SERMON

The scripture story I am about to read is near and dear to the hearts of various communities, from many African and African American churches to many intersex and queer persons.

It’s the tale of one of Christianity’s earliest converts, whose baptism -- as a Black person who defied normative categories of gender, religion, and class -- confirms that Jesus’s love not only permits but embraces marginalized persons in all our diversity.

However, it is also one of those Bible passages so packed with ancient concepts (that the author just *assumes* we all know) that it’s hard for us modern readers to fully grasp all that’s going on in it.

Because of this, I’m going to take you through the passage in bite-sized portions, instead of reading through it all at once. Before the first portion, let me fill you in on the cultural context most unfamiliar to our own time and place: some of the nuances around what it meant to be a eunuch in the ancient world.

A eunuch was typically a person who was castrated in order to be rendered infertile. While Israel and Judah *forbade* castration, many of their neighboring nations would appoint eunuchs to powerful positions because there was no fear of a eunuch producing their own heir to challenge their sovereign’s heir.

But even when granted high status, eunuchs were stigmatized by their societies, considered “emasculated,” defective not-quite-men. Eunuchs were considered valuable for the roles they played -- as they could move between the social spaces of men and women -- *but* they were never fully accepted as *belonging* to any space.

As Peterson Toscano puts it, “As non-procreative males who did not experience puberty, [eunuchs] stood out. In a world where it seemed everyone was part of a family unit, they were single. In a world where there were clear divisions between male and female, they were neither or they were both."

It’s this liminal, non-binary existence that has drawn various transgender persons to the biblical eunuchs -- we likewise know what it is to be shunned and shamed on account of gender or sex.

I myself feel a deep sense of kinship to the Ethiopian eunuch of today’s Bible story from a nonbinary perspective. Because I am emphasizing the nonbinary aspects of this person’s identity, I’ve chosen to translate the Greek with “they/them” pronouns for the eunuch, instead of the traditional “he/him” pronouns.

\_\_\_\_

There’s one more thing I want to bring up before we dive into the story, and that’s my deep gratitude for the people who came to this past Tuesday’s “talk back” session. Today’s reading centers around a conversation between two unlikely friends, and at that talk-back session, we engaged in an enriching conversation of our own.

I’ve been studying this Acts 8 passage for *years* -- reading books and articles, translating the Greek -- but nothing can replace a real conversation with a group of different people all coming together to talk it out.

Our little group included folks of various nationalities, neurotypes, religious upbringings, career paths, and family dynamics. It was a wonder to see how, as one person shared an insight about this story that their own unique experiences allowed them to have, others in the group listened thoughtfully and built upon that insight with ideas of their own.

So as I guide you through this story more deeply, I’ll be doing so with insights I would not have without each and every person who came to the Tuesday talk-back session.

**Listen now for the first segment of our reading from the Book of Acts, chapter 8.**

An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, “Get up and head south, on the road going down from Jerusalem to Gaza — the desert road.” So he got up and went.

And, look! There was an Ethiopian man -- a eunuch! -- a court official of the Kandace, the queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all of her treasury, and who had come to worship in Jerusalem. They were heading back home and sitting in their chariot, and they were reading the prophet Isaiah.

Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Approach and stick close to this chariot.”

After running up to the chariot, Philip heard the eunuch reading the prophet Isaiah, and asked, “Do you really understand the things you’re reading?”

The eunuch replied, “How could I possibly, if no one will guide me?” So they invited Philip to come up and sit with them.

So. We open with an angel telling Philip to go into the desert to catch up with someone who had just been in Jerusalem. And you have to ask -- couldn’t the angel have sent Philip after this traveler *before* they’d made it all the way out into the desert? Maybe Philip could have tracked the eunuch down while they were still in Jerusalem, and they could have had their life-changing conversation over a nice meal in the shade, instead of with a hot sun blazing overhead and stirred-up sand in their eyes.

