

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

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[0 : 00] If you've been joining us since Easter, we've continued on in our look at the stories of Scripture, particularly the writer Luke, who wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts.

And we titled our new series, Everyone Gets to Play. But I haven't actually done a whole lot to explain why we've called it that, so I want to take a moment, kind of a 20,000 foot view, and explain why it's called Everyone Gets to Play. It's actually a phrase from the Vineyard Movement.

Vineyard is a charismatic movement in the Christian tradition where the founder of the movement came up with this phrase, everyone gets to play, that everyone gets to participate, that God's Spirit gives the gifts of the Spirit, gives the availability of the Spirit to everyone. Now, there's irony in that, kind of like the irony of the Declaration of Independence, that we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men, and yet all men didn't mean all men, it meant all white landowning men, not women, not black and brown people for sure, no. And the Everyone Gets to Play phrase kind of has the same checkered history in Christianity, where everyone gets to play, but you know the ones we're talking about, not those other people. But as we look at the stories of Scripture, I see this idea of everyone getting to participate, to belong, to be part of the beloved community, the sacred community of Christ followers, of the people in whom God's Spirit dwells. Everyone meant, gee whiz, everyone.

So the first sermon after Easter was the story of two disciples who were leaving Jerusalem. Their Messiah, their hoped-for Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, had been crucified by the empire and placed into a tomb.

And so the movement that they had put their hope and their trust and their faith in had disappointed them, and so they walked away. And I don't know about any of you, but maybe you can put in the chat or just raise your proverbial hand if you have ever walked away from the faith or from the church or from your tradition because it failed you in some deep way. And yet, it's to those two very disciples, the ones who were going somewhere else, who were taking a different path, who had abandoned the faith that Jesus himself in his resurrected glory shows up to. The doubtful, the skeptics, the ones who gave up hope, they got to belong and they got to have communion, bread and wine served to them by Jesus.

[2 : 42] Last week, we took a look at the story. Pastor Ray showed us the story of Stephen, the very first martyr killed for his faith in Jesus. And again, it's the story of the apostles saying, we're going to spend our time teaching. We're not going to spend our time waiting on tables. So we're going to give this like secondary task to somebody else. And so the seven deacons, the seven first servants, Greek deaconos, Greek where they mean servants, chosen to do this like somewhat supposedly secondary tasks. And Stephen, well, he rises up as a teacher and as a preacher and as a wonder worker and eventually is murdered for his faith. And I don't know about any of you, again, you can put it in the chat if you resonate, you can raise your hand of like maybe you have felt like a second-class citizen in God's economy, in the church, in the faith, because you, you maybe for, you've been excluded.

You didn't have the right degree or the right pedigree or the right abilities or the right voice or the right gender, or maybe you have been set aside of like, well, you can do these things, but not these things. And God comes along, God's spirit comes along and says like, Stephen, I know they told you that you are not supposed to be doing a preaching. They're doing that. And you're just supposed to wait on tables, but I've got better and bigger things in store for you. Maybe you felt like that.

Now, today's story continues this theme of everyone getting to play. We're in the book of Acts chapter eight. And the story of Acts continues with one of these deacons, one of these not preachers of the word, but merely waiters of tables. Luke says like, no, I'm going to, I'm going to keep my focus on them for a while because it seems like God is doing interesting things here with them. So we get the story of Philip. Yeah, there are two Philips in the New Testament. There's Philip who is one of the twelve, one of the apostles. There's also Philip, one of the seven, one of the first deacons. And Philip is one of those who go is scattered because there's great persecution of the church. And he ends up in Samaria. And I love this verse in Acts chapter eight, verse seven, he ends up in Samaria, which by the way, is another location, geographic location where they were excluded. They were said that they were second class citizens. They were no longer part of God's kingdom because they worship in the wrong place at the wrong time and had marriages and sex with the wrong people. And Philip goes and proclaims the gospel there and says, no, the kingdom of God is even for you. And I love this verse eight.

