

Unless Someone Guides Me

sermon digest

August 22, 2010

Acts 8:26-40

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He started out waiting tables. One of the seven chosen to be the church's first deacons, he was in charge of distributing food to needy widows in the church. It was something of an honor that he was even chosen. He was, after all, Greek, something of a foreigner and outsider himself. The stoning of Stephen and the ensuing persecution of the church sent him and many in the church into far flung regions seeking safety. Fleeing to Samaria, he quickly drew attention to himself as a gifted preacher. People responded in droves, and some were healed. Back in Jerusalem, the great apostles John and Peter heard of their deacon's success and went to follow up on his accomplishments.

And then? Then it was time for his next assignment. Where might it be? He could imagine putting his feet to the road and heading north toward Caesarea. He had been successful in one city, why not another? The assignment, however: Go south! Put your feet on the road to Gaza—a road, Luke is quick to tell us, that snaked through the wilderness. It may have sounded just about as appealing in the first century as it would sound in the twenty-first. Go to Gaza? Put life and limb at risk and go to Gaza? What kind of sense did that make? Especially for one so gifted?

Clark Williamson calls the whole book of Acts a theodicy—an apology or explanation of the ways of God. Unfortunately, we tend to read the book, as we read most of scripture, completely lacking in understanding that there is anything to explain. We tend to see the story unfolding as if that were simply the way it had to unfold—as if that were the way it was meant to be. At best, we tend to read Philip's encounter with the eunuch on the road to Gaza with an eye to the growing division between Christians and Jews. We remind ourselves that the eunuch, who Luke says has been to Jerusalem to worship, could not be a full Jew. His mutilated body made him perpetually impure. If, indeed, he was a God-fearer, one seeking to worship and learn more about Israel's God, he could not do so in the temple, for he was barred entrance. Neither could a Jew, desiring to safeguard his own purity, touch him or sit at table with him.

There! We are prone to quickly conclude. There is the point of the story. The story of the eunuch is the story of one more barrier being obliterated, one more evidence of the openness of Christ and his church to all who will come. Coming to that conclusion too quickly and then tucking the story safely away, may cut us off from the genuine struggle that underlies it. It may become for us an occasion to sin—to reduce the story to little more than evidence of the superiority of *our* way over *their* way, the superiority of the church's way over that of Judaism. Feelings of superiority don't tend to serve any religion well. Feelings of superiority tend to place us above the wrestling match that our Jewish cousins see as so critical to interpreting the ways of the God who always exceeds our expectations.

Consider that Luke is describing the movement of Christ's church "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). Consider that if Luke is writing to Gentile Christians about how the gospel reached out to include them, how little comfort it would be to say to them that God had turned God's back on the Jews. Such a claim would have posed serious issues in the first century, just as it does in the twenty-first century. If God forsook God's promises to the Jews, what does that mean about God's promises to us? Can they be trusted; or may they, too, be set aside?

Luke actually inserts the story of Philip and the eunuch as something of a mystery. Rather than reading the account from our comfortable armchairs or pews, let's dwell for a few moments on the elements of mystery and in doing so, try to recover the challenge it might be issuing to us.

The story of Philip and the eunuch drops into the story of Acts out of nowhere. The eunuch believes and is baptized. He goes on his way rejoicing, and we never hear from him again. Philip is snatched away by the spirit and ends up in Caesarea, and that's pretty well the end of his story. We encounter Philip one more time when Paul comes to stay at his house (21:8-9).

If you will think for a moment, the story of Philip and the eunuch is something of a reminder of another of Luke's stories. Its similarities to Jesus' encounter with the disciples on the road to Emmaus are numerous; and that story, like this story, seems to interrupt the flow of the larger story. The encounter of strangers along a roadside, the painstaking and loving laying out of scriptures, the in breaking of understanding, and the conclusion with Eucharist in one story and baptism in the other are each reminiscent of the other. And each story, if it were lifted out of its place, would not interrupt the flow of the larger story. It wouldn't be missed in the unfolding of the plot.

