

MENTORS WELCOME

This morning's story from Acts centers around Philip. And the first thing we need to note is that this is not Philip the apostle but Philip the evangelist. These are two different Philips. Not Philip who was one of the 12 original disciples of Jesus but Philip who was one of seven chosen as the first "deacons" to assist in the expanding ministry of early church. He was a Greek in Jerusalem, appointed to run the food pantry, clinic and hospice program there, so the Twelve did not need to tend to such petty concerns as food and drink. He eventually moved on from as waiting on tables in Jerusalem to serving in Samaria as one commentator has put it "an evangelistic front man for Peter and John." He was part of the evolving nature of the early church. We are, after all, in the Book of Acts, which tells the story of how those followers of Jesus expanded into a larger group and took the "good news," the gospel beyond Jerusalem to a wider world. We might also want to recall that Acts is actually Luke, part 2, since most scholars agreed that the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were composed by the same author and tell one continuous story.

So, where are we in this story? Well, we're past the Pentecost story, which we'll hear more about in a couple of weeks. Today's account is sandwiched between two significant stories, the stoning to death of Stephen (while Paul – then Saul – watched and approved) and the conversion of Saul to Paul. In between these two dramatic moments we get some stories about Philip. The first, story which happens just before our passage this morning, has to do with Philip's encounter with Simon the Great or Simon the magician. You can read about that on your own.

This morning we pick up with Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip finds himself in this chance encounter because an angel of the Lord comes to him and tells him to "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza" which the narrator tells us is a wilderness road. So, Philip gets up and goes. There he notices an Ethiopian eunuch sitting in his chariot reading scriptures – specifically Isaiah. I'm guessing Philip didn't notice this right away since we are told the Spirit comes to Philip and says, "Go over to the chariot and join it." So Philip goes, and this leads to an incredible encounter and ultimately the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch.

Now that we know just a bit about Philip, what do we know about the guy in the chariot? As one New Testament professor describes him

... an Ethiopian, he probably hails from ... south of Egypt.

The term used to describe him, "Ethiopian" (literally, "burnt face" in Greek), indicates the dark skin color of his people, but it also could have resonated with other Greco-Roman literature that speaks of "Ethiopians" as people who lived on the fringes of the inhabited world. Greco-Roman authors sometimes use the term when characterizing sub-Saharan Africans as residents of a totally different land, almost a parallel society.

Identified repeatedly in the passage as a eunuch, it appears that, for him, castration was a condition for his position in the queen's court. Eunuchs did not fit conventional notions

of gender in the Roman world. They were simultaneously men and nonmen, neither male nor female.

Strikingly, he is described as powerful. He's an official, in charge of the queen's treasury. He's literate and wealthy enough to have an Isaiah scroll and use of a chariot.

We don't know if he was a Jew or Gentile, although we are told he came to Jerusalem to worship.

What are we to make of this Spirit directed encounter? This morning, I would invite us to consider two aspects of this story. First, what was going on in this encounter? For starters, the Ethiopian is looking for some help; he's not trying to figure out scripture by himself. I think that sometimes we assume that the Bible should be easy to understand. But it's not. It is not easily accessible. The Ethiopian understand this and was looking for a guide. Notice, I didn't say teacher. He was looking for a biblical scholar, an authority on scripture. He was looking for a guide – a mentor. As one pastor has noted,

Teachers point and say, "Go there, do that." Guides reach out and say, "This is the road I traveled. You might want to try it, but whatever road you choose, I'd like to walk it with you." Philip got in the chariot with the Ethiopian. Luke went out of his way to say that both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water for the baptism.

Guides come after you if you lose your way. The church, I am convinced, needs fewer teachers and more guides....

I think being a guide, a mentor to someone seeking to learn more of the faith is something we can all do. You don't have to be a pastor or a seminary graduate to do that. Yes, if someone truly wants to dig into the scripture you can point them in the right direction to a Bible study or pastor, but most folks want to know what the faith means to you. Why is it important? How do *you* read scripture? How does it speak to you? How does it intersect with your life? We should never be afraid to share those stories when asked.

The second point I'd invite us to consider is the Ethiopians status as an outsider and what that can tell us about being the church. Philip didn't question who the Ethiopian was. He didn't ask why or how he became a eunuch. He didn't inquire about his position the queen's court. He wasn't put off by the Ethiopian's skin color or economic status (which was in some ways probably above Philip's). He simply met the Ethiopian where he was.

As on Open and Affirming congregation I'd like to think that when it comes to issues of sexual identity, gender, sexual orientation that we are prepared to be like Philip – to welcome and engage and extend extravagant hospitality. I do wonder at times how far we are willing to go when it comes to other matters. There is much talk these days about the white church and race. The other day I watched the recent documentary, *White Savior: Racism in the American Church* At one point the narrator notes

...even well-meaning, white congregations who might want to reflect the full diversity of the U.S. population struggle with the reality that their theology and practices are immersed in white cultural norms that alienate people of color.

Commenting on our theology, another commentator in the film states

We centralize Western theology, by just calling it theology, and all the others are on the periphery - Black Theology, Womanist Theology, Liberation Theology - and we've created an otherness by saying you're not the norm.

And finally, a black professor reflects on her personal experience with visiting a white congregation:

I sat down; I was prayed over; I was sung to; I was preached at; and I was dismissed. For me, there was no spiritual component to the worship service, and I thought it was very sterile.

As we emerge from COVID-19 to a new normal what might these reflections say to us? How might we radically extend our welcome by rethinking who we are, by reshaping how we worship? We will need some guides and mentors for that. I bet we can find them.

AMEN.