But the desert, or wilderness, is the Bible’s quintessential liminal space -- it’s where the liberated Hebrews wandered, where God came first to Hagar and later to Elijah in their despair, where Jesus fasted 40 days... It’s that strange space between enslavement and liberation, question and answer, where the veil between the supernatural and the earthly is at its thinnest.

Thus the desert is the perfect place, and possibly the only place, for these two people to meet -- anywhere else, human norms and conventions would have kept them firmly in separate spheres.

Philip, the Palestinian Jewish man who had joined an up-and-coming sect that claimed Jesus as their Lord, was not *supposed to* associate with the likes of an Ethiopian eunuch, whose identity is labeled a “quadruple threat” of gender, race, class, and religion by trans theologian Austen Hartke.

When we look at how Acts 8 describes Philip’s first sighting of this eunuch, we can note each facet of that “quadruple threat” as it registers in Philip’s mind.

At our Tuesday talk-back session, John Whitehead explained the “cinematography” of the scene: the camera follows Philip as he journeys down the road, and zooms in when he spots a chariot up ahead, decked out in symbols of a foreign power.

“Look!” the text says, and shows us what Philip sees as he squints to glimpse who is riding in the chariot -- an Ethiopian man! No wait, not a normative *man*, but a eunuch, identifiable as such from their lack of facial hair...and their voice, carried back to Philip as the eunuch reads from Isaiah, had never dropped with puberty.

An Ethiopian would be troubling enough -- Ethiopia was one of Rome’s primary military threats; Philip, whose own people was subjugated by Rome, would be wise *not* to interact with the treasurer of the Ethiopian queen herself!

Add the fact that they’re a eunuch? Well, Deuteronomy instructs the exclusion of eunuchs from the assembly of the Lord. If this person were alive today, they could absolutely find *many* Jewish communities that would welcome them in. But in their own time, eunuchs were not popular among any culture -- especially the Jewish community, who associated eunuchs with foreign religions and the various foreign powers that had subjugated them over the years.

What is more, only prisoners of war and enslaved persons were castrated in the first place, so despite this eunuch’s connection to their queen’s wealth and power, none of it was truly theirs. Of higher status than the average slave, but not exactly free, this was yet another way our story’s eunuch did not fit into any social class.

Finally, in overhearing the eunuch reading aloud from Isaiah, Philip learns one last thing about them: they are not fully gentile -- yet as a foreign eunuch, they could never become fully Jewish. In religion, too, this figure defies social binaries -- another reason to shun them.

So, the text continues, Philip runs.

He runs -- but not *away* from the chariot! He runs *towards* the chariot, heeding the urging of the Spirit to get as close as possible to this person whom the world says he should avoid.

**In today’s Gospel reading,** Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another as he loves -- and is this not *exactly* what Jesus’ love looks like? Running eagerly towards the world’s outcasts?

On Tuesday, my friend Laura pointed out how Philip’s actions resonate extra deeply with autistic folk -- not only in Philip’s willingness to defy social norms, but also in his enthusiasm.

You know that feeling when you’ve learned something new, read an amazing book or watched an amazing show, and you’ve just got to tell someone about it or you’ll burst? That’s Philip in this story -- so eager to talk about his faith that he’ll sprint after a chariot in the hot desert sun.

Autistic people are especially familiar with this experience. We develop intense passions for things, which are often called “special interests” (I doubt it will shock any of you to learn that one of *my* special interests since childhood has been the Bible).

When Laura opened my imagination up to reading this text through an autistic lens, the story came alive for me in a new way. I could link Philip’s eagerness to how *I* jump at *any* chance to infodump about my special interests to a willing audience (not unlike what I’m doing right now!).

And while many non-autistic people assume that this autistic way of conversing is self-centered or produces one-sided exchanges, for us, it’s a helpful tool for relating to other people! Many of us struggle to connect using more typical social conventions like small talk.

So oftentimes in social situations, we’ll wait for an opening, the slightest link to our favorite thing, and then we’ll latch onto it and start talking. I can imagine that’s what Philip’s doing: “Hey, I hear you talking about Isaiah. I like Isaiah, too! In fact, that reminds me of this other guy who’s really cool…”

Buuut sometimes to make the connection to our special interest, we commit a little social faux pas. On Tuesday, Laura suggested that the first question Philip asks the eunuch is such a blunder.

