

Acts 9:26-39

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For some reason, when I meet people in the community who do not belong to a faith community, some feel obligated to tell me:

- a) that they do not belong to a church
- b) why they do not belong to a church

This has felt weird to me because I have made it my practice not to ask people whether they belong to a church or not the first time I meet them. Yet, when people find out I'm a minister, they often immediately volunteer that information. And almost always, when people tell me why they choose not to belong to a church, it is because, for one reason or another, they have not felt like they belong. They are members of the LGBTQ+ community and have been told they can come to church and, of course, give money to the church, but they cannot be in leadership and the minister will not officiate their wedding. Some have even been denied communion and baptism.

Sometimes people feel unwelcome because they don't believe "the right things" or wear the right clothes, because their skin is a different color or they've felt more judgment than love from people in the church.

There are a whole bunch of reasons people have been kept on the outside and at this church we have talked about them a lot. We've talked about people who are differently-abled who do not feel welcomed in churches due to building accessibility or the inability to hear what is going on. We've talked about people who feel excluded because churches do and say things and don't explain them, so everyone understands.

I've been told by people who have chosen not to have children or who are unable to have children that they feel excluded in many churches because the definition of family is so narrow. As if a couple without children can't be a family or a single person can't be a family with other single people or while living alone. There is no shortage of ways faith communities have gotten inclusion wrong, which is why we have to keep talking about it.

Today's text gives us another opportunity to talk about inclusion and about the importance of meeting people where they are, rather than creating barriers to community. This is Acts 8:26-39:

²⁶ 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.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

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

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth."

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ 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?" ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ 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.

In Acts, the author of Luke continues his story of the good news of Jesus with the sequel, the good news of the Holy Spirit. We think of the Holy Spirit in terms of how God is present in the world. God is here through the Holy Spirit. You may remember Philip from last week's story in Acts 6. He was one of the men appointed, with Stephen, to do the work of caring for the people, specifically, the Greek-speaking widows. Stephen did a lot of talking though and that is what got him into trouble. He talked a lot about the ways of Jesus and some Jewish leaders didn't like that.

After Stephen's death, a lot of the Jesus followers left Jerusalem as fast as they could because they feared similar persecution. The fact that so many of Jesus' followers fled Jerusalem ended up being a good thing, from a church growth perspective, because the stories of Jesus were told to people and places all over Judea and beyond. The Spirit of God was loose in the world beyond Jerusalem and beyond Judaism.

This story of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian, like many biblical stories, includes a messenger from God. An angel of the Lord sent Philip to the Gaza Road where he encountered a man who was a eunuch. Eunuchs were castrated men, either they were born that way or made that way to fulfill a specific role in society. Castration affected muscle mass, physical strength, and the amount of body hair on a man, most eunuchs are beardless. They very often rose to places of influence in royal courts because they were not seen as a threat to the royal blood line. They ended up with wealth and power, yet they were on the margins of community.

In the ancient world, eunuchs were outsiders because they could not procreate. Bringing offspring into the world was an important part of a person's place in society. The anxiety around reproducing was rooted in the realities of short life expectancy and high infant mortality. And as you know, when infant mortality is high, a lot of babies need to be born in order for the community to sustain itself, or even grow. More people in any community meant safety and security.

Another way in which eunuchs were kept on the outside in the ancient world is spelled out in Deuteronomy 23 at the beginning of a list of the ones excluded from Temple assembly, "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Before we begin criticizing Jewish law, I think it's important to mention that Jews were not alone in the ancient world in their discomfort with eunuchs (every community had anxiety over making more people) and later in the Hebrew Bible Isaiah 56:3-5 imagines a welcome for eunuchs and other groups who were kept on the outside.

One of the things we don't know about the eunuch is whether he was a Jewish or whether he was a Gentile. The fact that he was from Ethiopia did not mean he could not have been Jewish. There were Jewish people who exiled to Africa during

the Babylonian Exile, so it isn't out of the question that he came from a Jewish family. He could have also been a Gentile who worshiped the God of Israel and adhered to some of the laws, rituals, and practices, but was not Jewish. Either way, his experience at the Temple was not what we would call an "all means all" experience. There was literally a gate that would have kept him from entering the assembly, whether because he was a eunuch or a Gentile or both, he was not allowed through the gate.

So that's what he had come from as he rode along in his chariot reading scripture. Philip, urged by the Holy Spirit, chased the eunuch down and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" I love this exchange for a couple of reasons. First, Philip didn't immediately start talking at him as soon as he saw the scroll, but he met him where he was. And second, the eunuch was honest, "Ummm...no, I have no idea what this says." And rightly so, the passage he was reading from Isaiah isn't terribly direct. In fact, the eunuch asks Philip, "Who is the prophet talking about, himself or somebody else?"

Luckily for Philip, the passage from Isaiah the eunuch was reading was one of what is called the Servant Songs in Isaiah and the Christian tradition, for better or worse, tends to link it to Jesus. So, this was his opportunity to talk to the man about Jesus. The story doesn't tell us specifically what Philip said about Jesus. What do you think he said? What stories did Philip tell him? When someone asks you about Jesus, what stories do you share?

Well, whatever Philip said, when the man saw some water beside the road, he was inspired to ask, what I think is a pretty telling question, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" It's like he was expecting there to be a list of reasons why he couldn't be claimed by God. Eunuchs aren't welcome. People from Africa aren't welcome. Gentiles aren't welcome. That's what he was expecting. Instead, he got a wide open door. How cool is that? I imagine the coolness of the water felt especially refreshing to both Philip and the eunuch that day. After the eunuch was baptized, the story tells us the Spirit of God came along and snatched Philip away...I mean, his work there was done. There was more to do. And the eunuch was, maybe for the first time, filled with joy. Finally, he knew he belonged...to God and to a community of faithful Jesus followers.

Here's what I think this text is saying to us today. The Spirit of God is at work in the world, urging us to stop gatekeeping, encouraging us to make belonging to a community like this, not only accessible to everyone, but life-giving to everyone. The stories in Acts, where outsiders become insiders, are reminders to us that we cannot tell the story of Christianity and the church without including people with dark skin, without women, without people whose relationships are about more than procreating, without people for whom gender and sexuality are not binary or settled. Those stories are all part of our story and the church has spent far too much time trying to keep people out. In fact, the story that has been written would be unrecognizable, not only to Jesus, but to those first Jesus followers who did the work of sharing the Jesus stories. Those stories were always meant to convey a message of love and belonging to all people. They were never meant to keep people out.

As followers of Jesus in this time and place, we are called to reclaim those stories as stories of welcome and inclusion. There is, indeed, a place at the table for you, for your neighbors and your family, for all people. Once you have heard that good news, it's your job to set the places and invite the people...and then love them really well when they take their place. Amen.