

Sermon: Acts 8:26-38

Not Cut Off

-At the beginning of the year as we celebrate Epiphany our congregation draws words written on yellow stars. They symbolize the star that guided the wise men to Jesus. They're meant to offer some reflection and potential focus in our spiritual walk. So I wanted to ask: Do you remember your star word? Has the Lord used it's light to guide your way to him?

The word I drew for the year is Unity. Take a second to just imagine into that word and feel it's hope. As the bombs continue to fall, consider: what would a world united in the humility and mutual forbearance of Love for God and neighbor feel like?

You may remember how we spent a summer a couple years ago wrestling with how followers of Christ might respond faithfully to the animosity of the American tug of war that falsely politicizes everything into a tug of war.

How Allen Hilton taught us that we Americans have caught a sickness he calls 'selective empathy.' Meaning that increasingly we have a value problem. We are coming to value others worthy of our compassion only to the extent that they agree with us. So much that we, in fact, have come to count those who even disagree with us our enemies. This means that the surround-sound and trajectory of our experience is pointing us toward prejudice against those who are different. It means that the thin sense of kinship we do feel is increasingly found in dehumanizing other people together. The angry pleasure of being 'us vs. them.' Brene Brown has called this skewed sense of belonging 'common-enemy intimacy.'

One day the world will be fully unified in the Love of Jesus. How much feels like too much to ask of you or me when it comes to seeking to understand and honor someone whose (racial, religious, sexual, political, educational, financial) story is different from yours or mine?

Our Scripture comes from Acts 8. We're watching as Jesus' call to his apprentices unfolds to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. As we read, listen for how the Spirit is on the move to draw disciples out of a sinful 'selective empathy' for our own kind, out of a sinful 'common-enemy intimacy' into a running pursuit of persons easily othered, too easily cut off.

-I'm reading from Acts 8.26-40:

[A]n angel (that is messenger) of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) 27 So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." 30 So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 32 Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
33 In his humiliation justice was denied him.
And his generation, who even cares,
that he was cut off from the land of the living.”

34 The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” 35 Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 36 As they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” 38 He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing.

The Word of the Lord. Let's pray. Holy Spirit, move in us. Prompt us to pursue your surprising calling, not only to tolerate others, but to run to them. Amen.

-OK. So Jesus calls disciples to be witnesses. What do witnesses do? They tell the truth about what they've seen and heard. You can think of serving as a witness as sharing your own story of faith. Communicating your own experience of Christ alive. The Greek word for 'witness' is martyr. And from the beginning to be a Christ-follower carries this joyful, sacrificial responsibility to belong to Jesus regardless of discomfort or danger. (It's significant that the Philip of our story is not the same Philip as one of Jesus' 12. The mission is expanding. This Philip became a 'witness' on the day he became an apprentice of Jesus. He was ordained a deacon alongside Stephen.)

If making Jesus known is part of what it means to belong to him, then we can expect that God will give us the opportunity to act upon it. Philip senses the Spirit of God. An invisible messenger. A divine nudge. To travel the wilderness road going down from Jerusalem to Gaza. Philip trusts that if the Lord is alive, then our days are no longer our own. That there will be divine appointments. God-given adventures and meetings. Often beyond his understanding or comfort.

-Does this happen to you? Are you expecting it? Are you making yourself available to the nudging of God's Spirit to pursue God's purposes? (I've felt like I'm being prompted to this conversation with you over God's Word about how we might respond to the crisis of our time by bringing hope to our American divide, by growing myself to be less afraid of differences, trying - and let's be honest, sometimes failing - to speak the truth in love, not shying away from siding with Scripture or offering mercy.)

-So the Spirit prompts Philip to do this uncomfortably strange thing. To run up to a chariot on the road to Gaza and see what happens. To pursue a (boundary-breaking) divine appointment. / Seated inside the chariot is an Ethiopian court official. (Maybe you've been studying a map of the Middle East this week. Ethiopia is an African country south of Egypt & Sudan, not on the water, but just across the Red Sea from Yemen).

The Ethiopian is described as a eunuch, a man who has been castrated for royal service. Can you imagine being known for this unspeakable act of violence!? The logic was that without a distracting sexual drive or

responsibilities to family, a eunuch's loyalties to authority could be considered unwavering. So some men were quite literally cut off to be put in charge of a harem or in this case, of the queen's treasury.

So here's a person – no matter his advanced standing in the court – who's endured the grief of a number of permanent losses. And it seems that not only matters of diplomacy, but spiritual longing have drawn him to Jerusalem. He's come to worship, and no doubt been disappointed.

As a Gentile (non-Jew) he would already have been excluded from full participation in the Temple. When Paul is later accused of bringing even a tan-skinned Greek into the Temple precinct, a riot breaks out. Imagine a coffee-colored Ethiopian man – so obviously an outsider.

You know that in the Temple there was a Court of the Gentiles full of money changing and animal sales. Ostensibly non-Jews could worship at some distance. But the law of Moses considered castration a defect. It forbade the presence of such a person in the Temple: 'No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.' (Deuteronomy 23:1). So our Ethiopian court official was a Gentile. He was foreign. He was Black. He was castrated. He was other. And the 'people of God' would have found their religious justification from our Scriptures to ostracize him.

And that's what makes the passage Philip hears him reading so remarkable. The Ethiopian man reads from Isaiah 53. As I read it again, listen for how a man in so many ways wounded might identify with the Servant Isaiah portrays as despised and rejected, humiliated and cut off.

“...Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
33 In his humiliation justice was denied him.
And his generation, who even cares,
that he was cut off from the land of the living.”

