

Sermon for May 15, 2022—“How Wide is Wide?”

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C—Texts: Ephesians 2:13-22; Acts 8:26-40

Our reading this morning is from the Book of Acts. But, in a way, I think the title’s a little misleading. Its full, traditional name—“The Acts of the Apostles”—is true enough, except the apostles aren’t the ones driving the action. Certainly not is today’s reading.

What do I mean?

Well, sure, we see the apostles busy organizing a reform movement, what is known to us as the early church, based in Jerusalem. But what the book shows, throughout all twenty-eight of its chapters, more or less, is the Holy Spirit continually calling into action those who make up this new assembly, blowing the breath of God into new and distant places—into the most unlikely people. It’s about the Holy Spirit bringing these brave, boundary-pushing people into fellowship with Jesus Christ, and the world into which they’ve been sent.

The Spirit, not bound by human constraints—including, “we’ve never done it that way before”—is continually pushing the limits of who God welcomes, who God calls, where this good news is to be proclaimed, and to whom it is to be proclaimed. Everything about our story this morning is incredible.

Exhibit A, an Ethiopian eunuch, a man at once powerful and marginalized. Powerful because as a servant of a royal court, in this case as the queen’s treasurer, access to the ruler could wield great influence. Marginalized, because his power comes at a price, the symbol of his masculinity, his ability to father children.

Exhibit B, Phillip. He’s an apostle, fresh off a trip to Samaria, where he proclaimed the Good News, healed people, and exorcised their demons. Now, he’s directed by an angel to head south on the desert road to Gaza. There, Phillip sees the eunuch and guided by the Holy Spirit, he goes to meet him. The encounter is driven by questions:

First: “Do you understand what you are reading?”

Second: “How can I, unless someone guides me?”

Third: “Who is the prophet speaking of?”

Fourth—which is the most important—“What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

To that question the short answer is almost everything. Who he is. What he is. Even—where he is. Yet what is **impossible** with humans, is **possible** with God. This is a theme with Luke, the author of both the Gospel bearing his name, and of the Book of Acts, but a strong case could be made that this is a theme throughout the Bible.

Everything about the journey of faith of God’s people, that began with Abraham, has been about God making space for divine transformation in the narrow places of human life.

It happened with Abraham and Sarah, laughing at the prospect of children, much less a nation as numerous as the stars. It happened with a young girl in a Judean hill town called Nazareth, who said “yes” to an angel—and to God—and to the new life she would carry.

It happened to an energetic fisherman named Simon, who would have the courage to get out of the boat, and become the rock upon which this fledgling church would be built.

It happened to a zealous persecutor named Saul, who’d fall off his high horse, and into an encounter that would change more than his name.

And it happened to a eunuch on the road to Gaza.

Like so many others whose stories we find in the Bible, this man's an outsider, excluded by the rules of religion. Not only is he African, but worst of all, he's a eunuch—in the eyes of many, he's not a real person, let alone a man. Yet here he is returning from Jerusalem.

Now, Judaism had been practiced in Ethiopia for quite a while, and the eunuch possibly went to Jerusalem to hang around the Temple attempting to worship there, trying to find a place where he might fit in. At some point, he discovers the Hebrew Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament), and it speaks strongly to him. On this particular day he'd stumbled across a passage in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah which says:

“He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, like a sheep before its shearers is dumb. He didn't open his mouth. Justice was denied him. He has been cut off from the land of the living. Who is going to declare his posterity?”

Ironically, the eunuch, of course, will never have any posterity because he's been cut off. Literally. We might say “so what,” but believe me, back then having kids was a big deal. It was, in many respects, the measure of a man—how blessed by God you were. Small wonder why this passage resonated so strongly with the man.

But it left him to wonder: who is Isaiah talking about? Who is this one who's been cut off from the land of the living, who has no posterity? Who is that? Is Isaiah talking about somebody else? Could he be talking about **me**?”

Can't you just see this eunuch? Can't you picture him sitting in the hot sun, sweat pouring down his face, ignoring the intensity of the desert heat, studying Isaiah as if his life depended on it? He's saying to himself: “Here's someone else who's been denied a full life, cut off from God, and everyone else condemned to have no progeny, no offspring to follow and remember him.”

