

August 13, 2017

Lesson 11: Called to Break Down Barriers

Scripture: Acts 8: 26-39

Context:

Today our lesson continues with a look into the Book of Acts. In this passage, we get a little more exposure to Stephen, an early church leader. Stephen first appears in chapter six as one of the seven chosen to make decisions in the early church. He was noted for “the way God’s grace was at work in his life and for his exceptional endowment with divine power.”¹ Stephen was obviously respected in the church community and seen as someone to look towards as an example.

In the passage before, we read that Peter, John, and Philip had been preaching and baptizing believers in Samaria.² But as they return, an angel gives Philip different instructions. Philip is to go down a deserted road at noon and awaits what is to come. What he comes across is an Ethiopian man on his way home from Jerusalem. The man is a eunuch and the official responsible for the treasury of Candace, the title given to the Ethiopian queen. Contrary to the popular interpretation, we do not need think that eunuch means a castrated male excluded from the temple.³ Instead, we are to focus more on the fact that this is a story that focuses on an important man, a wealthy foreigner, potentially a Jew, and someone who is powerful as a queen’s minister.⁴ Yet, he does not understand the words which he reads and wants to know more.

For the early church, this dialogue would have been intriguing. In the Greco-Roman world, the term “Ethiopian” referred to people who were dark; what we could call “black” today.⁵ He is someone who would not have been common in the Jewish or Roman world. Most ancient people would have venerated him instead of despising him because of his unique color.⁶ He is exotic and comes from an official court.

As the chariot nears Philip, the Spirit prods him to approach this carriage. As he eavesdrops, Philip can tell that he is reading the scrolls from Isaiah. When the two begin a conversation, the man invites Philip to help him understand the passage that has captured his attention. The scripture comes from Isaiah 53, which would have referred to a prophet of some sort. As the eunuch asks questions, Philip is able to fill in the blanks and helps him understand that this is Jesus, the one who came for all people. Somehow, they must have wandered into the topic of becoming a part of this family of faith as the eunuch asks for Stephen to baptize him with the question: “What would keep me from being baptized?” With no response from Philip about qualifications, the eunuch is baptized and the Lord’s Spirit takes Philip away. The eunuch leaves with joy in his heart.

This passage comes at a very strategic place in the Book of Acts. This baptism

¹ Acts 6:8; NRSV.

² Acts 8: 14-24; NRSV.

³ William H. Willimon, “Acts,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1988), 71.

⁴ Ibid. 71.

⁵ Ibid. 71.

⁶ Ibid. 72.

comes between the baptism of Samaritans in the pericope before and comes before the baptism of a Gentile in chapter 10.⁷ The passage helps us to see the inclusivity of the Gospel and how the early church found itself in a place to welcome people from all backgrounds, races, socioeconomic groups, and ages. God was at work in all sorts of people and wanted the early church to wake up to the possibilities that were in front of them.

Application:

I think there are several takeaways to this passage that the church is to here today. The first focuses on the title of the lesson: “Called to break down barriers.” Barriers are sometimes things that become so ingrained in us that we don’t even notice them until someone points them out to us. When it comes to social groups, we know who we like and the groups we are in have rules for certain reasons. Those aren’t bad things; it’s important to have a support community and boundaries.

But at times I think we are called as Christians to step out of our comfort zones and to see the real and imaginary barriers that separate us from people. One of the things I’ve noticed in our world is how we tend to enjoy black and white thinking. We like our boxes and even how we can put people in boxes. If there is something or someone we don’t know, we may fear what life looks like in exploring new topics or meeting new people from different backgrounds. If anything, we try to evade the Spirit so that we can be comfortable.

What we hear in the passage is that God calls us to be in relationship with all sorts of people. I think some of my most enriching friendships have been with people who are different from me whether it is their faith background, skin color, age, gender, and even geographical location. Some of my “Yankee” colleagues from my time at Vanderbilt are some of the most genuine people I know and still call to talk about life. In those relationships, I have learned that God sends us people who are different so that we too can grow.

The second thing we hear in today’s passage is that the community of faith is open to all people. In the question we hear the eunuch asks Philip, there is a larger theological question about who gets to follow Jesus. The resounding answer is: everyone. It doesn’t matter whether you’re a wealthy “God-fearer” trying to figure out the scriptures or a skilled “reared in the faith” preacher. It doesn’t matter today whether you’re a wealthy CEO or a skilled blue - collar worker when it comes to joining the church. All are welcome by God and all are to be baptized into the faith.

I think it’s one of the favorite things I love about our denomination: we understand baptism as a means of grace that brings people into the family. Whether you are a newborn babe or an adult who has had a conversion experience, you are welcome to receive those waters and receive an affirmation from your brothers and sisters in Christ that you belong there. Do you remember your baptism? Or were you like me, someone who was baptized at two weeks old, but heard constantly about the powerful love of God and affirmed your faith by joining the church when you were young. Whenever your baptism may have been, it was a time of rejoicing. And should be something that you hold in your heart everyday.

⁷ Ibid.72.

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