Our Ethiopian friend so identifies! He hungers to know just whom Isaiah was writing about. And this is when Philip runs up to the chariot. This is when Philip crosses many a line to share his experience of Jesus. Jesus, who suffered for the resurrection of a life together where being foreign, crushed or cutoff, does not, cannot sever your personhood from the full embrace of the living Lord.

-Brian McLaren tells a story from his early days of serving as a pastor (McLaren, Brian, A New Kind of Christianity, 185-6):

Our little church had outgrown our living room and was meeting in an elementary-school cafeteria in a poor part of town...I had recently met a Kenyan graduate student named Francis at a party and invited him to church. This was his first Sunday visiting. Francis had suffered from polio as a child, so he walked with braces, his muscular upper body poised like a robust triangle above his shriveled lower body. I remember after the service, after nearly all the metal folding chairs had been stacked away, seeing Francis sitting folded over on a lone chair in the middle of the room. He was gently shaking, his face buried in his hands, his forehead touching his knees.

I gently touched his shoulder. 'Francis, are you okay?'

He raised his face, tears streaming down his coffee brown cheeks. 'Oh, dear brother, these are tears of joy,' he said.

'I don't understand,' I replied. 'What happened?'

'This is my first time celebrating the Holy Supper,' he said, referring to the [Lord's Supper].

'But, Francis, I thought you told me that you had been a Christian since childhood.'

'Oh, yes, but until today I have never shared in the Holy Supper,' he replied. 'You see,' he added, as if his explanation would make perfect sense to me, 'I am the child of the third wife.'

He went on to explain that the Anglican Church in Kenya, of which he was part, had made a policy for polygamous converts. Only the children of the first wife could participate in the [Lord's Supper]. 'When I came here today, Brian,' he said, 'and when you said that all were welcome to the table, I realized that here I am not the child of the third wife. Here I am simply Francis, a Christian, and I am welcome at the table.' /

-Our Ethiopian friend was reading Isaiah. About the Servant who would accomplish God's dreams for the world. Isaiah, Jesus' inspiration, whose prophetic vision of God's inclusion upended even the exclusions written into the law of Moses. (This is a case where the biblical writers hear God's Word differently.) Listen to this passage from just three chapters farther on than they were reading in the chariot. This is Isaiah 56.3-8:

Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,

 "The Lord will surely separate me from his people,"

and do not let the eunuch say,

 "I am just a dry tree."

4 For thus says the Lord:

To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
 who choose the things that please me
 and hold fast my covenant,

5 I will give, in my house and within my walls,
 a monument and a name
 better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name
 that shall not be cut off.

6 And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,
 to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,
 and to be his servants,

all who keep the Sabbath and do not profane it
 and hold fast my covenant—

7 these I will bring to my holy mountain
 and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
 will be accepted on my altar,
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
 for all peoples.

8 Thus says the Lord God,
 who gathers the outcasts of Israel:

I will gather others to them
 besides those already gathered.

In Jesus will be found a new covenant. A new creation. A new community. The new, blossoming belonging to God and one another that includes the foreigner, and makes the eunuch a brother. A name, a belonging, that is better than sons and daughters! An everlasting name that 'shall never be cut off.' This is the new reality launched by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead!

How much othering goes on in my sinful selective empathy? In my sinful common-enemy intimacy?

But did you hear? 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples?' Where have we heard those words before? They're the words Jesus quotes from Isaiah as he overturns tables in Temple Courts pursuing a place of prayer for Gentiles, a house united for eunuchs and foreigners, the outcasts of Israel and of Israel's Scripture.

How can we not think of those we consider politically cut off? But this passage goes deeper still.

Did you notice:

Thus says the Lord God,
 who gathers the outcasts of Israel:
I will gather others to them
 besides those already gathered.

Our brother from Ethiopia asks: What's to keep me from baptism? Philip's Answer: NOTHING. No thing keeps you from being welcomed into the gracious waters of Jesus Christ./

Do you need to hear that today? Because we can say the same to one another. Nothing. Not your hidden sin. Not your shame. Not your outsider status.

So you, my friend, whoever you are, are not 'the child of the third wife.' You are not, as some would have said to the Ethiopian, a non-Jewish, foreign, physically-damaged, sexually-defect, religious outsider. You are not a damn conservative. You are not a damn liberal. You are the one the Lord baptizes with his love. //

But immediately. Immediately, as soon as we emerge from the waters of love, we have to say this. In Lent we try to tell the truth about ourselves. So we have to say this. Selective empathy and common-enemy intimacy are sin.

If I am the one the Lord baptizes with his grace, So is this person that would be so easy to Other. So is this person it would be so easy for me to discount and dehumanize. So is this person it would be so easy for me to cut off.

Scripture suggests that our Ethiopian friend was the first non-Jewish-person to be baptized. Tradition goes further, claiming he was the first Christian disciple in Africa, the first (before Paul!) to expand and extend the good news of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

Immediately, if I am baptized by the love of Christ, I, like Philip, I like this newly minted ambassador of Jesus to Ethiopia, have a mission to listen for the Spirit. Immediately, I have a mission to run up to chariots.

I have Christ's mission to abandon my selective empathy. To push back against my common-enemy intimacy. To break social boundaries. To overcome religious and political barriers. I have Christ's mission to include the excluded. To respect the disrespected beyond their deserving in the dignifying love of Christ toward the world that will one day find its unity in his mercy. //

Let us be together in Lenten prayer...

How do you hear the Lord convicting you of your sin?/

How do you hear the Lord encouraging you with a vision of the love you were made for?/

How do you hear the Lord inviting to return to him with all your heart?/

Amen.