

The Ethiopian Eunuch and Philip

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Preacher: Tonetta Landis-Aina

[0 : 0 0] All right, so good evening. I feel a little nervous after coming, following the financial announcement, so I hope that you will bear with me this evening, but welcome and welcome into the space. It's my joy, as always, to stand before you and to continue our series from the book of Acts entitled, Called Together. For the past few weeks, we've been talking about what it means to be a community following the Spirit and shaped in all things by Jesus. Because of this church's leadership transitions and what we've all been going through these past two years with this global pandemic, we wanted to come back to the basics of what it means to be church, of why we gather week after week. We wanted to remember what the Spirit has always been up to among us, and to explore how the Spirit might be at work among us now, today, here.

From what I can see, I'm a newbie, but the past two years have held and been a lot of work for this community. It's been good work, very good work, but it's taken a lot of effort and a lot of exertion from so many of you. And we continue, as we move forward, to do good work in terms of becoming a more intercultural community as we vision and dream for the future. Yes. I don't know how you all felt about yesterday, but at least for me, yesterday felt like a pause from the work and an opportunity to lean into joy. Many of us yesterday gathered in the early afternoon to celebrate Capitol Pride by marching in the parade. Some dancing happened, too. I have a little regret around that. That's why I wouldn't stand in the back. Yeah, on the back, all right? So, but we did some dancing, but it was the first time in the history of this church that we attended. You could say that it was a kind of citywide coming out for this community, coming out into something new. And as I marched, I realized that being celebrated, it doesn't get old. It does not get old. Some of us were crying down there. I mean, it does not get old. Being able to be yourself does not get old. Being accepted without condition, it doesn't get old.

And like many of you in this room, as a teenager, I was that kid. I was that Christian good girl who cried every day before school and who begged God every day after school to change what I perceived as flaws within myself. I was that kid. I was so desperate to please God, and I could not understand why God did not change me. One of my favorite signs from my youth yesterday was made by Libby. Here's what it said. I think there's a picture. Pride is important because someone tonight still believes they're better off dead than being themselves. I watched people in the crowd react to that sign. I looked at their eyes. And what was really heartbreaking was that there was so much reckoning to show of that sentiment. We danced together yesterday with a kind of subversive joy. And we danced because we survived. And we are those who longed for all people, regardless of their sexual orientation or whatever they would be able to do any of that to survive.

We danced because we are named and claimed by God just as we are. We danced remembering that we follow a God who is clear, a God who calls us beloved and human beings made in the image of God who desires abundant life for their children and not deaf. Please can I give an amen? I need an amen.

So today we come together and we remember the work that is left to be done to make sure that all people know that to be a Christ follower doesn't mean that you have to choose between belonging and believing. It doesn't mean that you have to choose between being accepted and being authentic.

[5 : 21] God calls us and claims us as we are. Having said that, I feel really privileged for the text that I get to preach on today.

As a queer pastor standing here before you, it's a story in scripture that was pivotal to my own coming out. I can still remember the first time that I heard somebody teach from this passage really well.

And I could feel my body vibrate in that moment. And I know that this is a scripture that is not strange to the table church. So we're going to go there and we're going to ground ourselves in the hope of this passage, which is about an outsider and an insider interacting.

One who is deep in pursuit of God and who is being pursued by God regardless of their outsider status. So let's read this text together now.

It's Acts 8, 26 through 40. You can pull it up if you have a Bible app or a Bible. It's 8, 26 through 40. I am going to refer to it a few times this evening.

[6 : 41] Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, Get up and go toward the south, to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

This is a wilderness road. So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians in charge of her entire treasury.

He had come to Jerusalem to worship. And he was returning home, seated in his chariot. He was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the spirit said to Philip, Go over to this chariot and join it.

So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, Do you understand what you are reading? He, the eunuch, replied, How can I unless someone guides me?

And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of scripture that he was reading was this. Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb before its shearer, so he does not open people.

[7 : 57] When the eunuch was denied him, who can describe this generation? For his life is taken from the earth.

The eunuch asked Philip, About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this? About himself or someone else? Then Philip began to speak, and starting with the scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

As they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, Look, here is water. What is to prevent me from being baptized?

He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away.

The eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns, until he came to Caesarea.

[9 : 10] Now, I've said that I love this text. I love this story that centers on an Ethiopian eunuch who is a powerful court official.

from just the two words, Ethiopian eunuch. We know this person is someone that we might think of as living at the intersection.

He is somebody who clearly has power. He is the treasurer to the queen of Ethiopia, an area today that occupies what we know as modern-day Sudan.

He is a person of means, and we know that because he is riding in a chariot. This is rare. He can read, and he personally possesses somehow a text of the prophet Isaiah.

He is clearly a person of means. But he's also a foreigner when it comes to his faith, and he's also a person who seems to have, we can guess, darker skin because he's from Ethiopia.

