



A Freeing and Invitational Gospel

Acts 8:26-40

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

April 25, 2021

If you look up the definition of *church* in the dictionary, or if you ask, “Alexa, what is the definition of the church?,” you’re likely to get a response like, “a building used for public Christian worship.”

If you look this up on Wikipedia, you’ll find the *Christian Church* defined as “a Protestant ecclesiological term referring to the church invisible comprising all Christians.” In other words, it is anything but a building. The Christian Church is the corporate makeup of all who profess Christ as Lord, regardless of denominational affiliation, location, or even the era in which you live. The Christian Church is comprised of saints and sinners, both past and present, who profess Christ as Lord. It is the Spirit-gifted witness of God’s love in Jesus Christ for the world.

In this season of Easter, we are looking at the early Church – the first members of this Spirit-gifted witness – to consider how we might reclaim our purpose and our call as the Church today. We’re using the book of Acts, as it provides the earliest witness of the Christian Church.

This morning’s text is found in Acts 8, which marks a profound change in the early witness of the church. Up until this point, in the first seven chapters of Acts, the work of the early church was focused on helping Jews understand the truth of Christ as resurrected Lord. Everyone who joins the early Church in the first seven chapters comes from a Jewish background.

But the early Church has been called out of Judea. In chapter 7, a handful of Jews who lived outside of Judea were chosen to serve as leaders in the Christian Church, having been invited to proclaim the news of Jesus in their region of residence. Two of those leaders are Philip and Stephen.

Stephen was called to account for his profession of Christ as Lord by the Jewish community. In his sermonic response, he called the Jews “stiff-necked” for their inability to see Christ as the fulfillment of the Messianic promise. That didn’t sit well, nor did his absolute conviction in the resurrection of Jesus, and the claim of Jesus as God’s Son and Savior. In response to his profession of faith, Stephen was stoned. He was taken to the edge of town and killed.

In response to his death, many who professed Christ as Lord were persecuted in Judea, and Luke tells us in the Acts narrative that the early Church left Jerusalem and scattered out into the hillsides of Judea and Samaria.

Philip was one of those sent into Samaria, where he proclaimed the Word – the promise of Christ. We're told in Acts 8 that crowds of people listened to Philip, and they witnessed the signs that he did, curing the lame, and driving out spirits from people who were possessed. So many people came to accept the Word, that Christ is Lord, that Peter and John came from Jerusalem to see for themselves the work of God in this Samaritan community. This is the first time we see the Christian Church making inroads in a non-Jewish space. When Peter and John arrived, they found a people who were willing, who had accepted that Christ is Lord, but who had as of yet not received the Spirit or been baptized. Though they came to believe as the church believes, they had not been welcomed into the Church community.

It seems that though Philip was proclaiming the gospel message, and that his preaching was effective ... people believed what he had to say ... he had not begun to invite the Samaritans to receive the fullness of Christ's invitation to join in the Church. He had not baptized them, and they had not received the Spirit. So Peter and John, having arrived there in Samaria, seeing that these were believers in Christ, began to lay their hands on the people of Samaria that they might receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and be welcomed in the movement of the early Church.

It's important to know that, though Philip had been there proclaiming the promise of God and inviting people to know Christ as Lord, the people had not received the Spirit in Philip's presence. Sometimes, no matter the giftedness of the preacher, the message is found to be lacking in invitation. That seems to have been true for Philip, and is worth naming as we turn to today's text.

As we arrive at verse 26, we find that an angel of the Lord has told Philip to take the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, defined as "the wilderness road." He's being led into the hinterlands of Judea. Theologian Martin Marty compares this wilderness road to the edge of a desert, where one might find a gas station with a sign reading, "Last gas for 150 miles ..."ⁱ He's out there alone, wandering along this relatively unused section of highway when he spots a chariot riding by.

This is no ordinary chariot – it's high class. In fact, this chariot belongs to the Queen of Ethiopia, and it carries none other than the Queen's Secretary of the Treasury.

Philip receives a nudging from the Spirit to go catch the chariot. What happens next should be read for the humor it presents.

Did you ever watch the show, *Whose Line is It Anyway?* (I'm talking the original version with Drew Carey, not the revival attempt on the CW.) Host Drew Carey would invite the contestants to participate in a series of improv sketches, giving out points with no point. The show was just for fun. Wayne Brady, Colin Mochrie, and Ryan Stiles were the regular participants, joined by some other comedians to complete the cast in each episode.

One of my favorite sketches was when they'd have two people engaged in conversation using nothing but questions. If someone made a statement, or couldn't think of a question to ask, they were buzzed out, and another contestant would take their place.

I want you to picture that kind of improv sketch as we skim through this reading in Acts 8. The conversation in the text offers little more than questions being asked back and forth between Philip, who is running alongside the chariot, and the eunuch riding on the chariot, who happens to work for the Queen of Ethiopia.

The eunuch had been reading from the Book of Isaiah when Philip enters the conversation.

Setting the stage, Philip, who is now running alongside the chariot, hears the eunuch reading the text aloud and shouts, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

The eunuch replies, shouting back at Philip, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

The eunuch is kind enough at this point to stop the chariot so that Philip might get in and sit beside him.

