

St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA. Easter 5, May 3, 2015. Acts 8:26-40, 1 John 4:7-21
John 15:1-8 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

I love this story of the Ethiopian Eunuch! It speaks of the way that the actions of the Spirit of God so frequently subvert our own assumptions and expectations about what is and isn't appropriate. This Ethiopian is a fascinating man! First, he was a Eunuch - neutered, if you prefer. Such a condition had significant ramifications for him when visiting Jerusalem: Jewish Law forbade him entry into the "Congregation of Israel"in other words, he couldn't become a Jew.

And even if he had been born Jewish he couldn't -as a Eunuch- remain a Jew – he wasn't "complete."

Not that his physical condition was the only thing that doomed him to exclusion from Judaism - no matter how devout he might have been. He wasn't a member of one of the 12 tribes - he was a *foreigner!*

So when he went to Jerusalem - on business for his boss, the Queen of Ethiopia - he still couldn't worship in the way he really wanted. The closest he could get to the Temple, for instance (which was the "only game in town") would have been **the Court of the Gentiles**. Think of the Temple mount as a long rectangle divided from top to bottom mid-way across by a low wall. To the right was the Court of the Gentiles. To the left the Court of the Faithful - the court of the Jews. And it was in the middle of the Court of the Faithful that the Temple stood. **The only Temple in the entire world. And he couldn't even touch its outside walls.** Yet Luke tells us that he was a devout believer - that he was spiritually a Jew.

I found myself wondering if – well, no, not if, but when – when do we act in ways that aren't hospitable? Ways that might seem to make sense to us on an intellectual level, but fail the hospitality test. For example, ask yourself "What Would Jesus Do?" about allowing a person not baptized to take communion. That's the formal position of the Episcopal Church (among others) – no baptism, no communion.

Back to the Ethiopian Eunuch: he must have left Jerusalem feeling very frustrated as he headed home, reading aloud a passage from Isaiah. **And that's where we meet him for the first time.**

And Phillip the good, hospitable Jew, Phillip who had shepherded those Greeks who wished to see Jesus so that they could have their hope fulfilled, this same Phillip overheard him and offered to provide some insight into the meaning of what the Ethiopian was reading. This interesting foreign man readily accepted, and using the text as a starting point, **Phillip explained about Jesus. Imagine what it would be like to hear that story – so familiar to us – for the first time!**

Who knows how long they rode together, but soon, on this desert road, they came to a place where there was water - an oasis, perhaps, and the Ethiopian said "Is there anything to **prevent** me from being baptized? - still used to rejection, wasn't he? He didn't say "I want to be baptized." or "Baptize me," but "is there anything to **prevent** me from being baptized."We human beings have this really amazing ability to put up road-blocks, don't we?! The Ethiopian recognized exactly that in his experience in Jerusalem.

And, too, he probably wasn't surprised, because every religion of the time had a set of requirements about who could, and could not be a participant, a follower, a disciple.

So this delightfully open man was probably quite surprised when Phillip said "No, nothing in the world!" and baptized him on the spot.

I wonder, how often do we make becoming part of a community that easy?! Because every community has spoken AND unspoken rules about how to join and who can join. Some folk come to church but never get past that unspoken, hidden line into the heart of it all. Phillip's easy response is a witness to us, and an invitation, too.

Back to the text – the whole of today's reading is really quite remarkable! It works at many levels - it's so rich, in fact, that its one of THE central stories that Luke tells.

Most obviously it's a story about the power of the Holy Spirit to transform lives. But there are other, more subtle elements.

In addition to the sharing of wisdom, there are the features of the story: deserts form a prominent backdrop to the great events of salvation history. We've already been clued to look into the Old Testament by the content of the Ethiopian's reading. This desert is supposed **to remind us of the journey from slavery into freedom**, the place where a Chosen, Partner People **could learn what it meant to be free**, and the place where the gift of **Manna** was given.

So this story talks about Freedom, learning, and a great banquet. Here are profound echoes of some of the most important moments, themes, longings in humanity's long journey.

And in that journey there are markers - reminders of truths learned. Perhaps the most powerful truth that's present in this story is that *transformation happens most frequently not when we arrive at some great destination, but on the journey – on the Way to somewhere else.* It isn't about the destination, its about the journey.

And more importantly, it's about the journey and its about how we make it together. It's very easy, of course, to see our Christian journey mostly in terms of an individual pilgrimage because it has to be that. But it cannot *only* be that. Our pilgrimage ceases to a pilgrimage if we only understand it as a personal journey, and it becomes, instead, more than a little self-indulgent. *We have to make it together* - there's no other way, we simply cannot make it alone.

And part of that journey is recognizing that *it is not some of us but all of us who are so like the Ethiopian – we are, in a very real sense, “not from here.”* We belong to God and our lives are hid with Christ, and that marks us out as different from much of the world - **in that sense we are all foreigners and aliens.**

And so we stand as equals with those we meet on the way. This is an extension of the radical hospitality of Jesus, and it has profound ramifications for the way we treat other human beings, whoever they may be. At the very least we are called to treat them with respect, just as Phillip saw the Ethiopian as an equal and so treated him with respect. Because if we are all fellow pilgrims on the way then our faith calls **us to welcome into the fellowship of all believers anyone and everyone**, including those whom organized religion wishes so often to hold at arms length..

Exclusivity is not the faith of our forebears, as Phillip's actions so eloquently testify.

And inclusivity - which is, after all, one of the central witnesses of Jesus, who sought to include everyone within the reign of God - inclusivity means not just some of us, but all of us. That's the witness of baptism - its an equal opportunity sacrament. We should not, therefore, be erecting barriers to full inclusion. There is no litmus test for becoming a Christian, nor should there be. No matter who asks the

question: "Is there anything to prevent me from being a part of this fellowship?" our answer should be that of Phillip: "No, nothing in the world"!

This is a call to discipleship for all of us. It's an invitation to be open and willing to reach out to the "foreign gentile eunuchs" who daily pass us by in their "chariots."

To be successful will require of us a willingness to meet people where they are, and not where we want them to be, and to invite them in and welcome them.

Such is the true meaning of discipleship. May it be our meaning, as we continue to celebrate Jesus' resurrection – and our own – in this Resurrection season..