

What is to prevent me?
Sermon 220 | Greystone Baptist Church | May 5, 2024
Acts 8:26-40

This morning is a special day in the life of our church (we have so many of those right now) - and that's a good thing! Delaney Metcalf who is a church member, a deacon, and a student at Campbell University School of Divinity will be helping to serve communion. Delaney has been doing an internship at the church this semester that goes along with one of the classes she's taking and so her participation in worship this week and next week when she will be preaching the sermon - are a part of that ministry practicum.

Delaney has partnered with me in preparation of the three-part sermon series we begin today.

Each year the lectionary cycle contains readings from the book of Acts throughout all of Eastertide. Meaning, from Easter to Pentecost, every year - in the mainline denominations - we immerse ourselves in the stories of the early church as the apostles do their best to carry on with the work of Jesus after he is gone. We don't necessarily work the narrative in order (reading from Acts 1 straight on through) because that would have us celebrating Pentecost too early. So we read the stories that result from the outpouring of the Spirit, before we actually celebrate that outpouring.

So for the next three weeks, we will read and remember three significant moments that shaped the way the Christian church understood its mission in the first days after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. We're calling this 3-part sermon series: Where do we go from here? [and we are starting with the story from Acts chapter 8 - the story where Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch on the wilderness road from Jerusalem to Gaza.

As we open our hearts to the movement of the Spirit, let us rise and join our voices in the Call to Worship:]

II. – Beginning of the sermon

The book of Acts is a really strange and unique book. It is not considered a "Gospel" but most scholars agree that it was written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke... and that it is a continuation of the story and the theology that Luke is trying to establish. Even though our Bibles punctuate the story with the Gospel of John, Scholars say that Luke-Acts could (and some say should) be read as one literary unit. There's a strong case for this and I won't bore us with all of the details but for our purposes today let's try to remember where Luke started.

Luke's Gospel begins with the Holy Spirit conceiving within the bodies of two particularly

unconventional women, a prophet and the messiah. It is Luke's Gospel that places the birth of this Messiah in a backwoods, Palestinian town called Bethlehem where his expectant and tired parents were told that there was, "no room." [but God made room] It is then that Luke's Gospel tells us about Jesus' first sermon in his hometown synagogue, where he unrolls the Isaiah scroll and begins to read with a strangely God-given authority saying:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me
To bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To let the oppressed go free,
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And then Jesus rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant and says, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Lk. 4:16-24)

The rest of the Gospel tells the story of Jesus doing that work to which he was anointed.

Bringing good news to the poor.
Proclaiming release to the captives.
Recovering sight to the blind.
Setting the oppressed free; and
proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor.

It seems that for Luke, the good news always involves pushing a boundary, breaking down a barrier, expanding the community through radical inclusion, healing, and love. (what some have called: doing the work of justice)

Yes, in Luke's Gospel this is what Jesus was all about and he did it ALL while the disciples watched, taking copious notes, and the nay-sayers watched, looking for reasons to arrest him, kill him, and put an end to all this talk of liberation, justice, and freedom.

As the story goes, Jesus was indeed arrested and killed. His body was placed in a grave. But that wasn't the end of the story. No, he rose to live again and his movement (described by that Isaiah scroll back in chapter 4) was resurrected with him. In Acts we follow that movement after Jesus is gone and the disciples have picked up the mantle. It is still a small and fledgling movement, one that is receiving all the political heat Jesus felt in his earthly ministry, and yet one that continues to spread, changing lives, working for justice, and widening the circles of inclusion and acceptance throughout the region.

In the eighth chapter we meet Philip on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. He had been preaching the gospel all over, his direction guided by the Spirit in the ways we might associate with the old itinerant revival preachers. While Philip was traveling around preaching, Saul (who would soon become Paul after the famous Damascus road experience) was traveling around also. Not preaching !! but persecuting. Saul was pulling people from their homes, sending them to prison, and in some cases having them killed for the crime of participating in the Jesus movement.

These were turbulent times for the disciples and the earliest Christians.
Times scarred by the trauma of recent events.
Times marked with fear for the present moment.
Times full of uncertainty about what the future would hold - if there was to be any future at all.

Surely they wondered: Where do we go from here?
Philip though, does not seem to have any hesitation about what's next. An angel calls and he obeys, setting his feet to the ground and his face toward the wilderness.
As soon as he sets out on his way - his gaze meets a chariot carrying an Ethiopian eunuch
who happens to be reading scripture while he travels home [ah hah!] (from Isaiah - the same prophet from which Jesus read that day in his hometown synagogue).

