



“The Conversion of Phillip”

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April 29, 2018
John 15:1-8

I have to admit: when I was first asked to preach this week—before I gave my answer—I quickly pulled up the lectionary on my phone to check if there were any exciting texts to preach about. I suppose that is a luxury for those of us who don’t have to preach every week. But as I read through the options, none of them seemed to interest me. I was reluctant at first to tackle the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. You see, growing up, I always heard this passage interpreted as a call to evangelism. “The Conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch,” I heard it called. The story reinforced our calling to convert those who did not yet know Jesus so that they might be saved. That was not the type of sermon I was interested in preaching.

But the more I read about the eunuch, the more I realized how remarkable this story is—and how significant the character of the eunuch is. The scripture from this morning tells us that the Ethiopian Eunuch, having gone to worship in Jerusalem, returned home by way of a wilderness road reading Isaiah as he travelled. Now, I would be willing to bet that if the Eunuch was reading Isaiah, he was probably also familiar with Deuteronomy. More specifically, I imagine he was familiar with Deuteronomy 23:1. This is the law that specifically prohibits eunuchs, those who have been castrated, from the worshipping community.

Scholars tell us that Eunuchs often held high political positions because of their genital mutilation. They often served queens or a king’s harem, because they were not seen as a sexual

being—they were not a threat. Eunuchs were often castrated before puberty, giving them a distinct physical appearance, voice, and mannerisms that were considered feminine. First-century Roman society demonized eunuchs—they associated honor with masculinity and shame with femininity. Eunuchs transgressed gender binaries and were unable to fit into proper categories. They were considered profane by nature. This was further compounded by their inability to produce offspring—rendering them useless to a society that valued procreation.

And as if that wasn't enough, the Eunuch was also a foreigner. In an Empire that considered Rome to be its naval, its center—Ethiopia represents the ends of the earth, the outskirts of society. Writers of Antiquity often referred to all people with black skin as Ethiopian. Several handbooks even outline how physical features reflect moral character, depicting “Ethiopians” as cowardly.

The Ethiopian eunuch in this story is a sexual minority, a gender minority, an ethnic minority, a racial minority—the Ethiopian eunuch represents the ultimate outsider—the epitome of “otherness.” But, despite all of this, the Eunuch went to Jerusalem to worship anyway. Despite his high status as court official of the queen in his homeland, the Ethiopian Eunuch likely knew that he would be turned away by the religious establishment in Jerusalem, and yet he wanted to be part of that same community of faith that would gladly reject him.

When Philip encountered the Eunuch on the wilderness road reading from the scroll of Isaiah, he must have sensed the Eunuch's sincere desire to seek God. I imagine Philip asking himself, “Who am I to deny ministry to this person?” He could have chosen to reject this eunuch—just as

most others in his society would have. But Philip was moved instead to share the “good news about Jesus” with the Ethiopian Eunuch. And after the Eunuch heard what Philip had to teach him, he asked, “What is to keep me from being baptized?”

One author on the text writes:¹

Suddenly the question rests on Philip’s shoulders. What stands in the way of this man who is not a Jew, not one of Philip’s own, this foreigner from far away, this sexually unacceptable outcast, what is to keep him from being baptized?

Maybe Philip remembered in that moment not just Deuteronomy 23:1 prohibiting eunuchs from the community of faith, but maybe he remembered Isaiah 56:1-8 which points to a time when eunuchs and foreigners will be included in the kingdom of God, and God’s house will be “a house of prayer for all peoples.

“What is to keep me from being baptized?” asked the Ethiopian eunuch of Philip. And of all the things Philip could have said, “Tradition,” “Deuteronomy 23:1,” “We’ve never done it that way before,” “But you’re a eunuch,” “You’re an Ethiopian,” “You’re not like me,” “I’m out of my comfort zone.” Of all the things he might have said, in answer to the Eunuch’s question, the answer he gave was this: “There is nothing to keep you from being baptized.” In that moment of baptism, something wonderful happened: the law was being rewritten, social constructs and norms were being rejected, and the “outsider” was able to come in.

¹ A Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton, May 6, 2012 - <https://covnetpres.org/2012/05/philips-conversion/>

And now we see that this story has a twist. In his encounter with the Ethiopian Eunuch, Philip found his ministry, and himself, transformed. Guided by the Holy Spirit, Philip joined this person who sought to worship God despite his exclusion from the community, and because of the Eunuch's faithfulness, it was Philip himself who was converted to the faith. Perhaps, we can even consider it a mutual conversion.

In her sermon on the Ethiopian Eunuch, Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran Pastor at Denver's House of all Sinners and Saints, shares this story:²

One Sunday, a few years back, my parishioner Stuart showed up to liturgy wearing slacks and button-down shirt rather than his iconic Grease Monkey jacket and jeans. Earlier that day he had stood as godfather and baptismal sponsor for the child of his friends, a straight couple who have known Stuart for a number of years.

Apparently, after the baptism, there was a little reception back at this couple's house. To Stuart's surprise his friends got all of their guests' attention so they could say a few words about why they had chosen Stuart as their child's godparent. “

We chose you, Stuart” they said “because for most of your life you have pursued Christ and Christ's church even though as a gay man, all you've heard from the church is that ‘there is no love for you here.’”

² Sermon on Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch by Nadia Bolz-Weber - <https://queermergent.wordpress.com/2009/06/08/sermon-on-phillip-and-the-ethiopian-eunuch/>

This story is hardly the exception. For many of us, the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch is familiar and deeply personal. Often times, our desire to seek God and find belonging in a community of faith is so great that we do so even at the risk of rejection, even at the risk of vulnerability and heartbreak. In the midst of these fears, we long to ask our congregations, will you see past our “otherness” and minister to us? Will you include us fully in this community of faith? Will you allow yourselves to be converted? Will you be our Philip?

I have had the privilege of serving as a minister at Royal Lane now for nearly three years. And in that time, I have experienced more love and support than I could have hoped for from a community of faith. There are few churches—especially Baptist churches—that would hire an openly gay minister to serve on staff—or allow one to preach a Sunday sermon, for that matter. But Royal Lane lives up to its slogan—“diverse people united in Christ.” And that is just what we are—diverse people united in Christ. What this passage in Acts teaches us is something this congregation already knows: that God’s plan includes people of all types—some that we may not have expected—some that we may not feel comfortable including in our group. But we don’t get to choose who’s in and who’s out, because this is not our group, but God’s. Royal Lane is a community of faith that has constantly answered the question asked by the modern-day eunuchs sitting in our pews, “What is to keep me from being baptized?”

But, there is still work to be done. We still find the Ethiopian eunuch sitting in the back pew, afraid to open up about their gender identity, fearing they will be rejected from their community of faith if they do. We still find the Ethiopian eunuch longing for the day his church will finally talk about the systemic racism he must endure every day in our city. And we still find the Ethiopian eunuch that wonders when her congregation will help her fight to keep her

undocumented family from being deported. The story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch should remind us that it is not enough to simply answer the question “What is to keep me from being baptized?” We must follow through with action.

If we truly want to live up to our slogan, “diverse people united in Christ,” we must be a congregation that seeks justice for the marginalized. In order to do that, we must continue to ask ourselves these questions:

How will we see past the “otherness” of those our society labels outsiders?

How will we be Philip to the Ethiopian Eunuchs in our midst?