

## **“Ethiopian Eunuch – A Place for the Outsider”**

March 15, 2020

*A Place at the Table* series – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent – Livestream

It’s a bit ironic to talk about “a place at the table” *for the outsider* as we worship separately because of a global pandemic that has rocked everyone’s world. You can see me, but I can’t see you, though I trust you’re there.

This week, we’ve seen and heard about the worst of ourselves: racism and xenophobia, especially against those of Asian descent, when we need to come together and support each other, and empty aisles and some taking more than what’s needed out of fear that there won’t be enough for everyone.

We’ve also seen the best of ourselves: people offering help to others on social media because of the economic hardships for so many, people making music together from balconies in Italy in the midst of quarantine as an act of solidarity and community, restaurants providing free meals and companies providing free Internet and educational resources for kids and youth as schools are shut down, schools making a way for students to have meals during the closure, our local Scouts sponsoring a Feeding America food truck yesterday for our community, church family checking on each other, especially those who are homebound.

And it’s all happening in this season of Lent - these 40 days (except for Sundays) that lead us to Holy Week and then Easter. Somehow this week has offered us time to examine our hearts more closely, take stock of our reactions to a situation many of us have never experienced before, live in the tension of faith and fear - and try really hard to choose faith over fear, and hopefully draw nearer to God - God whose presence is never affected by the need for our physical distancing from each other, but who is with us and as near to us as our very breathing.

Even as we are diligent about washing our hands and cautious about being in large crowds, I am so thankful that God’s love is not affected or limited by this virus. God’s grace is sufficient for us every day. God’s Spirit - the Holy Spirit - continues to move in us and through us (and sometimes in spite of us!) when we focus on the call to love God and love neighbor in every way we can.

It’s the Holy Spirit that shows up in this encounter in Luke’s Gospel. This account of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch challenges us to see how God brings people together - sometimes in such unexpected and surprising ways. In these

times of uncertainty, I wonder how God is doing that now - making us more aware of how we're connected rather than how we're not.

Perhaps you've had a conversation with a stranger as we've traveled this interesting road together during the past week. Maybe you reached out to the cashier or the waitress or the healthcare worker you encountered to give them encouragement. Maybe you've heard more people talking and seen more comments about being kind and loving others. Perhaps you've had a chance to have spiritual conversations and talk about your faith in God who is with us in the midst of all this.

Those moments are important. Maybe that's what Philip felt like when the Holy Spirit led him to this man from Ethiopia. Gospel writer Luke, a physician by training whom scholars believe wrote the Book of Acts, too, records the details. Luke says this all happens on a desert road. Luke is sure to tell us about this Ethiopian - a eunuch - a castrated male servant who could have been ostracized - on the outside.

But we know he was in Jerusalem. We know he's somewhat wealthy because he's got his own chariot. We know he's got some social status as the person in charge of the treasury for the queen. So he's wealthy, educated, devout, humble, and hospitable - and he's an outsider. He's a seeker whose heart is open to God's grace - and an outsider as far as many would see him. That's not what God sees, but others do.

Have you ever felt like an outsider? Pushed to the margins even though you really wanted to belong? I think of stories of many people I've had the privilege to meet in the church: a woman who called me on the parsonage phone one afternoon wanting to be baptized, but had a struggle with finding a church community where she could be comfortable. She had had a hard life full of hard living, but called herself a miracle and wanted to celebrate God's faithfulness in her life.

I think of many who have been pushed away because of their sexual orientation and gender identity and yet are seeking a safe place to belong and to use their gifts to the glory of God. I remember an E-mail from someone asking if she and her partner would be welcome in the congregation I served. My prayer was that they would, but even the reality that she had to ask was painful. I think of many who are hungering for a sense of community and a true example of God's grace. This man from Ethiopia made me think of them.

We know something about Philip, too. In Acts 6, Philip is one of seven men appointed to care for those who are in need as the early Christian community grows. Later on in Acts 21, we hear Philip called "the evangelist." The other thing about Philip is that he's attentive to the Holy Spirit. He responds. He goes, and he acts. He engages. He guides.