So there was great joy in the city, which, I mean, one of my personal mantras is if the church is not bringing joy to the city, the church is doing it wrong. But the church is not bringing hope and joy and expectation to the neighborhood. Something is amiss. So Philip goes and proclaims the gospel to these excluded, castaway people, the Samaritans and says, no, God's kingdom is available even to you. Now we skip ahead a little bit to verse 26. And this is what it says. It says, now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, go south to the road, the desert road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. So he started out and on his way, he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake, which means the queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship. So let's pause there. We're introduced to the Ethiopian eunuch. Ethiopia was a Greek word that means, and I quote, the burnt skin people. It was a geographic location that basically meant anywhere south of Egypt. And so you're talking about, you know, central to southern Africa and those who had dark skin. They were not able to be conquered by the Romans, but they tried. So they had a treaty with them and had some like trade and things like that going on. There are records of the Israelite, the Jewish tradition, making its way into the southern Nile region, even a synagogue down there. And so the Ethiopians would have had some awareness, some knowledge of the Israelite religion, of the monotheism, Yahweh worship of the Israelites. So Philip goes and he meets an Ethiopian eunuch who we're told is an important official in charge of the treasury. So this is a wealthy, well-connected individual who is traveling in style. They've got a chariot. They're able to, you know, we'll see, buy expensive scrolls. Like this is a person who is way up there in terms of like the food chain of power in the world. And Philip comes across the Ethiopian eunuch. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship. Now, it was pretty common for there to be religious tourism in the ancient world.

There were lots and lots of different religions. All with, you know, a lot of them with many similarities. You know, if you compare like Roman and Greece religions and their gods, there were a lot of similarities.

[8 : 11] It would be typical for even other cultures, north, south, east, west, to go on tourism trips, basically, to explore these religions. What did they do? What did they study? How did they worship? What were their gods?

Did they have any similarity with our gods? Do we need to keep them appeased to make sure that our crops and our fields and our battles and our armies aren't, you know, harmed or wounded by these gods?

And maybe they have some, you know, mystical truth that I didn't have access to before, so I want to go find out. So this Ethiopian eunuch, they discover that there is this thing called Yahwism or the Jewish religion. And the Ethiopian eunuch wants to go take a trip to find out about it, which is quite the thing to do because it would have taken, assuming 25 miles a day, it would have taken something like two to three months for this person with their entourage of people to make their way up to Jerusalem. So the Ethiopian eunuch makes their way up to Jerusalem to worship. And on, the scripture says his, we don't know what this person's preferred pronouns would be, they're a gender non-conforming person, but on their way home. Now in that comma, there's a lot going on. That comma is doing a lot of work, okay? They go to Jerusalem to worship and on his way home. What happened when the eunuch went to

Jerusalem to worship? Well, there are some things that we can assume, we can read between the lines. Deuteronomy 23 says, and sorry if there are kids or sensitive ears in the room, this would be your cue to either giggle or leave. Deuteronomy 23 says that if a man's testicles have been cut off or his penis removed, they are not allowed to participate in Jewish worship. Now Josephus, a contemporary historian of the first century, first century historian, actually is more explicit than even that. Look at what Josephus says, he says, let those who have made themselves eunuchs be held in detestation and avoid any conversation with them who have been, who have deprived themselves of their, I'm quoting here, manhood, let such be driven away as if they had killed their own children.

Let, while their soul has become effeminate, they have transfused that effeminacy with their body as well, in like manner to you, treat all that is of monstrous nature when it is looked upon. So Josephus gives us an idea of how eunuchs would have been seen in the, we call the temple cult, okay? So the, the, is the Jewish or Israeli Israelite religion for Yahweh. So the Ethiopian eunuch, he's engaging in some religious tourism, he wants to see the temple, he wants to participate in one of these famous festivals that the Jews had. He goes and then read between the lines, what do you think happens when it's clear what he is, what has happened to him, his position? He's Ethiopian, he's dark-skinned, he's clearly wealthy, he's an official, and there would have been an idea of, oh yeah, we know about officials from Ethiopia. They're eunuchs, they're, they, they've had parts of their body removed in order to serve their queen. Now you are seen as a detestation. Again, I don't know if any of you relate to the idea of, because of your identity, or because of your body, or because of what you look like, you don't belong here. You can't worship here. You cannot be a part of us.

[11:57] So, Philip meets this Ethiopian eunuch official on the road. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, dot dot dot, and on his way home. He was sitting in his chariot, so again, man of wealth and style, reading the book of Isaiah, the prophet. So, whatever this individual had experienced, and whatever his interest was in Yahweh, the God of the Jews, it got him to the point, it got this person to the point of spending a significant amount of money to own a scroll of the book of Isaiah. The scroll would have been in the Greek language. We can see from the quote here that it's quoting from the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, and he's reading it for himself. So, whatever he experienced at the temple, not being allowed in, not being allowed to worship, did not push him so far as to not be interested in God, in Yahweh, at all. So, he's reading the scroll, and the Spirit tells Philip, that's verse 29, go to that chariot and stay near it. And some read this as like a supernatural thing, that he's got like superhuman speed. It's also possible the chariot is just moseying along the road.

