

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

6th Sunday of Easter
Year B

Duane M. Harris

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Text: Acts 8:26-40

Title: “A Place to Call Home: Always Room for One More”

I read this story years ago about two friends who were talking together. These guys knew each other for a long time. The pastor had challenged and encouraged the congregation to which one of them belonged to invite people to worship, so he asked the other to join him in worship. In response to the invitation, his friend said.

“I don’t think so. They’re all just a bunch of hypocrites.”

“Yes, that’s true. People do act like hypocrites sometimes,” the inviter replied.

“Then, why should I go to church?”

“Because there’s always room for one more.”

The longer I live and spend time in the church, the more I marvel at anyone who thinks that coming to church is about searching for perfect people who have no struggles in their lives, the perfect community where no conflict exists, where people are all agreeable and everyone believes exactly the same things and no one makes mistakes and no one slips up by saying one thing and doing another.

We all know that’s not what becoming part of a faith community like this is all about. It’s deeper than that and sometimes it’s hard, too, because there are differences among us. Often they are unspoken because we don’t want to cause conflict, but sometimes something erupts that does create conflict, and it’s then that we face the hard work of Matthew 18 in which Jesus outlines the process of working to talk through the matter in order to come to resolution which also can involve the need to forgive because sometimes people get hurt, and without forgiveness resolution is not possible.

Maybe the question is: when we know there are differences among us can we love each other enough to move through them? Another question might be: can we love and embrace someone else in spite of serious differences? Can we stay connected as the body of Christ and still allow differences?

The story from Acts this morning is a story about difference from which we may receive some insight. We have in this story a man from Ethiopia who is identified as a eunuch. Ethiopian comes from the Greek term, “Aithiops”, meaning “burnt face”. (New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible) The geography of the African continent was not then what it is today,

so the region he is from is the area along the Nile River south of Egypt. This man has been to Jerusalem to worship so he is a person of faith.

He is also a person of standing. He has a serious responsibility because he is the head of the queen's entire treasury. He is the equivalent of Jack Lew, our Secretary of the Treasury. This Ethiopian is on the queen's cabinet. So he is not a nobody.

But still he has a problem. His skin color is not the issue. Some scholars say that racism is a modern problem that wasn't part of Middle Eastern culture in Jesus' day. The problem the Ethiopian has is that he is a eunuch. That's not a term we use in every day speech in our day, but it has to do with the man's sexuality. Eunuchs were men or boys who lack reproductive organs. If not born this way, castration was involved. According to Matthew 19:12, Jesus says...

...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....”

(NRSV)

Eunuchs were altered physically whether by their own hand, by someone else's or through development in the womb. But however that alteration took place—whether it was their choice or not, it was not looked upon favorably. Deuteronomy 23:1 makes it clear that “No one [altered in this way]... shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.” They were not welcome in the Temple.

In Leviticus 21 it is also made clear that even members of the priestly clan of Aaron could not serve the Lord as a priest if one was so altered. It was considered a blemish and such a person was unfit for service to God:

²¹No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the Lord's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God. ²²He may eat the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy. ²³But he shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the Lord; I sanctify them. ²⁴Thus Moses spoke to Aaron and to his sons and to all the people of Israel.

For such a one to serve in the Temple was to profane the Temple. They were not welcome.

Thinking about this eunuch, Bruce Jenner came to mind. I wonder whether someone like him would be welcome to worship because that's who this eunuch reminds me of, someone not like most of us who may not be clear about male and female. A eunuch is something in between. It also seems interesting that the Book of Acts only refers to him as the Ethiopian court official or the queen's treasurer in the first part of the account. Throughout the rest of the account, the man is simply referred to as the eunuch which seems to emphasize his difference more than his position, as if the Word of God is focused more on the blemishes of the man, something to which we are to pay attention.

Then there's Philip who is told by the Lord to leave Samaria where he's been preaching "...the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ", performing signs of healing and freeing people from unclean spirits, baptizing many and working with Peter and John. Philip is told by a messenger of God to take the road from Jerusalem to Gaza and as he is hiking along, he sees the Ethiopian eunuch who is reading from the prophet Isaiah as he rides in his chariot. And again, Philip receives direction from the Lord through the Spirit. The direction is to hitch a ride with the eunuch. That's all God tells him to do.

Reminded me a bit of the two young men in white shirts and ties who stopped as they passed by the cottage Friday evening as I was working to lay down some mulch. They were Jehovah's Witness missionaries, and they saw someone working and so stopped to offer to help. I told Lynn later that I admired them for being willing to take a risk and talk to someone they didn't know about their faith. They weren't pushy or arrogant or rude, and though I may not align with them in many ways at least they are out there trying to listen to the Spirit and talk with people about their understanding of God's presence and power in their lives. They did so respectfully and did not push further when I gently made it clear I wasn't really ready to engage them in conversation. Still, they were young people taking a risk to share the faith as they received it.