Barbara Brown Taylor offers a great parallel as we consider this encounter: “Imagine a diplomat in Washington, DC, inviting a street preacher to join him in his Lexus for a little Bible study.” It really is an amazing moment!

The Ethiopian asks questions. And Philip answers. Their encounter challenges us to look at ourselves. How closely are we engaged in Scripture? How are we seeking to learn and grow? Are we willing to reach out to others for help? Can we share the questions we have about God and faith?

Yes, the Ethiopian is a seeker, and Philip is a faithful guide - one is a learner, and one is a teacher – and sometimes the roles switch. This relationship offers both of them an opportunity to strengthen their faith and to understand God more deeply.

First, the Ethiopian asks, “How can I understand unless someone guides me?” Now it’s interesting - he has high status and probably some wealth, but he’s seeking help. Sometimes we wrongly assume that those who have no worries about money don’t have other needs or worries. But we see his need. He can read the words, but he needs to understand them for himself. And he needs someone who has experienced the God Isaiah talks about to help him. So, Philip guides him.

What he’s reading - the prophet Isaiah - carries hope and promise for him. He realizes that Isaiah’s words are about Jesus - One who understands his humiliation and his humanity. Isaiah’s words are about God who reaches those who are on the margins and gathers them in.

His second question is: “who is Isaiah talking about?” Maybe he’s wondering if it’s possible that Isaiah’s word really is for him. We know that this man has some interest because he’s just been to Jerusalem to the temple. That wasn’t a quick trip. But it’s still true that he could have been on the outside - not fully included in worship because of who he was. In that time, his race - an Ethiopian, his religious identity - a Gentile, and his sexual identity, would have been a triple threat of exclusion.

For him to see Jesus through Isaiah’s word offers him hope. Jesus humbled himself and went even to death for the sake of the whole world - for the sake of every person - with no regard for the characteristics that others use to view him as an outsider. Whatever this man has experienced, he hears a promise of God’s love for him, and it’s good news.

It’s so good that he doesn’t hesitate. “Is there anything preventing me from being baptized?” I wonder about Philip’s initial reaction. Maybe the man from Ethiopia had thought about baptism before. Maybe he was told he couldn’t be baptized. Philip pays attention to the Holy Spirit, and the Ethiopian is baptized. This man who might have lived his life believing that he couldn’t be a part of God’s family experienced grace in a powerful way. He went away rejoicing, and tradition holds that the Christian church in

Ethiopia traces its roots to this moment - to this one who went back to his country and shared good news about God.

Luke reminds us that the Gospel is about new possibilities for everyone! No one is outside of God's grace. No one is outside of God's love. No one is outside of the embrace of the Gospel! Jesus was always going to the ones on the outside to bring them in. Jesus was always breaking social expectations to make clear that he cared and wouldn't ever stop caring.

What does the Gospel look like in the midst of a global event like we're experiencing? How do we view the "others" in our lives - the outsiders? The ones we've never spent time with, but still have opinions and assumptions about? How will we live the Gospel of God's love for the world in this moment?

We consider this exchange between Philip and the Ethiopian as our church and our world continue to grapple with issues around human sexuality - and the full inclusion of LGBT persons. What will we do? How will we follow the example of the Holy Spirit in seeing, hearing, and responding to those who are seeking a relationship with God who gathers us all into God's loving arms and uses us to share Good News?

I know I've shared the end of the story about the woman who called me one afternoon asking about baptism. We celebrated her baptism, which was amazing. And then one Sunday, she came downstairs to find me in the midst of a bigger crowd, which was difficult for her. She was uncomfortable. She felt like people might think she was out of place because of the tattoos that covered her arms. I responded with something like, "Well, Jesus doesn't care. I'm sure he had tattoos, too." Her response came immediately, "Well, he did have scars."

I still choke up when I think about her response because she offered a profound truth about the deep, deep love of Jesus for her. Her understanding of God's love for her was poignant and real and authentic, and she trusted it. I officiated at her baptism, but she taught me about grace.

There's a place at the table for the one who is seeking to know the deep love of Jesus - and to embrace it. There's a place at the table for the one who feels like an outsider. That's not God's view, but ours. We must make the table welcoming and open. We might just understand God's love more deeply when we do.

Thanks be to God. Let us pray...