

Surprising Characters

Acts 8:26-40

7th Sunday after Pentecost/ 28th July 2019

This text—the story of the Ethiopian eunuch—was one of two texts chosen by the PC(USA) the year that I took my ordination exams, back in 1989. Two texts were chosen each year, one from the Hebrew scriptures and one from the New Testament. The choice was up to me, so I went with the Acts 8 text. I had to write a comprehensive exegesis paper (about twenty pages in length). I had to demonstrate that I knew how to work with a text—historically, contextually, theologically, and pastorally. I had to show my proficiency in the use of the Greek text. And then I had to write a detailed sermon outline based on my exploration of the text. I'm happy to say that I passed. More than passed. I did well. The examiner particularly liked my sermon outline. I was commended for my “evangelical zeal.” I focused on Philip and the way he helped the eunuch come to a greater understanding of Christ, which led to his baptism.

Today, I read this text with different eyes. Instead of focusing on Philip, it's the Holy Spirit who gets my attention, the Spirit's role in the story and how the story, as a whole, tells us something profound about the nature of God—which is no less evangelical. I selected this text for our summer series on sacred stories because it's a beautiful illustration of something we are prone to forget from time to time. In the drama of God's story of redemption, within God's unfolding story of love and grace and justice, God chooses surprising characters to move the plot along. God searches after the least likely persons to be part of the story. In this story we discover something of what God desires. When I look at this story today, it's astonishing, and shocking, and comic, all at the same time.

Let's set the stage. Throughout the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit drives all the action and movement. People are hearing the good news, lives are being changed, radical visions and surprising commands are given, people are converted, transformed, healed, sent. Here, we find an official, the treasurer of the Candace, the queen of Ethiopia, riding in a chariot and reading out loud from the book (or scroll) of Isaiah. He can't drive and read at the same time, which means that someone else is driving the horses. He has a driver. And it's not a small chariot, it's large enough for at least two people (as we shall see). He's educated. He's a religious person, intellectually curious, spiritually hungry. He speaks eloquent Greek. He's on the way from Jerusalem back to Ethiopia, driving south on the Gaza road. He was probably in Jerusalem on official business for the queen, and while he was there he went to worship in the temple to the God of Abraham and Sarah. And we learn, he's a eunuch—which is not an incidental piece of information to know.

The Spirit notices that the eunuch is reading from Isaiah and needs some help interpreting the text—we all need help interpreting a text. It was customary in the ancient world to read aloud, even when alone. In Augustine's (354-430) *Confessions* (6:3), Augustine puzzles over Ambrose (d. 397), the bishop of Milan, who had a habit of silent reading, as if it were something genuinely odd. The reading and study of Torah were also audible.

So the Spirit tells Philip, “Go, catch him!” *Go, catch up to him. Run. Run along beside the chariot. Get his attention. Help him out. Catch him.* Get close to him, the Greek suggests. So, Philip goes in the name of God, because God sends him. Philip at the mercy of God, overwhelmed really by this command, goes after him. “God is overwhelming, and Philip [is about to] experience what it means to fall into the hands of a desiring God.”¹

And the fact that Philip, sent by God, as God’s representative, running on the road, looking up to him, suggests something of “God’s lowliness and boundary-transgressing love.”² For God is about to do something that God loves to do and calls God’s people to do: be transgressive, transgress boundaries, go where no one expects God to go, show up where no one expects God to be, dwell across the borders of convention and tradition.

So who was this eunuch? He’s a surprising character in the Book of Acts, a surprising character in the story of the early church. The eunuch was a treasurer, a high-ranking official of the ruling house of Ethiopia, the Candace (or Candake), a dynasty of Ethiopian queens. The eunuch had considerable power and influence. In middle eastern cultures it was common for eunuchs to hold important roles.³ We can see this in the way the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures. In the Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures, known as the Septuagint, completed around two hundred years before Christ, the Hebrew word for eunuch is translated into Greek as *dynast*, meaning someone holding office, as in Jeremiah 51:14. Both words, *eunuch* and *dynast* (court official) are used in Acts 8. He had a prominent place within Ethiopian culture or society.

Again, the eunuch is a curious soul, he’s a reader, he’s a spiritual seeker, he’s religious. He has just come from Jerusalem where he worshipped the God of Israel in the Temple. But what we need to remember is that as a Gentile he was not welcomed beyond the Court of the Gentiles. He was excluded because he was a Gentile.⁴ There’s also another reason why he would have been excluded from the assembly of God’s people: he was a eunuch. If you don’t believe me, have a look at [Deuteronomy 23:1](#).

Now watch this. The eunuch, who wasn’t a marginal figure in his own culture, was a marginal figure within Pharisaic Judaism. And what is he reading in the chariot? The story of a marginal Jew. The excluded Ethiopian eunuch is reading a passage from scripture, from Isaiah, about someone who would be cut out off from the land of the living, who would be excluded for his shame, and in shame and humiliation he will die for the sake of others. The eunuch is reading from the prophet Isaiah, words which would come to a profound influence on the early church. Here’s the text: “And he, because of his affliction, opens not his mouth: he was led as a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is dumb, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: who shall declare his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth: because of the iniquities of my people he was led to death” (Septuagint Is 53:7-8).

