

Instant Family: Just Add Water!
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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Acts 8: 26-39

The first time I dealt with this text was in a preaching class. Rev. Benjamin Watts, my instructor at Hartford Seminary, used it to talk about our role as preachers. In that way, this story is a great example of how the Spirit works in both Philip and the Ethiopian, just like how the Spirit of God works in both the congregation and the pastor, to change people's lives.

Now, while I believe that's a completely appropriate way to use this passage, I think it waters it down. At least it did for me. Whenever I encountered it again, I assumed I must already understand it... I got this!

But the problem is, no one ever approaches the Scriptures from the same place. And that impacts what we see. So, if you read this story as a seminary student, (or even as a volunteer Sunday school teacher), maybe you're going to think it's about what it means to be a teacher of the word.

But if you approach it from a slightly different angle, perhaps as someone who doesn't consider themselves a teacher, you might find in Philip the challenge to be open to the Spirit's leading.

And if you come to this story as a young person of color who's wondering if Christianity has anything to offer, or if it's just the slaveholder's religion used to oppress their ancestors, you'll come at this story from an entirely different place. Perhaps when you read about this encounter, you'll find hope, because it is clear that Africans were welcomed into the family of God long before colonialism was ever a thing.

You see, we don't come to scripture from a neutral position, we're always coming from somewhere and that is going to impact what we see and what we hear. Here's why I bring all of this up.

As a church that is (for the most part) pretty ethnically homogeneous, here in the middle of suburbia, on the southern border of quaint New England, it's very easy for us to believe this passage is an example of evangelism, but it's so much more than that.

As I dug into this text and sat with it all week long, what I kept coming back to was the scandal of it. We can miss out on that, if we don't stop and examine what's actually happening. Because what we see here is nothing less than groundbreaking.

Philip is commanded by the Spirit to go south, to the road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza, and Luke tells us that this is a desert place. And that's significant! The desert is a place that is not a place. It's dusty, and barren.

In the desert is a road. By its very nature, the road is unsettled, it is the already but not yet. So we're on the way, but we're just not there.

And then there's the symbolism of the wilderness nature of the road. It's a symbol of chaos. The wilderness is where one faces confusion and temptation. It's a place one must go through in order to grow and experience change.

Think of Jesus as he goes out into the wilderness to be tempted, just prior to him beginning his earthly ministry. It is to a wilderness road winding through the desert that the Spirit of God leads Philip. We get the sense that God is saying, *"Get ready, because some things are about to change"*.

On the road, Philip meets an Ethiopian eunuch. I love the image here, as the chariot is moving along, Philip has to run it to catch up to it.

Now, who is this guy in the chariot? First, we're told that he is Ethiopian. Ethiopians had a special place in the minds of the ancients. Within Greek mythological geography, Ethiopia was considered the "ends of the earth". And at this particular time, the Roman Empire was the most dominant force on the face of the earth. To travel to the ends of the Roman Empire was to travel to the ends of the world, and Ethiopia exists outside of that.

Remember earlier in Acts¹ when Jesus told the disciples to take the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth? And now Philip is running alongside of chariots, catching up to a man who hails from the literal ends of the earth.

Now, what we've got to do is take the last 400 years of Western history and set it aside to understand that there's no hierarchy here based on race or skin color. Instead, this is more about people that are exotic and foreign and all together different from what was commonplace.

¹ Acts 1:8

Not only is this man in the chariot an Ethiopian, but he's also a eunuch. This would have afforded him some privileges; he would have been allowed to serve the royal line in a very powerful role. As the Court Treasurer to the Queen of Ethiopia, he was a man of influence, education and means, which we can see from the very fact that he even had a scroll. Scrolls were not cheap! They weren't something you could find in a sales rack or have delivered to you from Amazon!

But although this man has means, authority and power, he doesn't really fit into society. There's no real place for him. As a eunuch, he will have no legacy, no children, no one to pass on his wealth and privilege. He is neither fully male nor fully female, he sits in this ambiguous middle. In a culture with strictly defined gender roles, he would be considered an outsider.

Which makes his trip to the temple in Jerusalem all the more interesting. You see, he could worship God, he could study the Scriptures, he could learn about the faith, but he would never fully belong.

So when this man got to the temple in Jerusalem, he was not allowed all the way in. At best, he would have been able to go into the furthest out courtyard. Likely, he would have known this. But so deeply did he want to worship God, he went anyway.

So now this man who is ethnically other, gender ambiguous and on a wilderness road between the temple and home finds himself being chased down by God.

Do you see the scandal in this, yet? It gets better.

As Philip stays and reads with him, he tells him that the promised future that Isaiah spoke about has come to pass because of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Those who are from the ends of the earth are welcomed into the presence of God.

Those who look different, are made family in Jesus.

Those who don't fit neatly into the norms of society are given a seat at God's table.

Those who are on the road stuck between a no man's land of what they know and what they don't are part of the covenant that extends beyond

our boundaries and makes even those who exist on the other side, siblings in Christ.

So then it's no wonder that in hearing this good news, the Ethiopian says, "*What then can stand in the way of me being baptized?*"

And by the grace of God, he is given an instant family, just add water.

Maybe the Ethiopian fully grasped the radical inclusiveness of the gospel in that very moment. If the God of the universe was willing to chase him down, what could stop him from belonging?

Nothing. Because God keeps doing what God does: redeeming and restoring all things and all people. God will see it through. This is the good news of the gospel. Our God expands the boundaries of who is welcomed. This is what the Ethiopian came to understand: nothing can stop him from being a part of the family of God.

So... to you who think you're on the margins, just out of reach of God's love: this family of faith assures you, you are not. God's love for you can find your wilderness road. You think that you are too weird or strange or too different, or outside the norm? Let us assure you that God's love is for ALL people.

This isn't just a story about evangelism and how to talk to a stranger about faith, although it is that. It is the story of the radical love of God and the power of the gospel to go to the ends of the earth.

To include the people that seem foreign and exotic and strange and difficult to relate to. May we have eyes to see the power of that love, not just for the strange one out there, but for the strange one in here. Amen.