Once he’s caught up, panting and sweaty, to the chariot, the question Philip opens with is “Do you *really* understand the things you’re reading?”

Hmm. Sounds kinda condescending, man -- are you implying that someone like the eunuch could never understand scripture? that *you* have all the answers?

If I were in Philip’s sandals and had just asked a complete stranger that question, I’d immediately wince. “Great, Avery, in your eagerness to talk about your favorite thing, you’ve come off as an arrogant, know-it-all jerk...*again*.”

But the eunuch is gracious about it: they reply with, “How could I possibly understand, if no one will guide me?” and an invitation to this total stranger to hop on up into their chariot and chat about it!

This desert road truly is a liminal space, where social conventions erode away. A question that might normally be rude is welcomed, and strangers who are completely foreign to each other become conversation partners -- as we’ll see in this next segment of the Acts 8 reading:

Now the passage of scripture that [the eunuch] was reading was this:

Like a sheep he was led to slaughter;
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

In his humbling, justice was denied him.

Who can detail his descendents? — for his life is carried off from the earth.

Responding to this, the eunuch asked Philip, “I implore you, whom is the prophet saying this about — himself, or someone else?”

So Philip opened his mouth and, beginning with this scripture, he proclaimed the good news about Jesus to the eunuch.

[[[That question the eunuch asks Philip -- “who is this prophet talking about?” isn’t just a polite conversation starter. At Tuesday talk-back, we decided that the eunuch is urgently interested in the answer. Why?]]]]

The chapter from which the eunuch is reading is Isaiah 53, which is part of a collection of texts commonly known as the “Servant poems” or “Songs of the Suffering Servant.” And it makes a lot of sense to me that this is a portion of scripture that would be of supreme interest to a eunuch.

After all, the eunuch has a lot in common with this mysterious servant figure, who in the verses quoted here is described as someone humbled, or humiliated, and -- depending on how you translate the verse -- as being at risk of dying without offspring. Looking a little earlier in Isaiah 53, the servant is also described as being disfigured and “despised and shunned by others.”

If I were the Ethiopian eunuch reading this text, I wouldn’t be able to help but think, “Hey! Shunned, shamed, thought of as disfigured...this servant sounds a *lot* like me!...So if this person is beloved by God, even if humans hate him...could *I* be loved by God, too?”

Thus for the eunuch, this question of who Isaiah is talking about isn’t just a fun thought exercise -- it’s what Reverend Broderick Greer calls **theology of survival.** As Austen Hartke puts it, our eunuch is pouring over scripture “and teasing out answers because [they] *had* *to* in order to **survive** as a gender-nonconforming, racially marginalized, royally subjugated person outside the bounds of the faith” they felt so drawn to.

Though parts of scripture like Deuteronomy’s mandates against eunuchs offer justification to exclude them from temple life, this Ethiopian eunuch suspects that *Isaiah* offers a second opinion on the matter.

For the eunuch, figuring out whether the scriptures they’ve been told hold only rejection for them might *actually* feature somebody like them, might *actually* hold God’s affirmation of them, is a *vital* matter.

As a queer person and as a disabled person, I’ve been there, and I imagine a lot of you have been, too.

But, also like a lot of us, the eunuch seems unsure whether they have the *authority* to declare for sure that Isaiah says what the eunuch thinks it says -- that those the world despises are God’s beloved. After all, remember their answer to Philip’s question, “Do you understand what you’re reading?” -- “How could I possibly, if no one will guide me?”

The eunuch may have been told that, as a foreigner and as a eunuch, as one cut off from God’s community, their interpretation of scripture was invalid. They can’t believe the good news they’ve found in Isaiah until it’s confirmed by someone whom humans have granted a bit more authority.

