

**Sermon for 4-29-18; Acts 8:26-40**  
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The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch -- we don't even know his name! -- takes up just 15 verses in the 8th chapter of Acts, but it is so very important and so often misunderstood. This story tells us something vital about the heart and soul of our Christian faith. It is a call to conversion -- not only conversion of faith, but also conversion of life and worldview.

The story begins with Philip, receiving instructions from an angel to head south to a "wilderness road" used for travel between Jerusalem and Egypt. Not a busy highway but a backwoods sort of path, and probably not the safest place for a missionary follower of the crucified Jesus to be hanging out. When Philip reaches this "wilderness road," God's messenger instructs him to approach a stranger's chariot... and this is when he meets the Ethiopian eunuch.

Do you know what a eunuch is? I certainly didn't, until discussing this text in a New Testament class. Some of you more sensitive men may want to cover your ears for this one -- a eunuch is a man whose external reproductive organs have been removed. Various cultures of the ancient near east practiced forced castration of men who were set aside to be guardians for important women like queens and princesses. Eunuchs were thought of as the best possible guardians for these special women, because they were "safe."

If we think of eunuchs as "regular" men who just happened to be castrated, though, we're not understanding fully. Some eunuchs may have been castrated as adults, but the majority were forcibly castrated before entering puberty. I admit that I don't fully understand the biology of this, but what I've gathered from my reading this past week is that castration before puberty affects hormone levels so drastically that these eunuchs would not have developed the same way as their typical peers. The Ethiopian eunuch in our reading, then, was probably an adult man who did not appear to be male, at least not in the usual way. Having such a low level of testosterone in his body during his adolescent years meant that he was probably shorter than average, with less musculature, no facial hair, and a higher-pitched voice than other men... in short, he would have appeared androgynous.

The eunuch's non-binary gender status is the very thing that allows him to hold this position of prestige as the queen's treasurer. But even with his wealth and high office, I have to think that he felt some kind of angst or frustration, living as an "other" in the midst of so many "regular" people. He was powerful and important, yes, but he was always an outsider, always different from everyone around him.

And here's an important point -- this man, the Ethiopian eunuch, was not a defective person. Being a eunuch did not make him any less human, any less precious, any less alive than the typical people around him. But it did mean that he did not fit into the categories by which his society was organized. He would always be *different* -- and to some people, he would always be *too* different.

This unusual man was seeking after God. This Ethiopian eunuch was a follower of Yahweh, the God of the Hebrew people. Although not an Israelite himself, he had obtained a copy of the Hebrew Scriptures somehow, and he is reading and trying to comprehend the words of the prophet Isaiah when he meets Philip.

The eunuch is focused on a few verses from the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, which is known as the prophecy of the suffering servant. "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him" (Is 53:7). The eunuch wants to understand these words, and he asks Philip to explain: "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?"

Could it be that the eunuch identified with these verses about the suffering of the coming Messiah? Did he see his own experience, his own isolation and pain mirrored in Isaiah's suffering servant?

This is Philip's big moment: "Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus." Philip tells the eunuch about Jesus, the Son of God, the Paschal Lamb who healed the sick and fed the hungry and welcomed the outcast, who submitted to suffering and death and who conquered death once and for all through resurrection.

And then the most beautiful, perfect moment -- the moment of decision, the moment of truth. The eunuch sees water and says, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He has heard the Good News and he is ready to give his life to Jesus, to be marked as Christ's own forever.

***"What is to prevent me from being baptized?"***

Well, as it turns out, plenty. And no one knows better than the eunuch himself. Because when he encountered Philip, he was traveling south, on his way home from Jerusalem. He had gone to worship God at the Temple, the holiest place, and although the narrative in Acts does not tell us exactly what transpired there, it is safe to assume that the eunuch had experienced rejection.

Deuteronomy 23 lists categories of people who are not allowed to enter the Temple; the very first one is men who have been castrated (the scripture uses more explicit language, but I'll spare you). This prohibition on eunuchs as part of the worshipping assembly is just one small piece of the massive purity code that governed Israelite society. In all likelihood, the Ethiopian eunuch had made the long journey north to Jerusalem only to find that he was not allowed to participate in worship. He was considered impure, unclean, even abhorrent. There was no place for him at the Temple.

So when the eunuch asks, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" there is much at stake. He has been rejected before. He knows how it feels to be excluded and marginalized. He is "a triple outsider -- a gender-variant foreigner from a racial minority"<sup>i</sup> and he knows he doesn't fit.

***"What is to prevent me from being baptized?"***

Philip, wonderful, blessed Saint Philip, has a choice to make. He knows the Scriptures too, of course, he knows the purity codes. He knows he is dealing with a person who is dramatically different from all of the other Christ-followers. But maybe he can see the light of hope in the eunuch's eyes; maybe he can sense the eunuch's faith and devotion. Maybe he feels the presence of God there, in the space between himself and the one who desires baptism. And in this moment of decision, Philip chooses love. He chooses love over legalism, and compassion over exclusion, and openness over barriers.

