

Acts 8:26-40

26 An angel from the Lord spoke to Philip, "At noon, take the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.) 27 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.) 28 He was reading the prophet Isaiah while sitting in his carriage. 29 The Spirit told Philip, "Approach this carriage and stay with it." 30 Running up to the carriage, Philip heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you really understand what you are reading?" 31 The man replied, "Without someone to guide me, how could I?" Then he invited Philip to climb up and sit with him. 32 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. 33 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? 34 The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, about whom does the prophet say this? Is he talking about himself or someone else?" 35 Starting with that passage, Philip proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him. 36 As they went down the road, they came to some water. The eunuch said, "Look! Water! What would keep me from being baptized?" 38 He ordered that the carriage halt. Both Philip and the eunuch went down to the water, where Philip baptized him. 39 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. 40 Philip found himself in Azotus. He traveled through that area, preaching the good news in all the cities until he reached Caesarea.

Psalms 22:25-31

25 I offer praise in the great congregation because of you; I will fulfill my promises in the presence of those who honor God. 26 Let all those who are suffering eat and be full! Let all who seek the LORD praise him! I pray your hearts live forever! 27 Every part of the earth will remember and come back to the LORD; every family among all the nations will worship you. 28 Because the right to rule belongs to the LORD, he rules all nations. 29 Indeed, all the earth's powerful will worship him; all who are descending to the dust will kneel before him; my being also lives for him. 30 Future descendants will serve him; generations to come will be told about my Lord. 31 They will proclaim God's righteousness to those not yet born, telling them what God has done.

1 John 4:7-21

7 Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. 8 The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. 10 This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins. 11 Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other. 12 No one has ever seen God. If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us. 13 This is how we know we remain in him and he remains in us, because he has given us a measure of his Spirit. 14 We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the savior of the world. 15 If any of us confess that Jesus is God's Son, God remains in us and we remain in God. 16 We have known and have believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them. 17 This is how love has been perfected in us, so that we can have

confidence on the Judgment Day, because we are exactly the same as God is in this world. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love. 19 We love because God first loved us. 20 If anyone says, I love God, and hates a brother or sister, he is a liar, because the person who doesn't love a brother or sister who can be seen can't love God, who can't be seen. 21 This commandment we have from him: Those who claim to love God ought to love their brother and sister also.

John 15:1-8

1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper. 2 He removes any of my branches that don't produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit. 3 You are already trimmed because of the word I have spoken to you. 4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can't produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can't produce fruit unless you remain in me. 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can't do anything. 6 If you don't remain in me, you will be like a branch that is thrown out and dries up. Those branches are gathered up, thrown into a fire, and burned. 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified when you produce much fruit and in this way prove that you are my disciples.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

- + All Are Welcome – ELW 641
 - o Anticipatory, hopeful, idealistic vision of the church
 - o Pushes us to ask...
 - o Who is really welcome in the church? Who isn't?
- + Today's passage in Acts puts this question before us
- + Resurrection about inclusion
 - o Radical incomprehensible inclusion
 - o Seen in a eunuch's baptism
- + Phillip, one of the Twelve Disciples, representing one of the Twelve Tribes of Israel
 - o Now a traveling evangelist, spreading the good news of the resurrection he witnessed
- + Meets this Ethiopian Eunuch
 - o A wealthy, foreign slave reading Isaiah
 - o Asks Phillip for assistance interpreting the scripture
- + Like a good evangelist, Phillip shared the good news of the resurrection
 - o Jesus is the lamb who was slain
 - o Offers welcome in his life, death, and resurrection
- + Ethiopian Eunuch, inspired, ask for baptism
 - o Phillip obliges
 - o Nice ending, right? No conflict or anything...
- + The Hebrew Bible, Israel's Scripture, our Old Testament, denies eunuch's entrance into God's people
 - o Even foreign slaves were allowed to join the people of God through circumcision or marriage
 - But eunuch's couldn't bear children, so they didn't marry, nor could they be appropriately circumcised
- + Phillip, a representative of Israel, of God's people, knows this...
 - o He knew this when he shared the Gospel!
 - o He knew this when he baptized this person, this Ethiopian Eunuch
 - No exceptions. No restrictions.

