

Outside In
Sermon by Jane Stewart
New Song Church
Easter 5, Year B (RCL)
April 29, 2018
Acts 8:26-40
Psalm 22:24-30
1 John 4:7-21
John 15:1-8

Outside In

Philip, fresh off of a highly successful mission trip to Samaria, which he's now left in the capable hands of Peter and John, has a new assignment aimed at opening the circle of believers even wider as the fledgling church grows and expands after Pentecost. An angel of the Lord says to him, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." If Philip wondered why in the world he was supposed to go way out of town to a road in the wilderness, we are not told. We are simply told that he got up and went as instructed by the angel—as if he was perfectly accustomed to taking directions from angels. Traveling down the road, after miles of nothing but wilderness, he "chances" upon a chariot with a driver and a single occupant. We are given a little context and are told several key facts about the occupant: he is Ethiopian, he is a eunuch, he is a court official of the queen of Ethiopia in charge of her entire treasury. He is returning home from Jerusalem where he had gone to worship. And seated in his chariot—yes, his chariot, for he was a man of considerable wealth and influence, he is reading a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Wow, this is a wealthy man to possess his own scroll. The fact that he is reading indicates that he is also educated, probably part of his grooming for service in the queen's court.

As Philip stands gawking at this interesting and unusual sight on a wilderness road, he gets his next instruction—this one courtesy of the Spirit. “Go over to this chariot and join it.” So Philip runs up to the chariot and hears him reading from the prophet Isaiah. And he asks, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The man responds with a question of his own, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” Hospitably, the man invites Philip to join him in his chariot for a bit of bible study. Because, why not?

Now there is a bit more to be understood about this unnamed man, who Luke repeated refers to simply as “the Eunuch,” as though his sexual identity is his single most important identifying feature. Because he has been to worship in Jerusalem, we can assume that he is either Jewish or a Gentile God-fearer attracted to Judaism. Either way, his relationship to Judaism is problematic. If he is a Jew, as a castrated male, he will not be granted access to the temple. Deuteronomy 23, verse 1 makes that quite clear that no one who is sexually mutilated “shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.” The reasoning from the time of Deuteronomy was that he was a “defective” man, because he is unable to be fruitful and multiply—a defining role for a male in that society. If he is a Gentile, he will not get beyond the court of the Gentiles. “This important man, an ‘insider’ in his own context, appears to be an outsider to the faith he seeks to embrace.”ⁱ

There are New Singers, myself included, who know exactly how it feels to have been excluded from the faith we were trying to embrace. We know how devastating it is to be told that, because of our sexual or other identities we are “less than” and therefore unwelcome within the circle of God’s love as defined by some particular church. We have stood on the

outside, looking in other church's doors, doors that are decidedly closed to our pleas to be let inside to share the light and the love of Christ.

“But,” Thomas Long points out in his commentary on this text, “the eunuch is not reading Deuteronomy; he is reading Isaiah, and the prophet gives a more hopeful word. Not only does Isaiah announce that God will ‘recover the remnant that is left of his people . . . from Ethiopia’ (Isa. 11:11); he also promises that ‘eunuchs who keep my sabbaths’ will be welcome in the house of God and will receive ‘a name better than sons and daughters’ (Isa. 56:4-5).

So which is it? Deuteronomy or Isaiah? In or out? Is he welcome in the household of God, or is he not? If he has only the written words of Scripture, it could be argued either way. How can this man know what is true, how can he understand, unless someone guides him?”

Long continues, “What he needs is someone who not only knows Scripture, but also knows the God of Scripture. He needs someone to teach him who has felt the embrace of God, who can read the cold ink on the page in the warm light of God’s Spirit. He needs, as all of us do, a Philip to guide him.”ⁱⁱ

The prophet Isaiah’s words that he was reading on this particular day have made the eunuch question his assumed status of being excluded from the company of the faithful. For this is what he was reading:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

So he asks a second question of Philip, “About whom does the prophet say this, about himself, or about someone else?” Underlying his question is a much more personal one. He’s asking, “Is this a word from God for someone else, or is this God’s word *for me, today.*” As a eunuch, he knows what it is to be subjected to injustice, to be humiliated, and to be treated as an outcast by the faith community he wants to be a part of so much so that he has traveled many miles and risked the very real possibility of rejection just to stand outside the door hoping to catch a glimpse of what it might be like to be inside.

Philip, starting with the scripture from Isaiah that the eunuch had asked about, told him the good news about Jesus, who, he no doubt explained, also knew what it meant to be humiliated and treated unjustly. A good evangelist always begins from where the person is, and relates their experience and their questions to the Gospel. Philip sees this man’s heart and reaches out to him with the love of God that he himself has experienced in the person of Jesus.

Upon spotting some water, the eunuch asks his third question of Philip: “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” I would love to have the benefit of hearing his voice rather than reading these words on a page. How did he ask it?

Was he excited and confident? “I know now that God both loves and understands me and that I will be welcomed by the community of the faithful!”

Or was he anxious? Was he terrified to ask for that which he most desired, because he feared yet another rejection? “Please don’t say no, I couldn’t bear it.”

What was to prevent him from being baptized? As Thomas Long points out, “There were actually quite a few things that people could have thrown up as roadblocks to prevent this Ethiopian eunuch from being baptized. He was living in Ethiopia, for one thing, so he was cut off from the land of Israel. He was a eunuch and thus in violation of the purity code. He was a member of the cabinet of the queen of Ethiopia, therefore loyal to the wrong sovereign. He belonged to the wrong nation, held the wrong job, and possessed the wrong sexuality.

But Philip heard the voice of the Holy Spirit speak a different answer to the man’s question. ‘What is to prevent me from being baptized?’ asked the eunuch. ‘Absolutely nothing,’ whispered the Spirit. ‘Absolutely nothing.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

Of course, Acts gives us nothing of the internal dialog that may have been going on for either man, it says simply that the eunuch commanded the chariot to stop, Philip and the eunuch went down to the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came out of the water, the Spirit beamed Philip up, depositing him at Azotus, where he continued proclaiming the good news to others who had their own questions about whether they too, might be included as beneficiaries of this good news. For his part, the eunuch (who I really wish had been granted a name in this story—something other than “the eunuch”) went on his way rejoicing. Perhaps he even took Philip’s lead and shared his joy, and the good news that had been shared with him, with his friends and associates back in Ethiopia.

I wonder what new opportunities and relationships God might open for us if we are as receptive to listening for God's Spirit as Philip was and if we are as willing to be open to the unexpected. Beloved, let's try to keep our eyes, ears, and hearts open both to God's Spirit and to those who might be hanging around outside, looking in. If our welcome is genuine, perhaps they will chance making themselves vulnerable, and dare to come in.

In closing, I want to share a verbal preview of the anthem the choir will sing today:

Love is the welcome that comes from the heart
And opens the door to the stranger,
Which makes of its house a resting place for all,
For the sake of the babe in the manger.

Love is the life that responds to a call
And chooses its truth as its treasure,
And walks with the One who says, "Come and follow me,
For to show you my way is my pleasure."

Love is the table that's laid for a feast
At the meeting of sisters and brothers.
In bread that is shared and the wine that is poured out,
Is the life that was broken for others.^{iv}

Each week, at New Song, we say, "All who seek God are welcome at this table."

Let it be so.

ⁱ Paul Walaskay, from *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2, p. 457.

ⁱⁱ Thomas Long, *Ibid*, p. 456.

ⁱⁱⁱ Long, *Ibid*, p. 458.

^{iv} Text of “Love is the Welcome” is by Kathy Galloway.