Luke seems to insert the story of Philip and the eunuch for a reason. It may well be for the purpose, not of chastising the Jews, but challenging the church. It may well be, as Clark Williamson suggests, for the purpose of posing an unsettling question to the church of the first century as it does for the twenty-first century. It may be for the purpose of bringing us up short in our too easy assumptions about our purpose in mission as it poses in stark terms the question no church and no Christian should avoid: "If God is faithful to the Ethiopian eunuch, with whom are we called to keep faith?" [Clark Williamson, "The Eunuch's Evocative Question," *Encounter*, Wint-Spr 1998].

Notice, Williams urges, that when the eunuch asks his evocative question, "what is to prevent me from being baptized?," Philip does not respond with any of our concerns.

"He does not ask whether the Ethiopian is "an open and practicing eunuch" or a "don't ask, don't tell" eunuch. Nor does he qualify his response with reservations, such as: "Well, we can baptize you, but we can't ordain you," or "well, we can baptize

you, but we can't promise not to discriminate against you."

The mission of the church is not bound by society's stereotypes and prejudices. The mission of the church is as open and as inclusive as the love of God. Nothing less will do.

And notice something else. This eunuch, Luke wants to emphasize, is Ethiopian. If the story of Acts is the story of the gospel's progression "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth," where are the ends of the earth? Are they in Rome where Paul's missionary journeys end? Hardly. Far from the ends of earth, Rome in the first century world was more likely to be seen as the center of the world. From ancient times, the Greco-Roman world identified the southernmost ends of the earth with Ethiopia and speculated at great length about the exotic and honorable peoples of Ethiopia, often depicting them as wealthy, wise, pious and mighty.

Ethiopia also had its place in Jewish writings which anticipate the day when the Ethiopian people will worship God. Is it coincidental, or is Luke pointing here to something that had not as yet been realized, but was surely on the horizon? Was Luke pointing to the day when the good news of what God was doing in Christ would indeed spread to the ends of the earth—to Ethiopia, no less?

Luke, if you remember, told another story. The parable we know as the Parable of the Good Samaritan is told only in the Gospel of Luke. According to Luke, Jesus recounts the story in response to the lawyer's cynical question: "Who is my neighbor?" or put another way, "How far does my responsibility extend? Where can I draw the line?" The question of neighbor, Jesus wants to tell us, is not a question of stereotypes or geography. It is a question about *us*. It is a question about whether we will be and act like a neighbor. For whom in Christ's name will we accept responsibility? Toward whom will we act like a neighbor?

Think back for a moment to Philip's opening words on approaching the eunuch: "'Do you understand what you are reading?" And the eunuch's response, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" What Luke is presenting here is no Lone Ranger theology, no live and let live ideology. We have, I strongly believe, done well in maturing beyond an evangelism that seeks to corral everyone in the world into the Christian faith. Having come to know persons of other faiths, we have come to the realization that the God we know in Christ is already there among them; and we accept and respect the faith of our Hindu, Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters. Acceptance and respect, however, does not mean withdrawal but joining hands and cooperating in the work of alleviating the pain and suffering of the world that God loves. Far from antiquated, the church's call to the ends of the earth in this day of modern communication and travel is even more critical.

Today's "as you go" paragraph addresses the terrible suffering from the flooding in Pakistan and the efforts of Church World Service to bring relief. Even if the work of Church World Service in the midst of that terrible devastation results in absolutely no one becoming a Christian, it is nevertheless a bold and essential witness to who Christ is and who his people are. The world encounters witness everyday that the Christian faith is narrow and exclusive and full of prejudice and condemnation of those who are different. I would say to you that going into the world to reach a helping hand to hurting people without extracting a price is the clearest and most critically timely witness we can make to the God of love we profess within these walls.

Several years ago I heard the story of visitors coming across a sign nailed to a tree in a small, remote African village. The sign boldly proclaimed: "Center for World Evangelization." We smile perhaps at a self-image that seems far out of keeping with the limited resources at hand in that far-away village. We may even make assumptions about how much understanding the sign reflects of the myriad ways God works among the diverse peoples of this world. If, however, we have had even a fleeting glimpse of the reach of God's love, we will not be about the task of limiting our sense of neighbor. We will rather be about the task of growing our love and our sense of responsibility to be as inclusive and as far reaching as the love of God.

So hear me clearly. Concern that the church manifest concern and responsibility for people living on the margins of our society and concern that the church minister to the needs of hurting people halfway around the world do not mean that the church is clinging to some bygone era of Christendom. It means that the church is following its Lord. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."