Maybe you know that feeling -- maybe you grew up used to your ideas about scripture or church life getting dismissed because you were young, or because you’re a woman, or a person of color, or disabled, or don’t have the right education, or any number of things. Maybe you internalized that implied question -- “who are *you* to tell *us* what’s in scripture, or what church should be like?”

But if it’s confirmation the eunuch needs, the Spirit provides it -- She sent Philip with his love for talking about scripture to guide the eunuch like they need. And, as our talk-back guest Q put it on Tuesday, where the eunuch had previously been met with doors shut in their face, Philip affirms and builds upon what they’ve seen for themselves in scripture.

When the eunuch asks whom the prophet Isaiah is talking about when he describes a disfigured, humiliated servant, Philip connects the Isaiah text to Jesus.

Now, Christians in our era must be cautious when we connect any figure in the Jewish prophetic texts to Jesus -- the author of Isaiah 53 was *not* talking about Jesus, and for our Jewish neighbors, this text is very much not about him. But we *can* see the similarities between what this servant figure in Isaiah experienced, and what Jesus experienced in his own life.

“Ah yes,” I imagine Philip replying to the eunuch, “if you like the suffering servant here, you’ll really like Jesus, too. He was also subjected to rejection and shame. In fact, there’s something Jesus once said about eunuchs that I think you’d really appreciate.”

“Tell me more,” I imagine the eunuch replying, settling in to hear Philip’s story, to ask more questions and add more comments whenever Philip pauses for breath.

And as we imagined at Tuesday’s “talk-back,” when Philip got to today’s Gospel reading, repeating Jesus’s command to love one another as Jesus loved and Jesus’s assurance that “I chose you”...

perhaps the eunuch replied, “Oh! I see a connection between that and *this* part of Isaiah, look --” and proceeded to read from chapter 56, God’s promise to eunuchs and to foreigners that if they cultivate God’s commandments, they will not be cut off.

And maybe Philip, who had never had reason to notice the similarities there, who *needed* someone who was themself a foreigner and a eunuch to point it out to him, laughed in excitement. “Yes! Yes, exactly! We are *all* invited into God’s chosen family.”

I believe that the eunuch enriched Philip’s faith too, taught Philip too -- because when we share the insights that only *we* with our unique identities and histories could have, we delve ever deeper into God’s Word, together. And that’s how by the time the chariot came to water, Philip was more than willing to baptize his new friend.

Let’s read that last portion of our Bible passage:

Now, as they were going along the road, they came upon some water — and the eunuch declared, “Look, water! What prevents me from being baptized?”

So they commanded the chariot to stop, and the two of them went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and Philip baptized them. And when they went up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord whisked Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him any longer, yet went on their way rejoicing.

And Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he proclaimed the good news to all the towns, until he came to Caesarea.

We’ve come to the eunuch’s last question: “What might prevent me from being baptized?”

And we can imagine a whole number of answers. “Well, we’ve had a great talk, but….you’re a eunuch. You’re a gentile. You’re an Ethiopian, and tied to foreign royalty at that.”

But Philip’s answer is not one of words, but action.

When the eunuch stops the chariot, Philip gets out with them, and together, they wade into the water.

There is nothing to say -- only good fruit that lasts to be borne, in the form of baptism performed and received -- the affirmation that God’s love *is* for everyone, just as they are.

And that last bit is important -- that the eunuch is not welcome to join Christ’s community...*if* they go through major transformation first, eroding away the various aspects of their identity that make them who they are. No! As trans theologian Justin Tanis writes, the eunuch

“Brings the particularity of [their] gender to [their] encounter with Philip and ultimately to [their] relationship with God. ...[The eunuch] is not baptized *in spite* of being a eunuch or after a lengthy session of apologetics explaining [their] gender to Philip, but simply at the point at which they passed a body of water.

Bringing our whole selves, just as we are, is part of the integrity of our witness to God. In this story, we see that God does not ask us to put aside who we are in order to be a part of the community of faith, but rather calls us as we are in our specificity.”

