

Sunday April 28th, 2024
Easter V

Acts 8:26-40

“What Vine are You Connected To?”

Tony Campolo was once asked to speak in the same program as Nobel prize winner Bishop Desmond Tutu. Before the service began, Campolo, passing the time waiting for his turn, jokingly asked the good Bishop why he wasn't a Baptist. “After all, Tony said, ‘In this country (meaning South Africa) most black people are either Baptist or Methodist.’” Bishop Tutu then told the following moving story from his life.

He said that during apartheid, when a black person met a white person on the sidewalk, the black person was expected to step off the pavement into the gutter, to allow the white person to pass, giving the white person a gesture of respect. “One day,” the bishop said, “When I was just a little boy, my mother and I were walking down the street when a tall white man, dressed in a black suit, came toward us. Before my mother and I could step off the sidewalk, as was expected of us, this man stepped off the sidewalk and, as my mother and I passed, he tipped his hat in a gesture of respect.”

The bishop said, “I was more than surprised at what happened, and I asked my mother, ‘Why did that white man do that?’” My mother explained, “He’s an Anglican priest. He’s a man of God, that’s why he did it.” “When she told me that he was an Anglican priest,” said Bishop Tutu, “I decided there and then that I wanted to be an Anglican priest too. And what’s more, I wanted to be a man of God.” (Tony Campolo-Let Me Tell You a Story, p. 160)

Stepping off the sidewalk out of respect for the bishop, and his mother, seems like such a simple gesture, but in the days of apartheid, it was anything but simple. Can I dare suggest to you that this simple gesture was radical, and clearly life changing for the Nobel winning bishop? I wasn't sure at first how to approach this scripture lesson from Acts 8. Most often the passage is used as a template for getting us to surrender fully to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

That is certainly a relevant theme out of this passage, and one of Luke's main theses is that the Holy Spirit is the power and influence behind the church's growth and expansion. However, the one element of this passage that shouts at me, and the one element that shouts from the entire book of Acts, is how radical and inclusive this evangelistic effort was. In less than a generation from the Day of Pentecost, the Gospel of Christ moves out from its Jewish roots to Samaria and then to the Gentile world. And not without its struggles.

The story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10 is a wonderful example of the inclusion of Gentiles, but what many people don't remember, is that in Acts 11 it caused a big fight in the early church. Then the Apostle Paul undergoes his conversion, and starts leading hundreds to Christ, rejecting Jewish cultural practices as he goes. Imagine the scandal that emerges by a former leading Pharisee, who declared about himself that he was “zealous for the faith of his fathers”, now does not think circumcision is necessary. Radical stuff.

People who in Jewish eyes, who used to be considered unfit for God's Kingdom, are now being welcomed in droves. The church is on a Holy Spirit driven path, to radical inclusiveness.

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It was an exciting and dangerous time, and the more inclusive the church became, the greater the opposition grew to the growth of the church. Both opposition from within, like the Judaizers Paul wrestled with, and outside from the Roman empire. Therefore, it dawned on me preparing for this week's sermon that this story from Luke 8, may be the most radically inclusive conversion story recorded in the bible. And that may be why Luke preserved it.

The story of Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch is from the get-go, kind of unbelievable; but is well within Luke's parameters of the Holy Spirit directing the church's growth. Phillip is told by an angel, to get himself out to the road between Jerusalem and Gaza, which is also called the wilderness road. There he encounters an Ethiopian official, coming back from Jerusalem after worshipping there.

The man was riding in his chariot, reading the words of Isaiah the prophet out loud, because Phillip hears him, and Phillip asks if he understands what he is reading. You might wonder whether reading out loud was odd. Reading at all was special, which indicates how educated and wealthy the man was. The scroll itself was very valuable since there were no printing presses yet, and all copies were done by hand.

Furthermore, the man read Greek, as this was likely a Greek copy and not one in his mother tongue Ethiopic. Reading out loud was the norm for anyone who could read. The idea of reading silently was not yet endorsed or practiced. Augustine in the fifth century mentions reading aloud and when people started reading silently, religious authorities thought it was the work of the devil and there is some evidence of people being burned at the stake for the effort.

The Ethiopian says he does not, because he was no one to teach him, and thus Phillip climbs in and explains that the prophet was describing Jesus. The Ethiopian comes to faith in Christ and Phillip baptizes him, and then Phillip is "snatched up by the Spirit" and ends up in Azotus.

So, beyond the miraculous elements of the story, why would I suggest that this passage is radical in its nature. Well, consider who the Holy Spirit directed Phillip to meet, in what is frankly the middle of nowhere. Don't you find it odd, the way the Ethiopian man was introduced. We are never given his name, only that he oversees the treasury of the Candace, a word that denotes the queen of Ethiopia not a formal name.

Instead of his name, Luke refers to him five times in this passage, as what? A eunuch. This fact must have been significant, don't you think, for Luke to mention it five times. Now all of us can be pretty clear about what an Ethiopian is. Phillip meeting a black man traveling from Jerusalem on his way home was not that remarkable in and of itself. So, it seems that what was significant about this man, was not his ethnicity or his position, but rather that he was a eunuch.

Perhaps we think we know what this word eunuch means, but according to scholarship on first century society, it could mean one of two things. A eunuch could be a man who was castrated intentionally or unintentionally. We understand that definition. But scholars tell us there was a second possibility that may surprise you. In many ancient texts, eunuch also designated men, who by choice, or inclination refrained from sexual contact with women.

