

Fifth Sunday in Eastertide; Acts 4:5-12; Ethiopian Eunuch
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This morning I want to try something a bit different. We have before us a unique and thrilling story from the Book of Acts which offers some significant teaching. But in order to mine the story for its jewels, we have to do some preliminary exploring. In the church world that process is called “exegesis” – which means taking a particular piece of scripture and coming to understand the context in which it was written – who wrote the piece, for example, in what part of the world, and for what audience. Exegesis also looks for the socio-economic, political, cultural, and relational environment within the story itself, and sometimes studies meaning of words as translated from the original Koine Greek or Hebrew.

I want to approach this morning’s story of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch by the apostle Philip, as an excavation of sorts, by walking through an exegesis together, taking a look around, and allowing the details to deepen the story’s meaning and relevancy. (As an aside I want to say that I was not a religion major in undergrad, so when I got to seminary and it was “exegesis” this and “exegesis” that – I heard it as “*exit Jesus.*” I spent my first few weeks of seminary wondering where, exactly, Jesus was going?)

First – the Book of Acts. It’s important to remember that, at least in the early chapters of Acts, Jesus’ death and resurrection is still very fresh. Jesus has appeared to Peter and the other disciples a number of times – clearly alive after his death -- the same but different. Jesus has breathed on them, forgiven them, restored them, and given them things to do. “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,” Jesus tells them, “in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (1:8) Easter has changed everything for the disciples. They have felt God’s fire on their heads and God’s wind in their faces. They are different people. Things they have been afraid of before do not frighten them anymore. They have found new strength in themselves, new wisdom they never knew they had.

The problem is how to translate all this newfound voltage into a way of life what will last. Otherwise Easter will stay a one-time event that involves no more than a handful of people. The Book of Acts is about Jesus’ disciples working to turn *the Easter story into an Easter community* whose life together will be a sign of Christ’s ongoing life in the world. Peter gives a big, passionate speech in the first chapters of Acts to inspire the disciples to assume the ministry Jesus has given them: Tell the story. Be baptized. Baptize others. Receive the Holy Spirit. That is how the Easter story will get translated into an Easter way of life that will last. That is how the people will experience the risen Christ, even if they’ve never seen or heard him in the flesh. Peter’s barn-burner sermon inspires three thousand people to be baptized that day (a pretty impressive altar call!). After which, the 3000 newly baptized pledge themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers. And they’re off! The Book of Acts tells these stories – how the disciples and the ever-growing numbers of apostles go out into the world to spread the news about Jesus. It tells the story of the Gospel moving out into the world, gathering under its wings of God’s mercy more and more of those who have been lost, pushed away, or forgotten.

Which brings us to this morning’s story. First, we have Philip. We read earlier in Acts that Philip is one of seven Greek-speaking Jewish Christians appointed by the Twelve to tend to the needs of others, especially widows, in the Greek-speaking portion of the Christian community. Known as Philip the

Evangelist, he is among the first to attempt to spread the Gospel beyond the bounds of traditional Judaism. The moment before our story begins, he has been directed by an angel to leave Samaria, where Peter and John are ministering, and walk southwest toward Gaza on the Mediterranean coast.

Along the way, Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch riding in a chariot. The eunuch is reading aloud from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah and Philip asks if he understands what he is reading. The Ethiopian man invites Philip aboard his chariot for conversation about the text. Philip tells the man the story of Jesus. The eunuch is transformed, asks to be baptized, and Philip baptizes him.

Luke also tells us a great deal about the Ethiopian eunuch. We know that “Ethiopian,” in Luke’s world, means anyone with dark skin from the largely unknown lands below Egypt. We know that he is in charge of the queen’s treasury and is himself wealthy enough to ride in a chariot. We also know that he is an educated person – able to read Greek, and a devout person – studying the prophet Isaiah. Wealthy, learned, and faithful, the eunuch is a contrast to the scruffy Philip. After Philip addresses him, the man invites the talkative pedestrian to join him in his chariot. For a modern parallel, imagine a diplomat in Washington, DC inviting a street preacher to join him in his late model Lexus for a little Bible study.

But despite his “insider” appearances, it’s important to notice that the eunuch is, in many ways, himself an outsider. The sexual state of the Ethiopian seems to be particularly important to Luke. Each of the five times he refers to the Ethiopian he is identified as “the eunuch.” He has been to Jerusalem to worship and is on his way home. Clearly, he has a strong affinity for Judaism. He may be a Jew attempting to worship at the temple, or he may be a Gentile God-fearer attracted to Judaism. Either way, he’s not a religious insider. As a castrated male he, according to the laws of scripture, will not be granted access to the temple, and if he’s a Gentile, he will not get beyond the court of the Gentiles. While an important man, an “insider” in his own context, he is an outsider to the faith he seeks to embrace. He is thirsty for the living God but, because of who he is, he cannot seem get to the proverbial spring. He’s not good enough. He’s neither completely “out” nor entirely “in.”

