

Finding Family

sermon digest

July 24, 2011

Acts 8:26-39

larry dipboye

The Jewish law clearly excluded eunuchs from full participation in Jewish religion. Without regard to cause, Deuteronomy 23:1 excluded from the congregation any male whose genitals had been mutilated. The practice of surgical mutilation was common in some neighboring cultures, most often to provide male servants to watch over the king's harem. The Book of Esther identifies such a eunuch in charge of King Ahasuerus's harem. The Jews did not engage in this cruel practice, and the rule in Deuteronomy may have been established to prevent mutilation of children. Of greater importance, the rule probably reflects the value of marriage and family in Jewish life. The law falls in context with other sexual issues, like the rape or seduction of virgins. It is followed by an exclusion of illicit children, we assume those born outside of wedlock, excluded from the congregation to the tenth generation. The law does not particularly inspire confidence in the Jewish idea of God.

In the context of a discussion of marriage and divorce, Matthew 19:12 seems to indicate a divergence from Jewish law in words attributed to Jesus: "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can." Some see this isolated statement as an apology for the celibate life of John the Baptist and Jesus. The statement probably broadens the word *eunuch* to include celibacy for the purpose of devotion to the Kingdom of God. This practice appears to have been a dimension of life in the Qumran desert community sometimes viewed as the source of John's piety that may have influenced Jesus. Like other Jewish antiquated absolutes later lost from practice, the Christian community seems to have abandoned the rejection of eunuchs or celibates from the congregation before we get to the story in Acts.

The gospel of Christ has a global reach. This raises some question about the context of the story about Philip's mission. The man identified as an "Ethiopian eunuch" and a court official in charge of the treasury of the Candace, the queen, had traveled to Jerusalem for the purpose of worship. Was he allowed into the Court where admission was limited to true Israelites? Was he a convert to Judaism required to stay outside the Temple proper but nevertheless so committed to the faith that he made pilgrimage to Jerusalem for one of the high festivals? Perhaps the reason why he was so hungry for a mentor to interpret Isaiah was the excluded status that he had experienced among conservative Jews. A more important issue is why the story made its way into Luke's account of the early church and why it appeared ahead of the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10), the first Gentile Christian. Either the Ethiopian was not considered to be a Gentile by Luke, or he had a purpose in the story that transcended even the divide between Jew and Gentile.

Luke was continuing to follow the expansion of the church based on the commission in 1:8: "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Philip had just taken the first step into Samaria. Ethiopia, a mystical nation south of Egypt and outside the bounds of the Roman Empire, was at the opposite extreme from the center in Jerusalem. An Ethiopian was anyone from a distant land beyond the scope of common knowledge. My evangelical, missionary roots have tended to limit my vision of the movement of the gospel to geography. Beyond the bounds of denomination and institutional distinction, some missiologists my Baptist tradition clumped denominations into a category of "Great Commission Churches": churches committed to spreading the gospel to the whole world, whose resources are devoted to sending out missionaries to other cultures, lands, nations, languages, and religions. Like the early church in Acts, their vision reaches beyond the center to the periphery of global existence.

Carolyn was a student at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia in the mid 1960's. The first black student admitted to Mercer was an African from Ghana, a product of Baptist missions and a step toward racial integration that focused on the mission of the church rather than the Civil Rights controversy over racial equality. If the student had been African-American, the move would not have been as acceptable to many Baptists in Georgia. Carolyn's church prepared for the arrival of the student and was ready to accept him when he presented himself for membership. There was some discussion and some opposition, but the church strongly affirmed his acceptance into membership.

The real problem came some weeks later when the student attempted to attend a worship service for students with another Baptist congregation in town. He was stopped at the door of the church and prohibited from entering.

We learned something about our Great Commission churches. Sending missionaries to Africa for the conversion of primitive pagans to Christianity was the right thing to do. Women's Missionary Union celebrated the involvement with other nations and cultures. WMU meetings were educational gatherings, not only about theology and biblical interpretation, they had something of the character of the *National Geographic Magazine*. Missions had become a window to exotic places and cultures of the world. Missionaries who spoke in our churches often brought with them items of clothing and art for display, and they told stories about strange cultures and practices from the ends of the earth. The crisis of racial integration in the U.S. brought a new perspective. Africans responding to the gospel in Africa was one thing; Africans trying to enter congregations in the U.S. were something else.

The eunuch was an Ethiopian, probably African, probably a man with black skin, without question a foreigner from a distant land. He was the last person on earth that Philip could expect to encounter on the desert road to Gaza. Furthermore, he was reading the Prophet Isaiah and had been in Jerusalem to worship with fellow Jews. An African proselyte in Africa was one thing, but an African en route from the Temple in Jerusalem was another thing altogether. If Philip had any of these thoughts, they were either kept from Luke or forgotten. Led by the Spirit, Philip responded to the man's inquiry as if he were a near neighbor. All that Philip saw apparently was an another human being in search of community and Isaiah's God.

The gospel transcends social as well as geographic boundaries. Robert Wall calls the Ethiopian eunuch a "double outcast" within Israel. Rejected as a foreigner, he was also rejected because of his sexual identity. Even on a human level, the Jewish law is outrageous. Why would God reject someone made in the divine image for conditions of birth? Infants do not choose their skin pigment, their gender, or their place of birth. They have no choice over their parents and their cultural surroundings. One might legitimately ask why the church should discriminate against anyone for any reason, but the exclusion of people based on natural conditions over which the person has absolutely no control seems ludicrous. I seriously doubt that the man was a eunuch by choice. Boys were prepared for service to the king's harem by surgical mutilation before puberty. The practice was somewhat common in ancient mid-eastern countries has been found to have existed also in ancient China. Eunuchs were often confidants of royalty and were therefore enabled to rise in power and status, but they could never quite overcome their identity as a third gender, neither male nor female.

We might assume that Philip met an isolated, lonely person on the road to Gaza. His power and wealth could not buy social acceptance. He lived daily with a sense of exclusion. He was reading Isaiah when Philip came along. Luke locates the reading in the suffering servant passage of Isaiah 53 and the question centered in the identity the one who suffered. Fred Craddock speculates that the man had been to Jerusalem to visit the Temple and had been shut out. He must have felt some identity with the suffering servant of Isaiah. Had he read further in Isaiah? Only a few verses from Isaiah 53 is the statement in Isaiah 56 that offers hope for foreigners and eunuchs:

"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. And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

Thank God, the awful practice of surgical mutilation of children is no longer common in our world, but with Matthew's statement we have to realize that there may be a broader way of understanding the meaning of the word. In defense of family, shall we ostracize from the church everyone who does not marry, or married couples who either refuse or fail to produce children, people who are born with a different physiology? Sexual aberrations do occur. Shall we punish people for conditions over which they have no control? Is it our responsibility to punish or exclude anyone?

Issues of sexual identity in the church are raging in denominations today. I was busy one afternoon

in the 1980's preparing my sermon for Sunday, when my friend and physician Claude came into the church office. He had just read an article in one of his medical journals detecting evidence that homosexuality may be more a condition of birth than choice. He declared that homosexual people have no more choice over their sexual identity and attractions than we have over gender. Claude paraded his new knowledge in my face and asked, "What are you preachers going to say about conditions of birth over which people have no control. Alcoholics and homosexuals seem to be predisposed to their situation in life. Does it need to be condemned?" That was the point when I began to take a second look at the Ethiopian eunuch.

When Philip and the Ethiopian came up out of the water of baptism, the Spirit snatched Philip away, but the eunuch went home rejoicing. He had a new perspective on faith and a new acceptance in a new family of God.