As they continue on their ride, the eunuch continues in question, "About whom, may I ask, does the prophet say this, about himself or someone else?"

Luke doesn't recall the rest of the conversation verbatim in his telling of the story, he just gives the narrative interjection that Philip proclaimed the good news of Jesus. As they were riding along, they came upon some water, and the questions begin again as the eunuch asks, "Look, here is water. What is to prevent me from being baptized?" ... Drew Carey would have buzzed him out, for he began his question with a statement.

I name the humor in this sketch because I think it's important we look at this text in a new way. See, this text is often utilized to highlight the importance of evangelism in the church. Perhaps you've heard this interpretation before: the Spirit led Philip to go and engage with this Ethiopian eunuch of the Queen's court that the Ethiopian might accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. That's a common reading for this text. And, as we've seen, Philip is a good preacher – many people who have heard his teaching have come to accept Christ as Lord.

What Philip has not shown is an ability to really welcome people into the Church community. In Samaria, he had convinced many to believe the Word that Jesus is Lord – but none had been baptized or received the Spirit, which for the early church is the indicator of one's welcome into the Christian community. It was Peter and John who welcomed the new believers into the church, not Philip.

So look again at this text.

Philip has been led by the Spirit to encounter an Ethiopian eunuch of royal power. A few things stand out – an Ethiopian eunuch with royal power is about as “othered” as one can be for a man from Judea. Bishop William Willimon notes that for the Greco-Roman world, the term “Ethiopian” was often an indicator of the individual’s black skin.¹¹ He would have visually looked different than Philip. But Ethiopia was also about as distant a land as one could fathom from Judea. It was a far-off distant space, that was indicative of his being “not from around here.” This man is made known in the text to be eunuch – a man who has been castrated, which was common for men serving in the high court of ancient empires. And he’s serving in the Queen’s high court; this man is welcomed by and serves among royalty. He and Philip couldn’t be much different.

Again, as they are riding down the road, they come across some water. Notice, it is not Philip who invites the eunuch to be baptized. It is the eunuch who says, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

I can’t help but wonder if Luke missed telling us about the Spirit’s follow up question, as the prodding of God asked, “*Yes, Philip, what is to prevent this man from being baptized?*”

Philip had been so good at preaching the good news of Christ, and yet, he was still limited in his understanding of who could be a part of this Jesus movement. We saw it Samaria, and we’re seeing it here. It seems the Spirit didn’t lead Philip to come and convince this man to believe in Jesus, it seems the Spirit led Philip to come and see how powerful the invitation of God in Jesus Christ is – that no differentiation should prohibit one from being welcomed into the church.

Look at the text! The eunuch, not Philip, invited the baptism. The eunuch, not Philip, ordered the chariot to be stopped. The only thing Philip gets credit for, is that by the time they reach the water, he’s willing, and Philip baptized the man.

As a sign of confirmation that this is the work of God, as soon as they came out of the water, the Spirit snatched Philip away. The lesson was over. Philip would find himself relocated in Azotus – which is a region on the coast of Israel north of Gaza, and he would travel up the coast preaching the Gospel. The Ethiopian would continue on his way back home, rejoicing.

Listen Church, this story is powerful, if we are only willing to see what God is doing – what the Spirit is doing. This isn’t simply a story that say evangelism is important, it’s a story that says you have no say in who God invites into the Church. It says that people don’t have to be just like you or me, they don’t have to look like you or me, they don’t have to have the same socio-economic position as you or me, they don’t even have to have the same sexuality as you or me to be invited and welcomed as a part of the Christian community.

Philip had a limited understanding of who could be in the *in crowd*, but the Spirit said “NO!” You go where *I call* you to go. Don’t limit my work in this world. And that’s where I think we, as the Church today, need to relearn our calling and purpose. I can hear the Spirit calling us just as sure as the Spirit called Philip, saying, “Stop trying to limit my work in this world. I am the one in

charge!” Hear this Church, we need to stop trying to limit who can receive the Good News – who can be welcomed into the body of Christ. It is our calling to preach and teach the good news, and then to rejoice in celebration and welcome all who proclaim that Christ is Lord.

One final thing ... look at the story. Look at the text. For those who might be wondering, after his baptism, the Ethiopian eunuch of the Queen’s high court was no less Ethiopian, he was no less a eunuch, he was no less a member of the Queen’s high court. His culture, his personhood, his occupation, his being different than Philip – *none of that changed*. He didn’t become a Jew. He didn’t become less black. He didn’t quit his job in the halls of royalty. What was different was that now ... now ... he was a Ethiopian eunuch of the Queen’s high court who was also a baptized member of the body of Christ, and he went away rejoicing.

The power of God in Jesus Christ is invitational, so we shouldn’t be surprised when others find life – find love – find welcome in the Spirit’s embrace. May the Spirit lead us, call us into relationship with those who may be very different than us, that we might proclaim God’s love for all people together, and welcome everyone into the body of the risen Lord. Amen.

ⁱ Doug Bratt. cep.calvinseminary. Retrieved April 27, 2021.

ⁱⁱ William H. Willimon. *Acts, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988.