Pushing Boundaries, Part 1

Acts 8:26-40

Buckingham Church

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Philip encounters a man who is both a eunuch and a black-skinned man from Africa, someone as different from a Jewish man from the Greek-speaking diaspora as he could be. I want to make sure we all understand some things about eunuchs. Most of them did not choose to be physically altered so as to remove any possibility of their fathering children. Most were either enslaved when this happened or sold by poor parents to the wealthy and powerful because they felt they had no choice. Many worked for wealthy and powerful women, as did this man, or for male rulers needing security for their harems. Some of them, and it looks like this might have been true for the man in this story, amassed an amazing amount of wealth and power for themselves, including the freedom to travel on behalf of their mistress or master.

But he was still a eunuch. Mocked behind his back and in front of his face. In some religions, including Judaism at the time of our story today, eunuchs were not permitted to be part of worshipping communities or have access to the rites and rituals of the faith. Their place in the Christian community had not yet been tested or discussed, as far as we can tell, so Philip made a radical decision on his own, with large consequences, in baptizing this man. We don’t hear what the fallout might have been, but because this story is written down, we know it was told widely in the community in a positive way. We also don’t really know what the reaction of folk in Jerusalem might have been to people from Africa being baptized into their communities of faith. The Ethiopian Jewish community does not date back to the first century, but was established not long thereafter, about the same time Christianity became widespread in Ethiopia.

The power of this story flows from the implication that in the eyes of God, of Christ, of the church (represented by Philip), literally, whoever you are and wherever you are on your life or faith journey, you are welcome. Whatever was done to this man that marked him for hatred or ridicule or as an outcast to anyone else, God welcomed him.

Did you hear what the eunuch was reading? Verses in Isaiah 53 about how the servant of God would suffer, and would suffer in silence, as this eunuch had no doubt so often had to do. The eunuch read, “In his humiliation, justice was denied him.” Wow. How could that not have spoken to this man? Deep in my heart I hope that, as Philip told him how this passage reminded him of Jesus, Philip might also have urged the eunuch to read on to Isaiah 56, where the prophet radically says, “Do not let the eunuch say, ‘I am just a dry tree.’ For thus says the Lord: to the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters, an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.”

Whatever has been done to you, however you have suffered, whatever other people say about you or think of you, whatever you might have done with the power you have, God welcomes you home and says you have a family. Whatever it is you are carrying from the past, put it down on the doorstep and walk into God’s house. We are told that Philip proclaimed to the eunuch good news. How good would this news have been to him; that no matter what his body looked like or how he had suffered, he was loved by God. No wonder he wanted to jump as quickly as possible into baptismal waters to seal this good news.

Those of you experiencing this service, I hope, are doing so because you know this to be true about yourself. Whatever has happened to you in the past, or is happening now, or whatever you have done and now regret, whatever is out there that makes you think you are “less than,” I hope you worship God because you know God values you and loves you. But I know that sometimes even those of us who have been part of church for a very long time still believe that God looks at us and thinks we are not enough. That God is ashamed of us. We need to hear the good news the eunuch heard that day again and again. Because we can only live our lives as disciples fully if we understand in our brains but even more accept deeply in our hearts that ***no matter who we are or what has been done to us or what we have done, God loves us and wants us to be whole.***

Sometimes the church has not done a great job letting people know this good news. We forget about Philip and this story, and others like it. Sometimes the church works or has worked to exclude people from its community because of what their bodies look like or who they love or what is in their past. And so, the message gets communicated that they are not loved by God, nor seen as lovable by Christians, and why would they want anything to do with a faith community which only sees them as not good enough? Or insists they make big changes in their lives before they are accepted? Who, if they had asked the eunuch’s question, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” might have presented him with a very long list.

Early in my ministry, in a small-town small church in rural Michigan, a 13-year-old unmarried girl in the congregation became pregnant. The leaders of the church were appalled and made it clear that what “she” had done was wrong and against good Christian values. When her daughter was born and she came to the church to ask for baptism, the Deacons wanted to deny her request, indicating that if the child were baptized, it would look like the church approved of the way she was conceived. I was, to put it mildly, angry about this decision. Fortunately, with much conversation and Bible study, they reversed their decision. To this day, 38 years later, I remember that as one of the most amazing baptisms which I have ever celebrated. I remember it because the church rose up to be the church, and a child and her child and the rest of her family saw that water flowing as the loving embrace of God, when they needed that embrace the most.

Near the end of chapter 56 in Isaiah, the prophet relays the words of God, “Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered. For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” Hear the good news, and let us, as did the eunuch, go on our way humbly rejoicing. Then let us tell others, for we are all the eunuch, and we can all be Philip! Amen.