- + So, was Phillip, a friend of Jesus, wrong to do so? Was this an unfaithful contradiction of Scripture?
 - o NO.
- + Phillip offers us a key method of interpreting our scriptures.
 - o Meant to testify to Jesus, to point to God.
 - o When scripture and God seem to conflict, we always err on God's side.
- + But when does scripture contradict God?
 - o Philemon's affirmation of slavery.
 - o The curse of Ham's possible denigration of African races.
 - o Paul's tendency to subjugate women
 - With each of these examples, we've looked at the example of Jesus, the weight of other scriptures, and the work of the Holy Spirit to suggest that God's inclusive promise takes precedence over these passages.
 - o BUT HOW!?!?!?
- + Ken Sparks' Sacred Word, Broken Word
 - o Written word vs. Living Word
 - John 1 – Word became flesh and dwelt among us
 - o J.C. is the living word of God to which the written word testifies.
 - o Both scripture and Jesus are, in a sense, human and divine.
 - But only Jesus is perfect.
 - o Scripture isn't God, so Scripture isn't perfect.
 - o Let's slow down, so we're clear.
 - Scripture IS special. Scripture IS holy. Scripture IS a way God speaks to us. But...
- + Scripture is God's perfect word spoken in imperfect voices. Voices of narrow perspective and prejudice. Voices of oppression and fear. Voices like yours and mine.
 - o Just as we are simultaneously sinners and saints, so scripture is simultaneously God's divinity communicated through broken humanity.
- + How, then, do we tell the difference? How did Phillip know that this baptism was not just permissible, not just ok, but was the will of God?
 - o Discern the grand arch of scripture

- From Eden in Genesis to a New Heaven and New Earth in Revelation, God is about, in Scripture's own words, the reconciliation of all things.
 - Time and again we see God's faithfulness despite our unfaithfulness.
 - We see God's embrace despite our abandonment.
 - We see Jesus heal on the Sabbath, befriend prostitutes, and defy any law that prevented human flourishing as God intended.
- + So, in that vein, along with the grand arch of scripture, Phillip embraces this Ethiopian eunuch, not abandoning Scripture, but instead trusting God at the heart of Scripture meant us for community and reconciliation rather than isolation and judgement.
 - Phillip doesn't welcome this eunuch first. God does.
 - God forces Phillip to reevaluate his interpretation of scripture.
- + When Phillip met the Ethiopian eunuch, he also met his need to interpret scripture in the light of Christ. He saw that oppression and exclusion simply couldn't stand the weight of Christ's resurrected welcome. He decided Jesus' witness of healing and wholeness, of compassion and grace, of radical love, took precedence.
- + So when we encounter people different from us, especially those that Scripture seems to exclude, we like Phillip must take our cues first from Jesus, from the living word of God. When we meet transgender people like Bruce Jenner, whose gender identities don't match their biology, we must, like Phillip, look first to Jesus' example of welcome. When we meet LGBTQ people like my friend A.J., a gay man who also happens to be a Lutheran pastor, we must, like Phillip, look to first to Jesus' example of inclusion.
- + We must ask ourselves, "Who does Jesus exclude?" Even the eunuch's banned in Israel's scripture find complete welcome in the Kingdom of God. May we, like Phillip, learn to celebrate the desires of all people to know more about God, to give thanks for all people's desires to become a part of the church!
- + And thank God for the grace that brings us all to baptism, all to this water of life, for no matter how different we are – no matter our political preferences, our racial divisions, our sexual preferences, our gender identities – that we are all part of the one Body of Christ, that we are all children in the family of God.
- + "Here the love of Christ shall end division! All are welcome. All are welcome! All are welcome in this place." That's an ideal worth dying for and worth living for. Amen.