When it was Jesus, reading the Isaiah scroll made sense, but at this point we have to wonder what is going on. This is not a young Jewish boy reading Jewish scripture in the Jewish place of worship...

Why is an Ethiopian eunuch traveling home from Jerusalem after high holy days?
and with Jewish scriptures in his hands? these things didn't add up.

While it was not common by any stretch, there is a chance that some Ethiopians were Jews - probably Essenes. In the 2nd century, Irenaeus implied that this was what was going on with the eunuch. He must have been an Essene. But in the 4th century, Jerome wrote that the Eunuch occupied an "intermediary position" between Jew and Gentile, one that placed him in the category of "god-fearer" but not a full convert. Not fully Jewish.

This meant that he could love the God of Israel, read scripture, pray, keep the sabbath and
even travel hundreds of miles to Jerusalem to observe the high holy days - but he could not convert and become a Jew. He would never be fully a part of the people.
People like him "could worship the God of Israel but not as Jews - not as equals."

Though some might argue that his exclusion from full membership in the family of faith was because of his nationality or ethnicity (he was a foreigner, a Gentile), the story gives us a clue that suggests otherwise. At first, when we meet him he's called an Ethiopian eunuch, but for the rest of the story, as recorded in the book of Acts, he's just "the eunuch".

It is a small but important clue about which adjectives mattered most, which identity would be the most problematic. The scriptures were clear, it was spelled out in Deuteronomy 23:1, that no one with the eunuch's particular mutilation "was to be admitted into the assembly of the Lord."

Eunuchs were not allowed in the holy places, like the Temple. They were not invited into full participation, full communion, full membership in the family of God. They were perpetual outsiders because they had been castrated - either by choice or by force (it happened both ways in the ancient world) in order to ensure they could be trusted to guard groups of women. Sometimes harems, sometimes royalty. Either way eunuchs did not conform to the standards that defined traditional masculinity in the ancient world.

Philip understood the laws of scripture and the world in which he was living. He surely he knew who he was talking to and the risk he was taking even engaging in conversation...

What would his friends think when they heard what was going on?

Would Philip be kicked out of the movement? Defrocked and asked to get his theology back in line? Would his friends say that Philip had gone too far, approaching the chariot and reading scripture with the eunuch... if he does that... what would he do next? It was a slippery slope indeed. But fortunately Philip trusted where the Spirit was leading and he walked right up to the chariot and engaged the traveler in conversation. The two discussed the scripture as they sat side by side in the eunuch's chariot.

IV.

I cannot imagine what it must have been like to be Philip, reading the text and knowing that Isaiah's words described the horrific events that had just unfolded with Jesus in Jerusalem. But also realizing how eerily similar they are to the kind of slaughter the eunuch must have known first hand. How does a person with the privilege of fitting in ever begin to understand this kind of humiliation of injustice and marginalization? (As Kay was talking I kept thinking about how teaching is so often multi-directional... student and teacher learning from one another)

As these two strangers make their way through the text - I wonder if each one is teaching and guiding the other. I wonder how many chapters they read? And if they got to the part where Isaiah writes:

"Do not let the eunuch say 'I am just a dry tree.'
For thus says the Lord; to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath,
who choose the things that please me and
hold fast to my covenant,
I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name

better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.” (56:3-5)

It's just 3 chapters later than the part he was reading earlier. Somehow the teaching and learning leads to a moment of rebirth for the eunuch and he professes his faith to Philip. Just as we think the story is starting to wind down, (the two strangers met by divine intervention and direction, Scripture was read and interpreted, a profession of faith was made...) The eunuch asks a question that seems to linger in the air of the progressing narrative:

Look! Here is water! He says,
What is to prevent me from being baptized?

It is a question - asked by the outsider - that forces the question of full acceptance, full inclusion, full welcome... true belonging in the family of God. The question lingers because it is in every way ridiculous. On the one hand: (say normally) What is to prevent the Ethiopian eunuch from being baptized? Nothing! The water is there, Philip is there, and the Spirit is there - has been there all along guiding these two together as they got to know one another and read scripture together.

But on the other hand: What is to prevent the Ethiopian eunuch from being baptized? Everything! His ethnicity, his gender nonconformity, his ritual impurity which was clearly stated in the scriptures and the very reason that he was not allowed to enter the Temple in the first place.

And still the question is raised. And it lingers...