Philip ran up to the chariot, heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet, and Philip asks, do you understand what you're reading? How can I, the Ethiopian eunuch says, unless someone explains it to me? Now, you could read this in the tone of like curiosity. How could I, unless someone explains it to me? Or you could read this in the tone of somewhat righteous anger, of indignation, of the, you know, he can't have anybody explain it to him. He's just been rejected from Jerusalem. He's just been rejected from the temple. He's just been rejected from the very people who could explain it to him. How can I, he says indignantly, unless someone's going to explain it to me, which I know is not going to happen?

So, he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Philip is open and willing to explain to the eunuch, to this gender non-conforming individual. Yeah, I'll explain it to you. The passage of scripture the eunuch was reading comes from Isaiah chapter 53, and it's from one of the servant songs of the prophet Isaiah, which were very famous, very important in the Israelite mind, because it had to do with the great day of expectation of when God would finally come back and restore God's people. So, Isaiah 53 says, He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, and he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants, for his life was taken from the earth? So, the eunuch asked Philip, Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else? And then Philip began with that very passage of scripture and told him the euangelion, the gospel, the good news about Jesus.

Now, Isaiah 53, important chapter of scripture, because it's about the Messiah, it's about the suffering servant, it's about this individual or community of people who are going to redeem Israel. And if you keep reading in the scroll, because remember, there were no chapters and verses. You had a big long scroll that you would read word after word after word. There's no chapter breaks that tell you like, oh, I should stop reading here, my quiet time's over. No, you would just keep on reading. So, if you go to Isaiah 56, there's this very interesting passage that I'm assuming Philip knows. He's well-educated. He knows his scripture. He was raised as a Jew. And it says this, Maintain justice.

Do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand. My righteousness will soon be revealed. Blessed is the one who does this, and the person who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and who keeps their hands from doing evil. Verse 3, Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, the Lord will surely exclude me from his people.

[16 : 29] And, verse 3, let no eunuch complain, I'm only a dry tree. Which euphemism for, I'm not having kids, and so no one wants me. For this is what the Lord says.

To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant, to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters.

I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever. And foreigners who bind themselves to Yahweh, to minister to God, that love the name of Yahweh, to be Yahweh's servant, to keep his Sabbath without desecrating it, who hold fast to my covenant. I will bring these foreigners to my holy mountain, code word for the temple, to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer.

Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar for my house, listen to this, will be called a house of prayer for all nations. Now, there is a lot going on here. Okay, Ethiopian eunuch, he goes to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. He's rejected because of Deuteronomy 23, the Bible says that anybody who doesn't have all of their parts isn't allowed inside the temple.

Philip says, what are you reading? I'm reading from the prophet of Isaiah. What does this mean? What does it say? You skip ahead a couple chapters to where there is explicitly a part about foreigners, Ethiopian, and eunuch, and eunuch. And here's the part that I just love. It is quoting, Isaiah 56 is a verse that Jesus uses when he enters Jerusalem. What does Jesus do? Jesus goes into the city of Jerusalem the last week of his life. And he goes to the temple. And Jesus turns over tables. Now, I don't know what sermons you've heard about Jesus turning over tables and all of that. Was it about like commercialism, and you shouldn't sell like items and books and CDs in the like church lobby? Or, and this is much more historically accurate to say, does Jesus, because of Jesus's understanding of his role, go into the temple and actually stops its functioning for a period of time. Jesus goes into the temple and makes it not work anymore because the whole idea of the temple is you go, you get a sheep, you slaughter the sheep, you eat the sheep, you give some to the priests, you go home feeling better about yourself. And Jesus says, no, no one's buying sheep. No one's buying anything. I want the temple to stop. This eventually gets Jesus killed.

[19 : 11] But the whole thing that Jesus quotes when he turns over the tables, when he stops the temple from functioning is, you've made my temple into a house for brigands, for revolutionaries, for the violent who are trying to overturn the empire. But no, my sanctuary will be called a house of prayer for all nations. And this is what gets Jesus killed. From his very first sermon in the opening of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus goes to his hometown synagogue, says the Gospel, the good news about God's kingdom being available today, now, is that it's not just for the Jews, but it's for the world. It's not just for one people group. It's for every people group. It's for everyone. Everyone gets to play. So the Ethiopian eunuch, he goes, he's rejected from the very temple that Jesus was trying to put a stop to. He meets Philip.

Philip says, yes, this is about Jesus who suffered, who died, was put on a cross, sat in the grave for a couple of days, and then was resurrected to make Isaiah 56 come true. Do not say, I am going to be excluded from the Lord's people. No, you get to be part of the Lord's people. That's the good news.

Now, let's keep reading. Verse 36. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, look, here is water.