[10:13] He is from an area that's on the geographical outer limits of the known world. When many scholars write about this passage, they often emphasize that the eunuch's conversion fulfills what Jesus says before he ascends about calling the disciples to go to the ends of the earth.

And Ethiopia would have certainly been considered the ends of the earth at the time. But what comes up for me is the reality that these ends of the earth were already considered the home of a racialized other.

In uncovering the roots of anti-black racism, the Reverend Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas explores how even in the 300s BCE, the 300s, y'all, Aristotle writes of the inferiority of Ethiopians.

Here's how she explains it. In an effort to justify Greek ruling superiority, Aristotle argued that the climates in which people live determined the physical, intellectual, and moral characteristics of that people.

He explained that extreme climates produced aesthetically, intellectually, and morally inferior beings. Extreme cold produced inferior pale people, such as the Scythians, which were folks from around Siberia.

[11:46] And extreme heat produced inferior dark people, such as the Ethiopians. Moderate climates, such as that of the Greeks, produced the best people, those meant to rule.

Isn't it funny how whoever's writing the text seems to see themselves as the best people all the time? And here are words that Aristotle actually wrote himself.

Ethiopians and people who live in hot regions have curly hair because both their brains and the enviroing air are dry. So this unnamed person in our passage today, this unnamed person of wealth, is pursuing the worship of God in a world where stereotypes about inferiority regarding his ethnicity are already swirling about.

And we could go on and on about that, and how that plays out in the early church. Okay, so he's Ethiopian, but he's also a eunuch. He was a person who was born with genitalia that was at the time considered outside of the norm, or maybe he had been castrated to serve in the royal household.

Eunuch actually means bedroom guard. Eunuchs were people who were preferred in royal service because they were considered not to be threats to the women of the royal household.

[13:19] But what I want you to know is that this eunuch would be considered, could be considered in today's terms, today's language, what we would call a queer person. Even as our language of intersex and trans doesn't fit neatly on top of the story.

But we do know this is a non-procreative person, which would have been queer at the time. And it's a person who does not fit easy categories of gender and sexuality, which would have also been extremely queer at the time.

Yeah, as you can see in this story, this person has made their way to Jerusalem to worship. This person seems to belong to this category of people, God-fearers, who didn't follow all of the law, but they worshipped the God of Israel.

This unnamed eunuch is somebody who has insisted on making their way to Jerusalem despite the prohibition in Deuteronomy 23.1.

No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penises cut off shall come into the assembly of the Lord. You want to find out some interesting translations of some verses?

[14 : 37] Look that verse up, okay? Fascinating. But there this eunuch is on the road coming back from worshipping in Jerusalem. There is a sense that this person is just in pursuit of God, who's made a long journey to be in the presence of God, to just stand on the outer courts of this God.

And this kind of faithfulness characterizes so many queer people that I know.

Pastors who stay in denominations like the United Methodist Church, enduring harm because they want to create a better church. People who can no longer bring themselves to even enter a church, but continue to practice spiritual disciplines and communities of like-minded folks who continue to study and read, sometimes even on their own, because they want to stand on the outer courts.

And some of y'all in this room sitting right here or watching online, who have visited church after church after church and been rejected over and over again, but yet have persisted in an intuitive sense that God loves you and claims you enjoy.

This is who the eunuch is. This is who so many of us are. So I love this passage.

[16 : 14] It contains like deep spirituality. It occurs in this in-between place in the wilderness, this wilderness place, which so often we talk about in terms of the condition of our soul.

It's a story about pursuit. Philip literally runs up to the chariot. It's about God desiring God's people, and especially those people on the margins.

And it's about baptism, which I also really love, that at the end of the story there's a baptism. As Willie James Jennings puts it, faith in the story found the water.

Faith will always find the water. And I also love the story because it's super practical. It's about witnessing in ways that are not coercive.

Somebody say, not coercive. Not coercive. You see this encounter that is based on invitation and intimacy. Philip joins the chariot. Philip joins the story, joins the journey that the eunuch is already on.

[17 : 24] Philip goes up and sits beside, in this deeply intimate way, with the eunuch. They have this conversation that is a true back and forth, defined by these profound questions, ending with, what is to prevent me from being baptized?

As Philip and the eunuch, they engage the text together, and they find the eunuch in Scripture. An important thing about this text, and I hope you'll go back and look at it at home, is that Isaiah 53 is about humiliation.

Or it's about moving from humiliation to exaltation. But it particularly rings true for this eunuch because of this line about generation.

There is a sense in which, even though perhaps the eunuch's body has been touched in ways that have not been consensual, that the eunuch is still bound and drawn in to the God of exaltation and the God of resurrection.

