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Acts 8:26-40 Philip and the Ethiopian

When Christians today consider how to tell the Good News of Jesus Christ in their lives to others, what better example than the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Racism, gender issues, religious persecution—the physical and mental abuse of those who are ‘different’ for whatever reason. So many of our contemporary issues resonate in this scripture from Acts 8: 26-40. But we also read there of understanding, reconciliation, led by the action of the Holy Spirit.

As a result of persecution, Philip the deacon was on the run in Samaria- then an angel of the Lord told him to head south to the wilderness road that ran from Jerusalem to Gaza. There Phillip encountered the Ethiopian eunuch. The “complicated gender” of this man of colour made him the perfect treasurer for a queen because he would be considered more trustworthy than others. He could safely be used to guard women; as well as treasure, because he didn’t have a wife, children or in-laws with whom to share stolen wealth. His complicated gender might have improved his social status, but caused considerable difficulty as a God-fearer. Jewish sexual morality, as delineated in the Torah, in Mosaic law in Leviticus, was all about ‘being fruitful and multiplying; about strengthening and growing the people of Israel’. Eunuchs, could not be fruitful. So, they were forbidden from worshipping in the temple.

When Philip meets him the Ethiopian eunuch asks Philip, “Look, here is water! What’s to stop me from being baptized?” This is no rhetorical question. Whether a Jew or a Gentile god-fearer, the eunuch would have been seen as a scarred and defective person, unable to enter into Jewish worship. But how about as a Christian?

The Ethiopian is reading from Isaiah’s prophecies. According to Isaiah, the Lord foresees a time to come when: *“To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, ...my covenants..... I will give them an everlasting name” (Isaiah 56:4-5)* For this particular Ethiopian eunuch, that time is now. Being excluded and marginalised by the laws of Leviticus; being unable to fulfil God’s commandment to be fruitful and multiply; none of this matters any more. Phillip the evangelist, the Holy Spirit with him, explains the good news about Jesus; that the one led silently to slaughter; the one humiliated and denied justice; the one who would understand the humiliation and denial of justice that the Ethiopian experiences, is also the glorious resurrected Lord. In the good news of Jesus, suffering can be transformed into exaltation.

This encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian; this baptism in a puddle had consequences that reached so much further than they could have imagined. The Ethiopian returned to Nubia, to his Queen Candace. He then lit the flame of his passion for Jesus in others until his whole country was evangelised

and became Christians. God used this person of complex gender, of colour and race, outside the Jewish tribe, rejected like Jesus- to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth to evangelise a whole nation, maybe even a whole continent-for the term Ethiopian was known to mean African-and God was certainly busy in Africa way before the missionaries of the 18th and 19th Centuries.

Like Abraham, originally of Canaanite creed, a nomad with no descendants, this Ethiopian has it all stacked against him. Then, God turns his world upside down; *'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose'*. (Romans 8:28). Abraham came to have more descendants than stars in the night sky; the Ethiopian through his evangelism, his telling of his story, also might be said to have had more descendants than stars in the sky. There are 380 million Christians in Africa today.

The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch show this love to each other in spite of every aspect of their lives being very 'different' from each other. They put those things aside. This love led to Philip welcoming a new Christian into the fellowship of God and the Ethiopian going on his way rejoicing. Their encounter reminds us to do the same; be ready to look outward and welcome people who are different from you. Put the differences aside. Be ready to tell them the story of God with us and in our lives and rejoice.

Amen.

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Send forth the gospel! Let it run
Southward and northward,
east and west;
Tell all the earth
Christ died and lives
Who giveth pardon, life, and rest.

Send forth Thy gospel,
mighty Lord!
Out of the chaos bring to birth
Thine own creation's
promised hope;
The better days of heaven on earth.

Send forth Thy gospel,
gracious Lord!
Thine was the blood
for sinners shed;
Thy voice still pleads
in human hearts;
To Thee Thine other sheep be led

Send forth Thy gospel, holy Lord!
Kindle in us love's sacred flame:
Love giving all and grudging naught
For Jesus' sake, in Jesus name.

Send forth the gospel! Tell it out!
Go, brothers, at the Master's call;
Prepare His way,
who comes to reign
The King of kings and Lord if all.



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