

Fifth Sunday After Easter  
Acts 8:23-40  
Psalm 22:25-31  
1 John 4:7-21  
John 15:1-8

Pastor Lindsey Jorgensen-Skakum  
April 29, 2018  
Holy Spirit Lutheran Church

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Grace and peace to you from our Risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – Amen.

This morning I'd like to turn our attention back to our first reading - this peculiar story from the book of Acts. It's not a story we are accustomed to hearing in the lectionary and you might have even found yourself wondering what this strange narrative is all about. After all it's not every Sunday we hear about an affluent Ethiopian eunuch who demands to understand the word of God and receive the gift of baptism. So I'd like to take the opportunity to explore this text a little bit more with you this morning.

While we all may be more familiar with Jesus "A-Team" of apostles – Peter, Matthew, Andrew, James, and John – this morning we are introduced to Philip, one of the seven deacons the apostles elected to help tend to the poorest amongst the Christian community in Jerusalem. Now, these deacons were chosen to allow the "A-team" (apostles) to spend more time concentrating on preaching, praying, and teaching within the growing early church.

Which meant these seven deacons were often sent out to some of the least desirable locations within Jerusalem. They weren't the model leaders of theological thought the apostles were, and they certainly weren't asked to preach or proclaim the good news of God. But they were called upon to care for God's people who had been left behind or forgotten.

So in a way Philip and the rest of his crew were some the earliest front-line workers in Jerusalem – helping people to understand that Jesus had a valued place for everyone within his upside-down kingdom. A place where they could find understanding and acceptance through the grace, love, and forgiveness of God.

However, by the time we catch up with Philip in the eighth chapter of Acts this morning, he is no longer tending to the widows and the outcasts of Jerusalem. He has branched out in his ministry after hearing the call of the Spirit to spread the gospel within Samaria.

And while the lion's share of Philip's ministry as a deacon had led him to be in relationship with people society would have deemed to be beyond the grace of God – likely none of those encounters had fully prepared Philip for who he was about to meet.

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This unnamed outsider among outsiders, this Ethiopian eunuch making his way back home from Jerusalem.

So what made this unnamed man such an outcast when compared to the rest?

Well, for starters, he was easily marked as an alien and foreigner in the midst of that first century community. He didn't look, act, or speak like anyone they had ever come to know before. And if his looks didn't give him away in an instant - his customs and mannerisms simply went to prove that he wasn't even a citizen of the Roman Empire. To say it quite simply, this first century community could tell this man was from the brink of their world – a brink many wished they could quickly push him back to before he settled in.

Unfortunately, this unnamed Ethiopian man's overlapping experiences of marginalization and oppression didn't just stop with the place of his birth or the color of his skin. While he was carrying the holy word of the prophet Isaiah, the community could tell he certainly wasn't a member of any of the twelve tribes of Israel. To many people of faith during that time – this eunuch would have symbolized a violation of boundaries that would have excluded him from any relationship with God's family. Due to eunuchs' ambiguous gender identity or their inability to produce a family - they were excluded from worshiping in the temple or for joining in other ritual practices of the faith community.

Yet, against all these odds, we come to find this unknown outsider, this Ethiopian eunuch, returning from not only a trip to Jerusalem – but a trip to visit the very temple he was banned from entering. A man who faithful desired to know and understand more about God, led him to acquire and read from the prophets scroll on his journey back home. Refusing to be told he was too different, too broken, or too alien to ever be considered a member of the family of God.

And in the midst of this all, God breaks into this moment to absolutely declare to this man through the witnessing of Philip, and the waters of baptism – that he is a beloved and cherished child of God – no matter what the rest of the world is saying.

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This is what I love most about this story from the book of Acts. The unexpected and unpredictable nature of the good news of God breaking into our world. The Holy Spirit sending the least likely of people, to the least likely of places, to share their story while building relationships that reflect the love of Christ.

And the best part of this whole narrative for us today – is that we are encouraged to remember that we each have our own story to tell of God’s grace and forgiveness that has come to break down the barriers of our own brokenness.

This is likely one reason why this text doesn’t even give us the words Philip used to share this good news with the man from Ethiopia that day. It doesn’t give us a three-part story of our salvation to memorize, or even give us pointers on how to get these conversations started with people we come to meet. Instead the narrative chooses to remind us that we each have a unique story to tell and that there is always room for each of us in the family of God.

A story that began for many of us long ago, when we were welcomed into the family of God through our Baptism. A story we were joined to when we were splashed with the sacred waters of creation. Waters that not only named and claimed us as Gods own, but waters that have united us with the saints of God in every time and place. Saints like Mary and Martha, Peter and Paul, even Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch – who upon hearing that this good news of God’s love applied to him as well - prophetically asked to be brought into these storied waters. Challenging every word or rule that had even been spoken against him to keep him from truly belonging.

We live in a world longing to hear this story. Yearning for healing, searching for community, and seeking faith and hope. Too often we have been tempted to kept the gift of our faith or the welcome of this community to ourselves – and for far too long the institutionalized church has tried to designate who is in and who is out when it comes to the beloved family of God.

So how do we begin to break down the fears and barriers that keep us from sharing this amazing grace we have received from God?

How do we begin to tell this story?

We start in four small ways: worship, prayer, welcome, and love.

We continue to place worship in a central place in our lives – allowing us to be fed, washed, and encouraged to live as beloved children of God.

We lift up our families, our neighborhoods, and our faith community in prayer – engaging in a posture that will turn us from ourselves and back to the call of the Spirit.

We welcome people into our lives, our church, and our community – holding space for them to experience the good news of Christ we have received.

And as we do we come to listen for the Holy Spirits prompting as Philip did so many years ago – trusting that God will lead us in faith and love to share our story as beloved children of God.

Four simple acts that turn us once more to share the Good News we have all received from God.

Worship, Prayer, Welcome and Love.

And it's through the sharing of these small actions that the Spirit will continue to move and breath in the midst of our community, destroying the walls and barriers that have kept us from sharing the hope we have received.

Hope, this man from Ethiopia was able grasp when Philip helped him to see a community where he could be baptized, cherished, and loved by God – even in the face of all that had threatened to keep him down.

A reality many of us have come to know here at Holy Spirit as we have been welcomed just as we are to grow in the grace and love of Christ.

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Both through the waters of baptism and the sharing of bread and wine at the Lord's table – we are continually welcomed, refreshed, and sent out to share the good news of God – welcoming all to experience and know the amazing gift of God's love.

A love that flows over borders and boundaries, languages and cultures, uniting us all in the waters of Christ's grace, forgiveness, and love.

So people of God let this love be a foundation for our lives today.

Let it remind you that you are a beloved child of God with an important story to share.

A story of God's great love and welcome that has brought you here.

And may this be so among us - amen.