This, friends, is the good news of Christ. This is what it means to love like Jesus -- it is to love one another not only regardless of differences, but also *through* and *in* our differences.

To love like Jesus is to refuse to let systemic boundaries get in the way of love and relationship -- *while* respecting and celebrating our diversity.

The eunuch’s identity does not keep them from being baptized -- after all, the things that made the eunuch excluded and stigmatized by human beings are the very things that *drew* them to the God of Isaiah and the God of Jesus. Their unique experiences and insights enrich the community of Christ.

The same thing goes for the unique experiences and insights that form *you.* We *need* your questions, your gifts, your voice, in order to be whole, in order to abide deeper in God’s love.

That’s what I find in this story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch; and it’s what I found at that Tuesday talk-back session, where I came to cherish the story even more than ever.

As everyone present added to the conversation, our many differences did not cancel each other out -- they wove together in surprising and powerful ways, so that by the end of our conversation, this Acts 8 story shimmered like a vibrant tapestry before my mind’s eye -- beautiful, yet *still* unfinished! This tapestry is one that can *always* benefit from more threads woven in -- *your* threads.

So I humbly invite you to join the conversation. Come to coffee fellowship after the service. You don’t *have* to talk; you can just come and listen; but your voice is more than welcome if you do have something to say.

Come, weave the threads that only you can add to the tapestry. Together, we journey towards wholeness.

REMOVED STUFF

I’ve always thought there was something special about converts to a religion. Most of us are Christian because we were born into it -- for us, the answer to the question “what drew you to this faith?” might be as simple as “Well...my parents dragged me to church every week for years and I guess something stuck.”

But a person who *chooses* a new religion with no outside compulsion is a reminder to all of us that there *is* something *compelling* about faith. After long years on the inside, *we* might take the beauty and wonder for granted *or* be so jaded by the failings in our religion that we no longer notice the good -- but converts remind us to look again. To remember why we stay -- or, if we find nothing worth staying for, to embolden us to follow the Spirit onward to a faith that does nourish.

Both Philip *and* the eunuch of Acts 8 encapsulate what is so powerful in conversion when it is free from the evils of imperialism, colonization, *coerced* conversion.

Conversely, the kind of evangelizing most prominent within too much of Christian history *and* Christian present is a violent, invasive evangelizing -- mobs threatening their Jewish neighbors with death if they refuse to be baptized; missionaries stripping Indigenous peoples of their families, their languages, their cultures; individuals on street corners or university quads shouting fire and brimstone and shoving fearmongering pamphlets at passersby.

That kind of evangelism poisons the word “evangelism” for me, and I know I’m not alone in feeling that way. I hear the apostle of this Acts 8 text traditionally referred to as “Philip the Evangelist” and my stomach churns. Because of this, I’ve never felt particularly connected to Philip in this story -- not the way I feel kinship with the Ethiopian eunuch. But you can’t have this story without *both* characters, because it’s a story about conversation, about mutual enrichment!

Just as all of us at Tuesday talk-back were enriched when our guests Laura and Q -- who live all the way in Germany and France, respectively! -- connected the eunuch’s questioning to today’s Gospel reading, where Jesus told his disciples,

*“You* did not choose me, but *I* chose you! And I have appointed you to go out and bear fruit — fruit that lasts!”

As we mused on how these words could have been part of what Philip shared with the eunuch while telling them about Jesus,

Q pointed out that for the eunuch -- who yearns to belong to a faith community that they aren’t sure they’re *allowed* to be part of, let alone *worthy* of -- hearing the promise “*I* chose *you*” would be encouraging indeed. Belonging to the community is not something you have to earn -- you’ve already been chosen, already welcomed in!

Laura added the idea of chosen family into the mix -- eunuchs, like many LGBTQ persons and others in *our* time, found themselves cut off from their biological families. But Jesus was never that big on normative family structures -- he promises chosen family for all who abide in his love.

As to the call to bear fruit that lasts, Jesus isn’t talking about how many kids you have -- he’s talking about good works done in love, something the eunuch is as capable of as anyone else.