What can stand in my way of being baptized? Now again, how do you hear the voice of this Ethiopian eunuch as he asks it? Is it one of complete open curiosity, or is there a tone of accusation because this person just experienced the rejection from the temple cult, from the temple, from the religious authorities? They just got done experiencing what can get in the way of my participating in the worship of Yahweh. Well, let me tell you, your gender expression is wrong. You've got the wrong parts in the wrong places, or not the right parts in the right places. You don't fit the expectations of who we think you should be. Get away from us. And so the Ethiopian eunuch asked, what can stand in my way of being baptized? Because he's expecting an answer that says lots of things. But listen to what Philip says. Verse 36. What can stand in my way of being baptized? Philip doesn't say anything.

He doesn't say anything. It says, he gave orders, the eunuch gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. What can stand in my way of getting baptized? Well, the Bible says, Deuteronomy 23, look, if anybody has like their crushed testicles or whatever, then, you know, you're not allowed to be in the temple cult. And if that's true, then certainly we can't baptize you, because baptism is the sign of belonging, of being part of God's family, of being brought down to the dead just like Jesus, and being resurrected to new life just like Jesus.

[22 : 20] Baptism is this core crucial sign and symbol of God's grace and deliverance and of your belonging. And so if you can't belong, be part of that, well, certainly you can't be part of this. Is that what Philip says? No, Philip keeps his mouth shut, gets down to the water, and baptizes the person.

And then, you gotta love this. When they came out of the water, the spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but he went on his way rejoicing. And I love the idea of like, the spirit gets Philip out of there before Philip can like ruin the moment. The spirit's like, nope, this guy is good. Go on your way. Rejoice. The kingdom of heaven belongs even to you. Now friends, there are some pretty obvious applications that we can make. How many of you, and I know the answer to this question, have been told you cannot belong, you cannot worship, you cannot lead, you cannot participate because of who you're attracted to, because of your genitalia, because of the gender you were assigned at birth, the sex you were assigned at birth? How many of you have been told for any number of reasons, the divorce, or the past, or the history, or the way that you've chosen to live your life? How many of you have been told, what's to stand in my way of being baptized? Well, I'm here to tell you the many list of things.

But when we look at the message of Jesus, the good news of the gospel, we get an Isaiah 56 kind of message. Don't let the foreigner say, I can't belong, or the eunuch say, this isn't for me. No, if you want to be part of the covenant that God is making, then you can be a part of it. If you want to identify yourself with the crucified and risen Savior named Jesus, then you can. What's to stand in my way of getting baptized? Philip doesn't say a word. The church needs to learn to take a similar posture.

How much pain has the church caused? Have you experienced? Because someone came along to tell you all the ways that you don't belong, and that you can't participate. And so what then is our posture towards everyone else? Towards the world, towards those who don't yet belong? Now, hear me. There are many, many things that can harm the community, that are a place where we draw the line and we say, not here you won't. But what scripture makes just abundantly clear to me is that our gender expression is not one of those things. Who we are attracted to is not one of those things. When we make decisions and choices that harm and abuse others, then yeah, I think church leaders come along and say, yeah, let's put an end to that. But when we see that the things that are core, central to our identity, are told, are said to be a reason that we can't be a part of God's covenant community, well, then we've got a lot of stories in scripture that would challenge that.

I also feel like the story should give any of us pause when someone says to us, well, the Bible says. Yeah, the Bible says a lot of things. That's why the scripture can't be read as one flat document, where every verse has equal authority over the other verse. Rather, scripture is a trajectory, a narrative. It is pointing towards something. So if you read only Deuteronomy 23, then Philip would have a long list of things to tell this Ethiopian eunuch about all the reasons that he could not belong, could not participate. But rather, Philip sees the grand arc narrative of scripture about how God's people, God's story, God's inclusion, God's invitation is growing wider and wider and wider, and that Philip definitely does not get to play the role of making it smaller and smaller and smaller.

[26 : 49] And so if you want to hear about the Bible says, then you better look at the entire story about how God's invitation is growing to include the world, not shrinking to include only those who look and think and act just like I do. That's the gospel. That's the good news. When Philip shows up in Samaria, he brings joy. When the Ethiopian eunuch is done with his encounter and is baptized and Philip goes flying away thanks to the telepathic powers of the Holy Spirit, I guess, he goes on his way rejoicing.

That is how we know that we are up to God's good work. When we bring joy to the city, when we send people away rejoicing, then we've got a hint and a clue and an inkling, maybe we're up to something good in the world that God started all along. So friends, may you encounter the kind of God who sends you on your way rejoicing, who brings you joy, and may you be shaped into the kinds of people of the people who do the same. Amen.