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For example: a man who was a monk of some religious persuasion, would be considered a eunuch. Remember Jesus' words in Matthew 19:12, "For there are eunuchs who have been made so from birth, and there are those made eunuch by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." Ancient manuscripts also sometimes refer to men who show effeminate traits as eunuchs.

Daniel, of lion's den fame, and his three friends were likely castrated, and appointed to the king's household. Daniel is referred to as being very handsome and loved by the chief of the eunuch. The wording here to many scholars implies a physical attraction.

Whatever this Ethiopians status physically was, although physical castration is certainly heavily suggested; he is referred to as someone who could not or would not father children. Eunuchs were highly valued in ancient societies, as military officers, domestic servants, and as in this case, treasury officers. Without the responsibility of children, eunuchs were believed to be fiercer soldiers because they were not afraid for their own skin.

As domestic servants, because they would not fraternize with the female members of a household, and as treasury officials because there was no danger in corruption being prompted by the needs of one's offspring. It was also true that there was no danger of positions being passed down, along with accumulated wealth. The eunuch we meet today oversaw a great treasury, as Ethiopia was a very rich country at this time.

As valued as they were by rulers, eunuchs otherwise were generally shunned by society. In Deuteronomy 23 we are told that men whose genitals have been crushed, a eunuch, were forbidden to enter God's house. It is very probable that our Ethiopian friend here, would not have been admitted to even the outer court of the temple. The passage the man was reading about the Suffering Servant" was about someone cut off from "the people of God".

The same experience he most likely just had. It is also possible that he was very confused by this rejection, given his desire and devoutness to worship. Maybe he has already read Isaiah 56:3-5. *"The Lord will surely separate me from his people"; and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.' For thus says the Lord: to the eunuchs 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."*

Phillip tells the Ethiopian eunuch, that Jesus was cut off from the people of God, just as he was, but now because of Christ's death and resurrection, he was now accepted and welcomed. More than that, suddenly in the desert they come upon a body of water large enough for the Ethiopian to be baptized. "What prevents me from being baptized." Nothing. Not the man's ethnicity. Not because he was black.

And not because he was a eunuch, whatever the nature of it was for him. Even the Old Testament which excluded men like him cedes to the inclusive Christ. The Suffering Servant changes everything for everyone. The book of Acts makes it very clear that the church is called to love all of God's people in radical ways.

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It means our outreach in Christ's name is to connect with people who we might see as outside acceptable societal norms. The book of Acts, also shows us that the church of Christ is called to extend grace to the people who live on the margins, as Jesus did.

The book of Acts reminds us of whose church this is, and who is to direct its mission and outreach; namely the Holy Spirit. Even if it means going out to the middle of nowhere. The book of Acts calls on the church to continually wrestle with its theology so that we never stigmatize any group of persons. The book of Acts, from Peter's experience with Cornelius, reminds us that our aversion to others is more about our biases than theology or ethics.

Finally, the radical inclusivity described in Acts demands hospitality. Henry Nouwen in "Reaching Out" writes, "Hospitality...means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by a dividing line. It is not to lead our neighbour into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment.

It is not a method of making our God, and our way into the criteria of happiness, but the opening of an opportunity to others to find their God and their way. Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of chance for the guest to find his/her own."

The story of the Ethiopian Eunuch coming to faith and being baptized is quite relevant in light of the current discussions going on in our larger Baptist family and also in light of events that transpired in this church and local association not very long ago. Although many argue the many nuances of the debate over inclusion and acceptance, the Ethiopian Eunuch story reminds me that I do not set the rules about who gets into the Kingdom.

This story also reminds me that God's love always trumps tradition, social standards and even my theological stance. What the story does show is that God can take the simplest encounter between two people and create something life altering, and even nation altering. I say nation altering because traditionally Ethiopian Coptic Christians believe this eunuch came home and shared the Gospel and thousands came to faith leading to generations of Jesus followers.

It all comes down to Christ setting the terms of love. He demonstrated the length God went to to show his love. And love transforms everything. There is a story of a gruff and burly gunfighter with craggy facial features who lived in a frontier town. He never smiled, and he was always ready to kill anyone who crossed him. But one day the old gunfighter met a woman who took his fancy, and he began to date her.

Standing in front of her house one evening, when he was saying good night, he blurted out, "Mary, I love you." The words just seemed to pop out. There was no attempt to make those words soft or dramatic. They were simply declared as fact. Mary stood there for a while, then slowly smiled and kissed the old gunfighter on the cheek, and said, "Joe! I love you too!" Joe then simply turned and walked slowly home.

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He went up the steps of the boarding house where he lived, closed the door to his room, got down on his knees at his bedside and prayed, “Dear God! I ain’t got nothin’ against nobody...” (Let me Tell You a Story, p.67) Love does that to people, especially the love of God.

God’s love is radical. God’s love transcends everything we think is important. As the Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13, “If we do not have love, we are nothing”. If God’s love is radical, then our love needs to be radical as well. A love, radical enough to welcome with open arms anyone who seeks spiritual peace and acceptance. A love that does not put-up hurdles, or hoops to jump through but as Isaiah states, a love that makes the way straight.

Can we not learn to love as God loves? Please! Even if it makes us uncomfortable. After all there sure wasn’t any comfort for Jesus on the cross.