

When the Spirit Speaks

Acts 8:26-40

It has been several weeks since we celebrated Easter. The Biblical text tells us that Jesus has visited with his disciples, the Holy Spirit has descended on those same disciples, and the persecution of the new sect known as The Way has begun, led by a fire-breathing Pharisee named Saul. As a result of this persecution, the infant church begins to expand beyond Jerusalem and even Israel, as the disciples seek places of safety to share the Good News.

No longer being led by Jesus, the disciples must listen for that still, small voice of God they know as the Holy Spirit. In today's Scriptures we learn that Philip has the skill to listen and obey, by responding to instructions to travel a specific road from Jerusalem to Gaza. He is not told why he is to make this 50-mile trek, only that he should go.

We learn that on his way he meets an Ethiopian eunuch. There are a number of things to note about this eunuch. First, he is a devout person, returning to his homeland following a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. We are not told if he is a Jewish convert, or a God-fearing Gentile attracted to Judaism. Second, he is a man of wealth and responsibility due to his position as the manager of the treasury for the Kandake, or queen of the Ethiopians. Third, he is not referred to as a man. Eunuchs were considered to be scarred, defective men, since they were unable to be fruitful and multiply due to their sexual condition. As such, even though

he was a devout God-fearer, he would have been denied access to the Temple courts to pray. Even if he could access the Temple courts, he would only have been able to enter as far as the first court, the Court of the Gentiles and Women. Lastly, although he is able to read, he does not understand what he is reading and needs someone to instruct him.

Fortunately, Philip heeds the directive of the Holy Spirit to go to that particular chariot and join it.

I think it is worth noting that Philip even agrees to hop in the chariot and explain the Scriptures to this man. This eunuch has so much going against him – he is not from Israel, he serves the wrong sovereign leader, he is a Gentile, and he is not even considered a man by his contemporary society. Philip is running up against a number of taboos in his current day society. Yet, responding to the Spirit's leading is of utmost importance to Philip and, if he is to witness to this person, so be it.

The passage from the Book of Isaiah the Ethiopian was reading raised questions in his mind. Is Isaiah talking about himself or someone else? Is it possible that these words could apply to the Ethiopian? Surely these words strike a chord with him. As a eunuch he was likely castrated before he reached puberty, like a sheep to the slaughter he had no say in what happened to him. This treatment at such a young age would lead to a lifetime of humiliation, as he would not be able to father children, just as Isaiah asks, "who can speak of his descendants?" With a lack of male hormones, he would have appeared effeminate. He would not be allowed

to enter the Temple courts, as mentioned before. Was there any justice for this person who had so much taken from him without his say?

In the story of Jesus that Philip shares with him this man finds hope. He finds hope that he, too, can be accepted into God's kingdom. Perhaps Philip even directed him to these words found a little later in Isaiah's writings:

Isaiah 56:3-5

Let no foreigner who is bound to the LORD say,

“The LORD will surely exclude me from his people.”

And let no eunuch complain, “I am only a dry tree.”

⁴For this is what the LORD says: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—

⁵to them I will give within my temple and its walls

a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever.

The eunuch learned that it wasn't his nationality that mattered to God. It was not his employment that mattered to God. It was not his sexuality that mattered to God. What mattered most to God was that a eunuch, or anybody for that matter, have their hearts turned to God, to keep his Sabbaths. The Sabbath was established for rest, for refreshment of the Spirit, and to spend time in communion with God. In his day there were

many Jews who did not meet these requirements, yet the eunuch was hearing that he would be wholly accepted as a child of God.

With that assurance the eunuch asked to be baptized in the name of Jesus. Philip did not hesitate to offer that rite to this person who, in his whole life, was considered someone less than, an outsider, someone not worthy of God's blessing. In baptism, the eunuch became a member of the body of Christ, no longer a "dry tree" but totally acceptable within the church community.

The early church accepted ALL believers, even the murderous Saul. That same Saul, renamed Paul by Jesus, would later remind members of the Church:

Colossians 3:10-12

¹⁰ ...put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. ¹¹ Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Over the past two millennia some in the Church have lost that understanding of what God requires of his people. Under the reign of the Emperor Constantine, who ruled the Roman Empire in the early 4th Century, the church became a political arm of his administration.

“Othering” then crept into the doctrines of the church that was once open to all people. Today is the Church and its members seeking justice and mercy when people are locked out because they don’t look or act like the members of a particular congregation? Or are we continuing a practice that has no basis in God’s Kingdom. Is the church practicing the humility of Jesus when it chooses who is “in” or who is “out”?

In our world today there are many voices claiming to speak for the Truth. There are many who claim that you must believe what they believe, think as they think, or you are an outsider subject to humiliation and a lack of justice because *they only* hold “the Truth.” This is no different from the world that Jesus lived in. He spoke about equality for all people, that no person is free of sin and therefore unable to pass judgment on others. He stated that He himself did not judge, judgment was to be left to God himself. I like the saying that goes, “If you catch them, God will clean them.” We, like the early disciples, are to be fishers of men by keeping our ears tuned to the voice of the Holy Spirit. We are to invite others in, not keep them out. How else will they come to know the love of God in Jesus? Let the Spirit guide us in

righteousness, which is right relationships, with all of God's people.
Pray it may be so.

Lynne Allebach

April 28, 2024 Hatfield Church of the Brethren