but he says this person that knows something about humiliation. This person who knows something about what it means to be mistreated. This person who knows what it feels like to not have agency over your body. This person is who I want to know more about. This person is whom I'm drawn to. This person is someone that I as the outsider and the outcast can relate to. Now I received good training at our divinity school, and I know that we can't read Jesus back into the Old Testament. It's likely that this passage in Isaiah is more about a nation and a people rather than an individual person, but it bears some reflection that it was this text that opened the door for Phillip to talk about Jesus. In a world where the scriptures have been weaponized to hurt and harm people. In a world where so many put their own biases, their own beliefs, and their own standards into the mouth of Jesus. In a world where so many place their own patriotic values and partisan ideals onto the life of Jesus it is important that we really remember Jesus for who Jesus was. Jesus didn't just do ministry to the oppressed, but Jesus was born and lived among the oppressed. Jesus didn't just care about minorities, but Jesus was a minority under the control of an imperial government. Jesus didn't just reach out to the outsider and the outcast, but Jesus experienced life as an outsider and an outcast. When the words of scripture and the teachings of Jesus live up to their fullest potential they will always point to a Savior and a redeemer who knows what it means to be mistreated, who knows what it feels like to be left out, who understands what it is to be disregarded and who ALWAYS chooses to walk beside the very people that the world tries to put to shame. No wonder the songwriter said Jesus KNOWS all about our troubles not just because Jesus read about them in a book or saw them on a headline or listened to a podcast, but Jesus KNOWS about the trouble of the oppressed because Jesus was disregarded by the world too.

Phillip proclaimed the good news, and they kept traveling. They keep journeying together and pretty soon they encounter some water, and the Ethiopian eunuch speaks for the last time in this story. He turns to Phillip in excitement and says "Look, here is water!" Then he puts the ball in Phillip's court and asked the question "what

would keep me from being baptized?” His last words are a question. I was reminded of the words of indigenous scholar Tink Tinker who said *“theology moves forward when great questions arise.”* I would argue that this was the kind of question that would push the theology of this early movement called “The Way” forward. Some have made his question about the location and the context of the water. He was asking if desert water was appropriate for such a sacred act. If desert water was pure enough for such a holy ritual. Many would say he should have waited until he was back home in Ethiopia or until he had the opportunity to go back to Jerusalem, but the Ethiopian eunuch said why wait if there is water right here and right now. But the more I read it I began to wonder what if his question was less about the appropriateness of the water and more about his need for the affirmation that his body was worthy enough to step in it. Both he and Phillip would know what has kept him from full inclusion in the temple. Both he and Phillip would know what the book of the law has said that people like him can never be a part of God’s assembly. Both he and Phillip would know something about the way this man has been labeled and mistreated in society and now this man is asking can my body that has not felt appropriate, that has not felt accepted, and that has not felt acknowledged in other places be deemed as worthy enough for a ritual like this. We can’t blame his question completely on the water. The water is good. The water is decent. The water is fine but what is often tainted are the ideas about who has the right to step into the waters! This Ethiopian eunuch was saying Phillip I know what you believe about Jesus but now I’m asking what you believe about ME?! So many of us struggle when we have to put our actions towards people in alignment with our confessions about Jesus. We feel a bit uneasy when we have to back up what we profess with the risks we are willing to take on behalf of radical LOVE. YET In Spite of all the social scripts that told Phillip that this man did not belong. In Spite of all the norms and customs that Phillip had been taught about people like him. In Spite of all the ways that the culture had conditioned Phillip to restrict people like him and keep him at bay the bible tells us that Phillip’s response to this Ethiopian eunuch’s question was to go with him down into the water so that he could indeed be baptized. Phillip’s response was I’m not just going to tell you that you belong in the water but I’m going to show you that I belong in the water with you. In all of your fullness, in all of your identity, in all of your complexity this ritual can hold your body too! Not only am I here to tell you what to believe but today I’m using my body to show you that you belong!

Perhaps there is somebody listening today who is asking the same question and in need of the same affirmation. Somebody who has felt ridiculed because they are different. Somebody who has felt like they couldn’t fully be a part of the life of the church because of who they are. Somebody who has felt pushed out of their faith community because of who they love. Somebody who has felt isolated and alone because of the color of their skin. Somebody who has wondered if they were worthy enough to be loved by God and to belong to the family of God because of the choices they had to make. If you are asking the question, what would keep me from being baptized? What would keep me from belonging to God? What would put me outside of God’s love? What would hinder me from being a part of God’s family? **Well, we can certainly get into the details later but this morning, I refuse to get into a weighty debate or offer a long drawn out answer but what I can say is that water is fine and beloved so are you!** In all of your mystery, in all of your complexity, in all of your identity, in all of your imperfections, in all of your blemishes the love of Christ, the grace of God, and the waters of God’s Spirit can HOLD your story too! I grew up in a little old Baptist church way out in the country in South Carolina and every week without fail somebody from the congregation would stand up and sing **JUST AS I AM WITHOUT ONE PLEA. BUT THAT THY BLOOD WAS SHED FOR ME. AND THAT THOU BIDST ME COME TO THEE OH LAMB OF GOD I COME! I COME!** For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the LOVE OF God which is in Christ Jesus. Beloved, welcome to the family! Welcome to the family! Let us tell you what we believe but also let us show you that HERE you will always BELONG! Amen.