Much like the Lawyer in Luke 10 who asks Jesus the question: Who is my neighbor? To which Jesus responds by telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan, here the Eunuch asks: What is to prevent me? And Philip knows that the answer should be everything, but that because of Jesus - the answer must be, "Nothing."

Nothing is to prevent you:
friend, brother, beloved child of God.

So Philip and the eunuch step into the water together and Philip baptizes him just as John baptized Jesus back in Luke chapter 3.

One Bible scholar says:

"If we pull together [the] various baptism passages from the New Testament a picture starts to emerge. Jesus' baptism and the baptism of Jesus' followers bear a striking resemblance. Baptism by water is assumed or supposed to be accompanied by baptism of the Spirit. In addition, baptism is the means by which God's family is demarcated on the earth. It starts with Jesus as the beloved son, receiving the Spirit, and expands to everyone who receives the Spirit of adoption as God's children. Baptism is about belonging to God.

Because of this, baptism is also about belonging to a community...

Funny how the themes continue to grow from Luke to Acts...
from Jesus to the disciples...

...and now from them to us. The same question that lingers by the side of the wilderness road from Jerusalem to Gaza lingers for us today as people are telling us what it feels like to not be fully welcomed into the family of God... what it feels like to only "partially" belong. The question lingers for us as it did with Phillip all those years ago, as beloved individuals who identify with the eunuch, not because of some ancient practice of bodily mutilation but because they do not conform to our traditional categories of sexuality and gender and they too are asking for full inclusion, full acceptance, full welcome into the family of God...

And so with Philip, we also must ask... and eventually answer:

What is to prevent us from sharing the welcome of God widely?

Here is water, here is bread, here is drink, here is nourishment, here is grace, here is love, here is acceptance - full acceptance -

What is to prevent us from sharing it as widely as possible?

We know how transformative a gift it is

- that gift of God's unconditional love
- the gift of belonging to the family of God
- the gift of being FULLY a part of God's work in this world

So what is to prevent us from sharing it widely?

What is to prevent us...?

... hopefully nothing.

Amen.

Introduction(CHRISSY says some kind of transition from sermon to table):

Invitation (Delaney)

Here, we remember that Christ invites all people to come to this table, all who love God, and who seek to live together, growing in love of God and neighbor. All who hunger and thirst to know the presence of Christ in their lives are welcomed at this table of grace. This is Christ's table, and the invitation is Christ's alone, this is our holy meal for the sacred journey as followers of Jesus.

The Prayer of Thanksgiving (Delaney)

Let us pray:

Gracious God we give you thanks for the extravagant love and welcome that you have shown to us in the life of Jesus and the disciples who followed the guidance of your Holy Spirit in the early days of the Christian church.

We give you thanks for always meeting us as we are, and reminding us that Your love is not a transaction... but a gift.

You love us fully,
No matter who we are,
No matter where we come from,
No matter what we have done or left undone...

We give you thanks for the example you show us in the life of Christ.
Who lived and died with humility, always in service of others. We give you thanks for
your Holy Spirit who guides us now-
Who shows us tables which need to be expanded -
even as we gather to dine around them...
Guide us ever forward, closer to you, closer to your love...
And along the way, use us to reflect your expansive love in each and every moment.
As we receive this bread and cup, remind us that the grace we find in communion
is not limited to this place and time, That your love is not confined to any Temple
That your love will not be confined by any law
Nor will it be bound by any wall...
Remind us that your gift of love is ours to share anywhere, everywhere, and with all
people.

Call us to go about our lives - from this moment on - in the service of others,
seeking peace,
bringing about justice,
and embodying your love.

We ask all these things in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Words of Institution (Chrissy):

On the night he was arrested, Jesus found himself sharing a meal with his closest
friends and followers. During the meal, he took the bread, and after giving thanks, he
blessed it and broke it saying: This is my body, broken for you. Take and eat.

In the same way also, he took the cup and after blessing it he poured it out saying: This
is the cup of the new covenant, poured out for you. Take and drink.

Each time we share this meal we do so in remembrance of Jesus who taught us the
language of love, the language of abundance, the language of generosity.

Family in Christ, the table is now ready. Come, bring all the faith you have to this table
of grace.

Closing Prayer (Delaney):

God we give you thanks for the gifts which we have now received from your table.
May this holy food nourish our bodies so that we might grow in love for you and for one
another - becoming a living example of your inclusive kingdom, here on earth.

Amen.