Assuming he started at the beginning of the Hebrew scriptures he'd have read, in the Book of Deuteronomy, chapter twenty-three, verse one, and I'm paraphrasing here, that **“no [eunuch] shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.”** So now, by the side of the road, the eunuch is reading the fourth of Isaiah's servant songs, and is sensing that there's hope. But how to know for sure? Which is why he questions Phillip.

And Phillip, who just happens to be at the right place at the right time, knows exactly who it is about whom the prophet writes. It is—of course—Jesus of Nazareth. He is the one who is cut off without posterity. It is he who's been denied justice. He had no family, no issue, and yet through baptism calls all people to himself, creating a family the likes of which the world has never seen.

The eunuch sits upright and asks his most important question: “Hey—here's some water. What's to prevent me from being baptized?” Any of us would probably quickly and easily say, “nothing!” But Phillip has a problem. He knows the Law. He knows the text from Deuteronomy.

Here's an African eunuch asking to be baptized. What's an apostle to do? Samaritans are one thing, but an Ethiopian? A eunuch? I imagine he's a bit perplexed, wondering Peter and John, or any of the others might do. He may have forgotten Isaiah's words in chapter fifty-six:

“...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 I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.”

The eunuch’s faith is evident as he sprints to the water. I believe that this is what convinces Phillip to baptize this man. And so right there in the desert, Philip baptizes the eunuch.

At this point, Philip disappears from our story, snatched away by the Spirit, writes Luke, but our Ethiopian friend went on, some scholars say, to be the one who brought Christianity to Ethiopia. In many ways—not unlike the Samaritan woman in John’s Gospel, who introduced Jesus to her village. Two unlikely converts who would convert others. That is how our merciful, gracious and loving God, through the Holy Spirit, works in the world.

Now, we know, as the old hymn goes, that there’s a wideness in God’s mercy. But I ask you, in terms of people like us—what about us? How wide is wide? Is it as wide as a shepherd’s heart; one that risks the lives of ninety-nine sheep in order to find the one who is lost?

How wide is wide? Is it wide enough to include folks who are different from us, those who don’t look like us, talk or dress like us, whose skin is a different color—folks who’re **different**, as the eunuch was different? How wide is wide? Perhaps, as it’s often been exhibited by the Church, maybe not as wide as we think.

If you read the Church’s story in the pages of the Bible, it’s clear that every time the Church had to spread the Word beyond its safe, comfortable walls, it had to be poked and prodded by the Holy Spirit. Every time. Friends, I have to confess, I still have to be poked and prodded.

This story is about the conversion of the Ethiopian. But I think that there’s another conversion here—that of Philip. Out in the desert the Holy Spirit overturned, his narrow perceptions and prejudices broke down one more barrier, and kicked open one more locked door. What’s more, there are unlikely apostles everywhere.

And so—I invite you to listen. Listen to the Spirit calling, telling you to go to those unlikely places, and unlikely people. Listen to the questions they ask, and the stories they tell. How do they echo the stories that we’ve read in the Bible? How do they echo the stories in our own lives? Pay attention, because these are the keys to sharing the Good News.

Brothers and sisters, here’s the thing: The Holy Spirit blows where it wills. Since the moment of Creation it has blown, and it blows today, even in—especially in—the most unexpected people and places. It always will. And with the Spirit’s empowering, what’s impossible for humans, becomes not only **possible**, but immediate, compelling, and real. In people, places, and situations that might seem God-forsaken, we can often find revelation and blessing.

We might wonder where in our church, and in our community, the Spirit is blowing right now. Perhaps we might, as the eunuch, and as Philip did, look to the words of the prophet: **“...in his humiliation, justice was denied him”...**

Perhaps we might go to places where humiliation exists, where justice is denied. Sounds like a good place to start. Sounds like a good place to ask a few questions. The good news is that there are places like that are right here in Westwood. So, today, I ask all of you: How wide is wide? Where might the Spirit lead us if we allow it to do so? If we have the courage to follow? If we have the humility to cast aside our crowns? If we lay aside our biases? Our preconceptions? Our prejudices?

One thing is certain, it will, like Phillip, push us and prod us, until the day when every human being feels welcome in the infinitely wide, all-embracing heart of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.