Even though the Ethiopian eunuch is, according to the usual standards, impure and defective and unworthy, Philip baptizes him in Christ's name. Through the guidance of God and the wisdom of the Spirit, Philip is freed from the blinders of convention and propriety and sees the eunuch for what he really is -- a child of God, with dignity and worth equal to that of Philip himself and every other child of God. This is no small event; think of how difficult it is for us today to see beyond our various identities and recognize the full humanity of those who are different from us. At least in this brief moment, Philip is able to see as God sees, and know as God knows, and love as God loves.

What is to prevent this man from being baptized? Nothing. Nothing at all.

In the waters of baptism, the Ethiopian eunuch is spiritually reborn and marked as Christ's own forever. He becomes a member of the eternal fellowship of believers, equal in status and worth to all others. Through baptism, he has been included, adopted, claimed in a way that he never was before; perhaps that is why he "went on his way rejoicing."

And here, friends, is that part that I think is most challenging for us today, for you and me. The Ethiopian eunuch is spiritually transformed through the waters of baptism -- but he is not physically transformed. He is still a eunuch after his baptism. He is a full and equal member of the fellowship of believers, he is a follower of Jesus Christ, claimed and saved by his Lord; and he is still a eunuch. The story doesn't say that he magically regains his reproductive organs, or that his hormone levels are instantly transformed and he becomes a "real man." According to the prevailing cultural standards and religious legalism, he is still very much an outsider, an anomaly, an other. That reality has not changed.

What has changed for the eunuch, and what allows him to go on his way rejoicing, is that in the waters of baptism, **all** of him has been welcomed, **all** of him has been blessed, **all** of him has been sanctified. God knows who and what he is, and God sees him as God sees every one of God's children -- perfect and worthy and good. The eunuch does not have to "lose" or "overcome" his otherness to be welcomed into the communion of saints.

Last month, the world lost one of its greatest minds; certainly one of its greatest contemporary minds, perhaps one of the greatest minds of all time. Stephen Hawking, the Cambridge theoretical physicist and cosmologist, prolific author and professor (and sometimes guest star on *The Simpsons*) died on March 14th at age 76. As the avalanche of sympathies and condolences began to appear in the media, some colleagues of Hawking and disability rights advocates expressed dismay at the language and images that were used to memorialize the great scientist.

Well-intentioned editorial cartoonists drew images of Hawking's empty wheelchair, showing the man standing upright, even climbing a staircase into the sky. Obituaries described Hawking as a great mind who had been tragically "chained" to his wheelchair for so long, and was only now "free" from its onerous burden.<sup>ii</sup> But the professor himself did not see it that way.

Listen to Hawking's own words: "My disabilities have not been a significant handicap in my field... Indeed, they have helped me in a way by shielding me from lecturing and administrative work that I would otherwise have been involved in."<sup>iii</sup>

This is why Hawking's colleagues and disability rights advocates reject portrayals of the late scientist as being finally and triumphantly free from this great burden -- because he did not live his life that way. His disability was simply part of who he was, and he worked with it, not around or in spite of it. We do his memory a disservice if we insist on celebrating "freedom" from his wheelchair instead of celebrating his amazing body of work and truly phenomenal contributions to our collective understanding of the universe. Activist Keah Brown challenges us with this question: "[Stephen Hawking] did not need to be free of his disability and wheelchair to change the world, so why must he be freed of it now that he has passed on?"<sup>iv</sup>

Just as Stephen Hawking did not require freedom from his disability to live a full, vibrant, meaningful life, the Ethiopian eunuch did not require freedom from his complicated gender identity to become a full and equal member of the fellowship of believers. Those of us who fit into the conventional norms and usual categories of society should take this story to heart and consider how it challenges us to rethink the way we see and relate to those who are different or atypical. Let us not make the mistake of confusing our own personal and cultural fears and prejudices for God's values. Let us see the other in our midst as Philip saw the Ethiopian eunuch that day on the wilderness road -- as a fully human and equal child of God.

Here is the Good News, which Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch proclaim to us today: no part of us, no aspect of our identity, can ever be a barrier to our membership in the body of Christ. Although other human beings may try to be gatekeepers, declaring who is and is not worthy, the only true arbiter of our belonging is the eternal and ever-expanding heart of God. We are God's children, in all our brilliant, confounding, amazing diversity, and we are all loved, just as we are.

Like the Ethiopian eunuch, baptized and claimed as Christ's own, let us go on our way rejoicing!  
Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Margaret Mayman, "A Contemporary Reflection" page 1, found at [http://pittstreetuniting.homestead.com/Witnesses/2015/150503\\_Margaret\\_Mayman\\_Easter\\_5B.pdf](http://pittstreetuniting.homestead.com/Witnesses/2015/150503_Margaret_Mayman_Easter_5B.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Jessica Roy in the *Los Angeles Times*, found at <https://www.latimes.com/science/sciencenow/la-sci-sn-stephen-hawking-disability-rights-20180316-story.html>

<sup>iii</sup> Alaina Leary, "We Need to Stop Talking about Disability as a Burden," found at [https://tonic.vice.com/en\\_us/article/xw78a7/we-need-to-stop-talking-about-disability-as-a-burden](https://tonic.vice.com/en_us/article/xw78a7/we-need-to-stop-talking-about-disability-as-a-burden)

<sup>iv</sup> Keah Brown in *Teen Vogue*, found at <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/stephen-hawking-free-from-his-wheelchair-ableist>