

Wesley United Methodist Church
Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
May 2, 2021
“A Place at the Table”
Scripture: Acts 8:26-40
John 15:1-8

Have you ever read the Bible and found yourself more confused than when you started? It's happened to many of us. In fact, I would say it's probably a fairly common occurrence as we try to understand how, or if, the scripture speaks to us in our current circumstances. There are some people who like to call on an often used argument, “The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it.”

Oh, if only it were that simple. As the words of the Bible have been translated from one language to another and another and another, it's not always easy, or even possible to render an exact translation. But even more basic than that is the reality that the 66 books of the Bible were written by many different people and often with different hearers in mind.

The Gospel of Luke and the book of the Acts of the Apostles are believed to have been written by a man named Luke, who we believe was a Gentile physician. He was writing at a time when the number of Gentile followers of Jesus were beginning to outnumber the number of Jewish followers of Jesus. Luke never met Jesus. He was not an eyewitness to anything Jesus did. He never sat and listened to him. What he knew about Jesus, he learned from others – which really is the case for all of us, isn't it?

I've always loved Luke's gospel because it has wonderful stories that we don't find anyplace else, stories like the Samaritan woman at the well, the lost sheep, and the Prodigal Son to mention just a few. Luke's emphasis is often on including and reaching, “the lost, the last, and the least”. Volume 2 of his writing, The Acts of the Apostles begins with Jesus telling his followers that they were to be his “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

Today's story about Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch is part of a much larger story of the universal embrace of the gospel, and it is a very personal story of the inclusion of one of those “last, lost, and least” persons. But it's also a story that speaks to us today.

When the early church started to experience persecution, the believers were spread to different parts of the then known world. Philip found himself preaching and teaching about Jesus to the Samaritans – a group who were considered outsiders. He was amazed how happily they responded to his teaching, but suddenly he found himself on a wilderness road encountering an Ethiopian Eunuch. I don't really have time to get into a long explanation of all that involves but, for now, let me just say that by the definition of the day, he was neither fully male nor was he female.

He was reading from the prophet Isaiah, and Philip went alongside him and asked if he understood what he was reading. His response was, "How can I unless someone guides me?" There was good reason for his response. In the book of Deuteronomy, there seems to be real clarity that someone like him could have only very limited involvement in the Jewish faith because eunuchs were deemed to be scarred defective men. But he was reading from the prophet Isaiah which offers hope to captives, to the poor, the sick, the outcast, and even to eunuchs.

How was he to understand, unless someone could explain it to him, could help him understand? These conflicting passages raised more questions than answers. Was he in or was he out? He needed someone to help him understand. He needed someone who didn't just know what the scripture said, but also and more importantly, knew the God of the scripture.

The story is told of a speaker at a large event who laid out in great detail why it was foolish to believe in Jesus. At the end of his lecture, he asked if there were any questions. An elderly man arose and slowly walked toward the stage. He took an orange out of his pocket, slowly peeled it and then ate it. The speaker watched with growing impatience and demanded, "Do you have a question for me?" "Yes," the man replied. "How did my orange taste?"

"How should I know?" the speaker exploded. I didn't taste it. The old man replied, "Exactly. And until you have tried Jesus, you do not know what you are talking about."

Philip knew Jesus. He knew the God of the scripture and he was ready to respond when the eunuch asked his next question. "About whom does the prophet say this? About himself, or about someone else?"

The passage he was reading is called one of the suffering servant songs, and describes one who was led to his death and humiliated and denied justice. The eunuch is likely asking if this applied only to a specific person, or could it apply to him as well? Isaiah is describing what could be his experience as well.

Philip explained to him that Jesus had experienced this humiliation and death. He explained to him that God understands the human situation of humiliation, of pain, of being ostracized or cut off. He explained that Jesus took on that role. When seen through the lens of Jesus death and resurrection, he begins to see that there is hope, and restoration for him as well.

The biblical word is never only about back then. It is about today and tomorrow as well. It is about the human condition. It is about our times of pain and sorrow; our times of feeling cut-off or outside; it may tell us about the past, but it is also about our time and our circumstances.

Faced with hope, as they come upon water, the eunuch asks, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Philip could have answered based on the laws from Deuteronomy. There were several things that could have been roadblocks to his baptism.

But Philip also recognized that the Holy Spirit had brought him to this place. The Holy Spirit had guided him while he preached and taught among the Samaritans who responded with such joy to the good news about Jesus. Philip listened to the Holy Spirit speaking in the circumstances of that day, and of a man who wanted to be connected with God.

And so, guided by the Holy Spirit, walls of prejudice and prohibition came tumbling down. Guided by the Holy Spirit, who had led him to be a guide for the Ethiopian Eunuch, Philip went down into the water with him and baptized him. A man who had felt lost and humiliated was found and in the wideness of God's grace he was restored and welcomed.

Jesus' resurrection meant new and radical experiences and understanding. It meant an upheaval to all they had believed and it meant radical change. Luke who learned about Jesus from others, was a witness to this change and this expansion of the gospel well beyond its previous limits. This is one of many stories about that ever

widening circle of those who came to believe and who came to be included because of the grace and the love of God shown through Jesus.

The table expanded that day. There was room at the table of fellowship for an Ethiopian Eunuch. Throughout the book of Acts, we see the table being expanded more and more so that there is always room to include anyone who truly seeks to know more about Jesus, who wants to respond to God's loving invitation to be included, to be part of the fellowship of God's love.

At this point in the Acts of the Apostles, we have seen Samaritans responding with joy. We now see a person who was from far away and who didn't fit the expected gender roles and identities suddenly included through the agency of the Holy Spirit. If we read on, we will see the inclusion of Gentiles – which would have included Luke himself, who bears witness to this expanded table and community.

This is a wonderful picture of what the church is, or is called to be. John tells us that we are joined to Jesus like vines to a branch. We become part of Jesus in such a way that it becomes part of us to love as Jesus loved. Love flows from him to us and through us to others. So that, as John describes it, we bear fruit and the table expands more, so that there is always room for one more, for two more, for many more, because there is no limit on God's inclusive love.

Let us pray:

God of love, as you sent Philip to be present with one of your searching children, you also send us into our world to be present to others. As Philip listened to the Holy Spirit, help us to listen. Help us to be your hands and feet reaching out to all of your people, not just the ones with whom we are comfortable. Help us to be open to where and how your Spirit calls and invites us to extend your table so that there is room for all of your children. Help us to be open to the new ways that you may be working in and through us, we pray. Amen.