Most commentaries commenting on this passage identify Philip as the “hero of the story.” And it’s true – Philip “makes good” on the mission he has been given by Peter and will do so again and again. Philip successfully tells the story of Jesus and inspires another person enough to want to be baptized and join the fold. But with what we know about the context of this story, my eye is drawn to the eunuch as a hero, too, and someone closer to our own experience, perhaps, with whom we can identify. Here the eunuch is with status, security, money, health, education, and position. But he’s also hungry -- for depth, for an experience of God he knows is there, but hasn’t, for whatever reason, been able to grasp. It hasn’t been for a lack of trying -- traveling to Jerusalem to worship and at least get close to the sacred places and holy people. Because he is hungry, the eunuch is: *open, able to listen, and has the courage to ask.* And that pursuit and tenacity opens to him an encounter with the Holy Spirit.

First, the eunuch is *wide open*. The eunuch is in his chariot reading from the prophet Isaiah when Philip approaches and asks him if he understands what he is reading (which is a little arrogant, but we can overlook that). To which the eunuch replies, with humility: *How can I, unless someone guides me?* Having lived for so long on the outside, not welcome in the temple, it would have been easy for the eunuch to close down, to draw into himself, resigned to walk his religious path alone. But for whatever reason, he’s still open, still convinced that he needs community of some sort to teach him new things about God in scripture, that studying scripture is something to be done in relationship to other people.

No one person ever knows what there is to know about God – and so we need each other to illumine, direct, enlighten our interpretation. “About whom...does the prophet say these things?” the eunuch asks Philip, “About whom is the prophet speaking, himself or someone else?” by which the eunuch almost surely means, “Is this only about Isaiah or is this passage about me as well? Is this a word from God for someone else, or is this God’s word for *me, today?*” The Isaiah passage is about someone who “like a sheep was lead to the slaughter” and “in whose humiliation justice will be denied.” As a eunuch, he knows full well about “humiliation” and “justice denied,” and he is wondering if God is speaking to him and to his own experience of being an outcast in Israel. Because he is open, he can hear Philip when he tells him how Isaiah passage is “fulfilled in his hearing,” which turns out to be even better news than the Ethiopian could have ever imagined – not only does God know and understand the eunuch’s experience of being humiliated and ostracized religiously; Jesus himself took on that lowly and outcast state. What Isaiah says, Philip tells the eunuch, has to do not only with you, but also with Jesus, who himself was humiliated and denied justice. Because he is open, the eunuch’s story of shame is refracted through the story of the cross and resurrection of Jesus and is transformed, for him, into a narrative of redemption, restoration, and hope.

Second, the eunuch *listens*. I’m just back from clergy conference where they presented a TED talk given by MIT professor Otto Scharmer about generative listening. In it he talks about four levels of listening, the first three with which we are largely familiar. The first level being “downloading” – when we listen to what we already know, and that listening serves to reconfirm our pre-existing opinions and judgements. The second level is “factual learning” – where we listen with an open mind and are able to notice what is different from what we expected or knew previously. The third level is “emphatic” listening – listening with an open heart, making an emotional connection as we see through the eyes of another person. The fourth level – the one that most of us struggle to do, is “generative” listening. In this kind of listening we connect with our open will, our capacity to “let go and let come.” Generative listening is the kind of intense focus and attentiveness that allows us to connect with an emerging future possibility that is helping us to connect more fully with the real source of who we are, and who we want to be. When we listen in this way we are open to changing our wills, our direction, because we are able to hear and connect with a hopeful “tomorrow self” – our emerging, future self, seeing ourselves not only in the context of our present and past, but our future selves.

I think the eunuch listened to Philip in a generative way. I think that in the telling of the story of Jesus, his life and resurrection, the eunuch saw himself as he wanted to be. I think the piece of God that lives deep down inside each of us, inside the eunuch, was ignited, and the eunuch heard something that connected to that “immortal diamond” within him, and he was, in that moment, transfigured. In the listening the eunuch saw himself as he wanted to be: part of the Jesus movement -- included, adored, beloved – part of something loving and life-giving.

Finally, the eunuch has the *courage to ask*. “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” he asks Philip. “Could it be at all possible for me, too, to belong?” It’s a very brave thing to ask, directly, for what you want. Some of us have a hard time even knowing, ultimately, what we want. But the eunuch is on fire, and he wants this living God, this passionate community, so badly that he asks for it like a proclamation. “I want baptism – can I have it?” It’s courageous to ask, of course, because the ask, because the asker risks rejection, or being ignored. We are loathe to risk – but asking itself changes us, requires of us a clarity about our deepest desires and a public proclamation of that vulnerable information is made in the asking.

In the end, the Book of Acts is about us. It is about real people, who never met Jesus in the flesh, hearing about the country peasant who came to change our consciousness and connect us in a new and permanent way, who came to set our hearts on fire and our lives on a new path. And it's about the people whose hearts already glowed with that fire, whose only possible path would be to go out into the world, tell the story, and invite more and more people to join them. Like the disciples, apostles, and evangelists before us, our mission as followers of Jesus is to follow the eunuch's example of openness, listening, and asking. And it's also to invest our whole lives in translating the Easter story into an Easter community into a way of life that will last and lives on and on and on. AMEN.