Faithful as he is to God's direction, Philip picks up his pace and--like one trying to catch a moving train-- he runs alongside the chariot noticing that the eunuch is reading from the prophet Isaiah. Apparently the eunuch is wealthy enough to own a copy of the scroll which is quite unusual. You couldn't get online and download a copy from Amazon in those days. Couldn't even go to the bookstore and buy a paperback copy. These were handwritten texts, copied meticulously by professional scribes whose duty it was to spend their lives in the holy task of replicating sacred texts. The scribes were the copy machines, the printing presses of their day, and the eunuch owned one of their hand-written copies which meant he was a person of means. It also meant that he was a person who sought God in his life. He was someone who not only wanted to worship the Lord, but he was eager enough to know more of God that he read on his own.

Philip, running alongside the chariot and hearing him read the text aloud, asks him if he understands what he is reading. "How can I, unless someone guides me?" The eunuch was reading from Isaiah 53:

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

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In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth."

It is a text that describes Jesus' experience as he suffered humiliation and pain and was crucified. But it just may also be that the eunuch could identify with these words, too. It may be that as someone so physically altered, he, too, experienced humiliation as someone who had a blemish,

according to the Leviticus law. It may be that his search for God grew out of his experience of loneliness and rejection that he suffered as he wanted to worship God but was not allowed to enter the Temple in order to do so, according to the Deuteronomy text.

Philip is invited to get on board, and as he does so Philip--consistent with the apostle that he is--begins to tell the eunuch about the good news of God's kingdom come in Jesus Christ. We don't have the words of Philip, but I wonder if he told the story of Jesus healing people of illnesses that had plagued them throughout their lives, like the woman with a hemorrhage who simply touched his cloak and was healed. I wonder if he told the story of the woman caught in adultery who was dragged before Jesus and whose angry accusers asked Jesus whether they should stone her as the Law of Moses instructed. Jesus replied "He who is without sin cast the first stone", and then told the woman after all had dropped their stones and left them alone, "Go, and sin no more." I wonder if he told him stories of Jesus with children, vulnerable as they are to the power of adults, with Jesus telling his disciples to stop preventing children from coming to him because the kingdom of God belongs to them. Or holding up a child he taught that unless a person becomes like a child he or she cannot enter the kingdom of God. I wonder if he told the stories of Jesus eating with tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners with the religious leaders responding with angry accusations and criticisms. Did the eunuch hear the words of Jesus', "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." I wonder if he told them that though death always seemed to have the last word, with Jesus "...that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

Whatever words Philip used to share the good news of Jesus Christ, the eunuch was so inspired by them that he asked another question: "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Apparently Philip's response to that question was "absolutely nothing." There is always room for one more in God's home. They stop at some non-descript body of water and Philip baptizes him right then and there. Before the eunuch's eyes clear of the cool water running down his face, Philip is gone, off to other places as he continues to listen for the Spirit's guidance as to who was the next person with whom God would direct him to share the good news of God's kingdom come in Jesus Christ, who is always open to receiving one more.

I have a friend who serves a church in Albany, New York, who posted some reflections on his Facebook page about Philip's encounter with the eunuch. I found Jim's reflections to be thoughtful and challenging. He wrote:

Do you know someone like the Ethiopian [eunuch]? Do you know someone who feels excluded, who has some scars from encounters with the Deuteronomy church? How can you be their Philip? How can we, individually, personally, as well as together offer the same doorway to God's love?

There are texts for that as well.

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us and his

*love is perfected in us.
[1 John 4:12f]*

...But perhaps the most powerful of all is when Jesus imagines a final judgement and the criteria is whether we recognized him.

Out there, in our networks, in our families, in our community, there are people just like the Ethiopian [eunuch]. There are people wondering how to find a more vibrant, brighter life, where their gifts are celebrated. Jesus said, "I am the true vine and my Father is the vine grower". He went on to say it's up to us to bear fruit. The fruit we bear is living his vision of heaven here, a place where all are welcomed, all are loved, all are cherished. We do that by creating such a community in this church, we do it by inviting others into that community. It begins with this simple prayer: open the eyes of my heart Lord. Open the eyes of your heart and you will see, you will see what Philip did—someone hoping for an open door to God. You, we, are the door God hopes to open. (Rev. Jim Eaton)

The good news of God's kingdom known in Jesus Christ is about making it known that there is always room for one more.