But if the eunuch was familiar with rest of Isaiah he would have known that despite being marginalized by the religious authorities, God had a different plan. God was creating a special place for someone like him among God’s people.

Listen to Isaiah 11:11: “On that day the LORD will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia....”

Listen to Isaiah 56:4-5: “For says the LORD: To the eunuch who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.” The eunuch will be given a place, a purpose, and a plan.

Or listen to promise given in Zephaniah 3:9-10: “At that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord. From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants, my scattered ones, shall bring my offering.”

What’s the point of all of this? Can you see, can you sense God’s desire to draw the circle of inclusion ever wider and wider? Can you see, can you sense God’s plan, God’s radically inclusive and expansive love, extending welcome, acceptance, and granting full participation into the narrative of God’s salvation? Just as the love of God was seen in a marginal, rejected body on a cross, just as we saw the body of God where no one would have thought or even dared to imagine—*on a cross!*—the place of humiliation and pain, suffering and shame, so now we find God’s presence in an unlikely place: on the chariot of eunuch! “Look, here is water,” he says, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” he asked (Acts 8:36). What prevents the eunuch’s body from being incorporated into the living body of the living Christ? *Nothing! Absolutely nothing!* And then we’re told that both Philip and the eunuch went down together into the water. The eunuch was baptized. But through this encounter with Spirit and the eunuch, Philip had his own kind of “baptism,” immersed anew into the deep world of God’s grace.

We’re given an astonishing insight here into how God moves in the world, both then and now. The eunuch is one of the first believers in Jesus, one of the few sought out by divine directive, even before Paul. God actively seeks him out. God chases after him, tells Philip to catch him. God wants the eunuch, wants the eunuch to know that he has a plan and place and purpose in God’s story of salvation, even if he’s a little different.

God loves difference. God’s not afraid of difference. Difference is all over this story. Difference marked by being from Ethiopia, the end of the known world; difference marked by his blackness, which is implicit in the story. And difference marked by his sexuality, neither unambiguously male or female. Theologian Willie James Jennings, who teaches at Yale Divinity School, writes, “God has come for the eunuch precisely in his difference and exactly in the complexities of his life. He matters, not because he is close to worldly power and thus a more appealing pawn. He simply matters, and he is being brought close.”⁵ The Spirit is radically free to move, to call, to include, to love, to grant us true freedom. There’s so much freedom and liberation and release in this story.

Can you imagine how the eunuch must have felt? And yet, the Church throughout the centuries has done a pretty good job putting up walls and barriers that have been previously removed by the Spirit! The Spirit removes the walls and barriers, and the Church loves to put

them back or build new ones. Why are we so afraid of the freedom that we have in Christ? Jennings is correct when he says, “The church has often been too impatient and sometimes downright fearful of [its] freedom [in Jesus Christ,] choosing instead to quickly impose an image of the true, the good, and the beautiful example on those who have been made free by the Spirit.”⁶

If I’m sounding radical here, it’s not me. It’s right here in the text. This text is radical. And it continues to speak to our day as the Spirit continues to strive to tear down walls and barriers that exclude, and as the church then struggles with acceptance, welcome, hospitality, struggles with racism, and the incorporation of the marginalized in the body of Christ, as we struggle to create a safe space for all God’s children, welcoming difference and diversities of sexualities in the body of Christ. Theologian Linn Marie Tonstad argues, “Based on this story [in Acts], it is simply absurd to have debates about whether trans and gender-nonconforming people can be included in the church. They’ve been in the church all along. God made that happen.”⁷

And that’s probably why there’s so much joy in this story. The eunuch “went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:39). Joy, *chara* in Greek, is always a companion of grace, *charis*. Always. Wherever there’s grace there is joy; where there’s joy, there’s grace. Joy is always a response to God’s work of grace and love and justice in the world. This is a typically Lukan response, in the Gospel and in Acts. We go on our way rejoicing knowing that after our baptism, after being incorporated into the body of Christ, because we included in God’s redemptive story. A new journey, a new story begins for us.

The eunuch, indeed, each of us, we are, together, the surprising characters in this love story. In the drama of God’s story of redemption, within God’s unfolding story of love and grace and justice, God loves to choose surprising characters—surprising for *us*, that is, not for God. It’s been part of God’s plan from the beginning and will remain so to the end.

¹ Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 81.

² Jennings, 82.

³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 155. In particular, see *The Persian Wars* by the Greek historian Herodotus, published around 425 BCE.

⁴ The construction of a Court of the Gentiles was part of Herod’s renovation of the Temple in 20-19 BCE.

⁵ Jennings, 84.

⁶ Jennings, 88.

⁷ Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 26. “Eunuchs, in the ancient world, included a wide variety of people that now might be categorized as trans, intersex, genderqueer, or nonbinary, so their presence in several biblical passages is quite significant” (24-25). Beyond Acts 8, there’s the story of Ebed-melech, also an Ethiopian eunuch, accounted in Jeremiah 39. See also Jesus’ enigmatic statement in Matthew 19:12.