



## “Life in the Spirit: Plenty Good Room”

Acts 8:26-39

April 25, 2021

Let me be clear from the start. This morning’s story from the Book of Acts wasn’t supposed to happen. Almost every part of this encounter is unexpected, unusual, and out of place.

Begin with the place. We have no idea where it happened. Somewhere on a wilderness road between Jerusalem and Gaza. The middle of nowhere. A spot that appears on no maps.

Then there are the people. Philip isn’t supposed to be here. Two chapters ago he was one of seven chosen by the apostles as table-waiters, the Greek word is our word for deacon, to ensure equitable food distribution within this new community formed in the name of Jesus—something the apostles themselves delegated so that *they* could focus on preaching the Gospel. Philip is supposed to be serving food in Jerusalem, and yet here he is called to proclaim the Gospel in the wilderness, to interpret scripture for a curious reader.

The eunuch. Uncertainty surrounds almost every part of his story, but this much we know. The laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy and cultural practices of the time explicitly preclude his full participation in the community of faith. That priestly kingdom, that holy nation, excludes people like him. Though his power, influence, and wealth are great, he stands unquestionably on the outside of God’s chosen people.

And yet, there is a prophetic vision that seems to speak of just this moment. Isaiah proclaims a day of restoration when eunuchs will have a place in the Lord’s house and an everlasting name when they too will be recognized as children of God.

And, perhaps most importantly, there is another player in this drama, another actor just off stage. The

Holy Spirit orchestrates the unlikely encounter with divine precision, down to the stream of living water flowing by the desert road.

A story that wasn’t supposed to happen. Two people who had no business meeting one another. A server delivering sermons and pouring the water of baptism. An outsider, ritually unclean and socially ostracized, offered an everlasting name and a new family in the cleansing waters of baptism. I’m convinced that Luke, who gave us this story, is doing everything he can to get our attention here. He puts up a billboard on the wilderness road that reads, “This One’s For You!”

So what are we to make of it? Some context might help. In its earliest committee meetings, the ancient community of faith struggled with a central question. Who is to be included in this new movement, and who must be left out? And it was a contested call from the start. The Book of Acts records multiple accounts of wrestling—should the Christian church be open to Gentiles, those who had not been part of the Jewish faith? Many of them spoke different languages and had strange cultural and religious customs. None of them knew the foundational stories of the Old Testament and most had worshipped an array of idols only weeks or months before. Their ethical codes and traditions were quite different from those of Israel. Would a confession of faith in Jesus Christ be enough for them to be welcomed? The question was as hotly debated as any of the most divisive issues in the church today.

Within the story of this struggle, Luke intersperses a number of accounts describing how the minds of individuals were changed. There is, of

course, Saul the persecutor of Jesus-followers on the road to Damascus, who becomes Paul, an Apostle to the Gentiles and the strongest voice for their full inclusion. There is Ananias, who baptizes Paul only after the Spirit clarifies his change of heart. There is Peter, who breaks bread with Roman Gentiles and has a vision that disrupts his perception of what is acceptable to eat. And there is Philip, who is called by God to baptize one whose name did not appear on the list given him by the authorities in Jerusalem.

And, at the heart of each of these stories, there is God's Spirit, set loose on Pentecost, driving the church to cross boundaries and build bridges and tear down walls. In this movement, we see the church grow and thrive as it opens itself to new and different people. It is an unnerving, anxious, thrilling, extraordinary time as the Spirit of God pushes Christian leaders beyond their comfort zones and into the practical implications of following Jesus. Our ancestors in the faith were compelled to live out the words of Peter's Pentecost sermon, "For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him."

This morning's story is another example. It shouldn't have happened, but it did because the Holy Spirit demanded it. The Spirit of God keeps prodding...*"go over to this chariot and join it."* The unlikely pair reads scripture together, shares conversation, and Philip witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Having heard and understood, the Ethiopian eunuch asks a striking question, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" It is a summary of the debate. What are the barriers here? Is there room for this kind of person?

What is to prevent me from being baptized, the Ethiopian eunuch asks, and the answer is quite simple...a lot! There is much that might prevent this man from receiving the sacrament in this moment. The list of barriers is a mile long. But in

that chariot, sitting next to Philip, immersed in the words of scripture, he is convinced that God might just welcome him. Philip has also been persuaded. He wades into the water with the eunuch, and an encounter that began by the force of the Holy Spirit ends, against all odds, with the promise of baptism spoken to an outsider.

I wonder if Philip had some explaining to do when he finally made it back to Jerusalem. I wonder if the emerging bureaucracy was critical of such a reckless act, this unsanctioned baptism. Where was the committee vote...the statement of faith...the witness signatures?

To such questions, Philip could only answer with testimony. It seems that God will not wait for us. It appears that every institutional barrier imposed by the purity laws are no match for the unfolding reign of God and the movement of the Holy Spirit.

I can tell you that it is a humbling experience to be asked for baptism. Six years ago, I heard that question from an eight-year-old boy who had been through more trauma as a child than most of us could imagine. At age seven he was adopted by a faithful and loving couple who began to bring him to church. He took it seriously, even intensely, pouring himself into the life of that congregation and making up for the lost time. After a year, his parents told me that he'd like to talk with me. We met over ice cream. *Will you baptize me?* All the barriers in the world would not have kept him from those waters. Why? The Holy Spirit demanded it. God would not wait for us. Beloved child of God, here you belong. Here, nothing but the grace of God is necessary. Last Sunday, that child, now a strapping fourteen-year-old, made his confession of faith and joined the church. How dare we stand between the waters of baptism and a child of God who longs for them?

The Ethiopian eunuch and this improbable encounter with a server turned preacher, stands as an uncompromising mirror for the church of Jesus Christ. Who is missing here...and why? What would

mean for us if the Gospel is good news *for all*? How would it change our practice of the faith and our vision of the future, if the mission of the church is less about being right and more about being in relationship? These are not hypothetical questions for us, any more than they were for our ancestors. They are a measure of our faithfulness. They are mission critical.

This mission is emphasized in the words of an old spiritual that we'll hear in a few moments "plenty good room, plenty good room, plenty good room in my Father's kingdom...just choose your seat, and sit down..." And when you do, take a look around. You might be surprised by your companions at the table. You might be reassured. Your field of vision might be expanded. I love how the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, when asked his views on whether those who believe differently are saved, answered, "I will have more joy in heaven and in God if you are also there to share it with me."

The story from the Book of Acts ends with a sense of overwhelming hope for the future of the church. The Ethiopian eunuch, given the powerful gift of full inclusion in the gracious promises of God, continues his journey with a joy previously unknown. His heart is filled with anticipation for the road ahead as a baptized believer. Philip also continues his journey, preaching the Gospel in many other places beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem. But both this deacon and the Gospel he proclaims have been transformed by this encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. And so Philip journeys on proclaiming the good news. God intends to serve as host at a large table, and will not wait for us to vet the invitation list. Just take a seat and accept the truth. There is plenty of good room in the kingdom of God...room for you, room for me, and room for all God's beloved children. Amen.