And then, there is so much I could say about this. Yeah, so much I could say. But I've said a lot. So let me say this at the very end. I love this passage, not the very end, almost the end.

[18 : 49] I love this passage because it's very clear in it that Christianity is not the white man's religion and that it is not meant to exclude people who are gender and sexual minded.

And it has a lot to tell us about the experience of witnessing to our faith beyond abstract beliefs. But a couple of takeaways from this that I want us to leave here with that relate to our series.

So one, being called together as a community of the spirit means being called to convert, not just once, but repeatedly.

My favorite thing about this verse, or this passage, is that in verse 38, both the eunuch and Philip go down into the water and come up from the water.

So, there's a good reason to believe that Philip is changed to. He authentically experiences something by interacting with this person that would have been considered Israel's lover.

[19 : 59] He's transformed. He's transformed. Growing up, I was taught that to be a good Christian meant to close ranks, to close down, to make boundaries higher.

And now I think that the truth of Christianity is the exact opposite. It's the call to open up. It's the call to become promiscuous and prodigal in our hospitality and willingness to be transformed.

It's the call to be converted over and over again. And while we're all called to open up, if you identify as a straight Christian in this space, I think that you have a unique opportunity to be converted by your siblings, to learn from their faith and their boldness and their gifts.

You get to enter into an invitation that spans centuries and which marks all Christians across the globe to come out in ways that feel risky, in ways that you need to, to give up respectability defined by other people, to risk everything for the sake of love.

Episcopal priest Elizabeth Edmond says something that I love. Authentic Christianity is and must be queer.

[21 : 27] Authentic Christianity is and must be queer. In this community, because of our queer siblings, we have an opportunity to discover a more queer faith and to follow their journey.

And here's how she puts that journey, how she frames it. Queer individuals are called to perceive a truth inside themselves, name it as an identity marker, reckon with it, tell the truth about it, even in the face of hostility, find others who perceive a comparable identity marker and build community for the betterment of all of us.

That to me, she says, is the essence of a spiritual journey. It is more than that. In my faith tradition, we refer to it as a vocation.

That's the Christian path and that's the path that so many people who don't even call themselves Christians, who are partying down there right now, are already on and that we need to lean into in this church, in all of our churches.

And then second, second, being called as a community of the spirit means leaning into marginality, being on the margins as a way to open the doors even wider.

[22 : 53] Philip is a Hellenist. He's somebody who grew up in the diaspora, somebody who would have been deeply familiar with Greek culture. and yet he is among these people, the Hebrews, who grew up in Palestine and would have spoken Aramaic.

Pastor Anthony talked about this last week, that there's this conflict in the church between these two groups of people and Philip is one of the people, one of the minorities, the people with less power who is called to help fix the problems around this.

What I do not want us to miss is that Philip is somebody who is a member of this community who is inside the church.

He's somebody who's being overlooked himself and being marginalized. And yet he uses that experience to open the doors of the church wider.

He does not settle for being accepted or even recognized as a leader. He pushes the boundaries.

[23 : 59] He doesn't sit back content with his newfound power acceptance. He doesn't repeat verbatim exactly what the apostles have told him. Instead, he takes the gospel to people like the Ethiopian eunuch, to Gentiles, not waiting for the authority.

He recognizes that as a person on the periphery, he has the opportunity to take the gospel, to let the gospel confront new situations and new questions that ultimately reveal new dimensions of the faith.

That's what I want us to do, y'all. That's what I want us to do. So if you are on the marginalized side of things in this space because of your ethnicity or other things, your queerness, then here's your call.

Help us fling the doors open wider where they are locked and where we don't even realize it. Help us fling the doors open wider.

Perform the script that God has given you, not despite being on the margins, but because of it. In this story, I'm going to close.

[25 : 19] Philip, in this story, performs the future. In Acts 2, which is Anselm preached on at the very beginning of this series, Joel, Peter quotes Joel and talks about the last days in which there will be a leveling by the Spirit, a greater democratization of who gets to speak about who God is.

And Philip recognizes these latter days as our days, as these days when the upside-down kingdom of God has come. And he performs that reality.

And then Philip also performs Isaiah 56, which is a text that's essentially about, that prophesies that one day in the Messianic age, the foreigner, the eunuch, will be given names, will be esteemed, will be recognized.

I think you can see this up here. You can read it. But he performs that reality even though in many ways it is yet to come. He performs the future of inclusion.

He follows the Spirit and is converted even though he's already a person of faith. He leans into his marginality to make space for others more marginalized than himself.

[26 : 52] He trusts that God's commonwealth of flourishing, God's kingdom has been inaugurated through Jesus and he acts accordingly. He acts accordingly.

And our call as a community of the Spirit is also to act accordingly. May we be those people who perform God's radical future, who perform it every day and in so doing find ourselves and our world transformed.

Amen. Amen.