

Sunday July 10, 2022
Lesson 6: Faith Transcends Culture
Scripture: Acts 8: 26-39

Context:

We continue our unit of unpacking life in the Spirit as found in the work of the early church being moved by the Holy Spirit. We continue to examine how the Holy Spirit moves Christians to conversations and to make radical decisions which bring more people into the body of Christ. Today we explore how God seeks to bring all into a united family.

The scripture lesson continues a dive into the book of Acts, which records the accounts of the early church. Like last week, we hear of how one of the elders is given a prescription by God to do something and they do so. Philip is told by an angel of the Lord to take a particular path at noon and so he follows the absurd order to walk along a deserted road. On this road, he meets an Ethiopian reading scripture and a conversation takes place. All of it is the work of the Spirit as Philip explains about what he is reading and then he goes on to Azotus.

This Ethiopian eunuch on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza is given a great deal of attention much like the centurion Cornelius. Contrary to popular interpretation, he need not be a castrated male excluded from the temple, as it is more likely he is an important man, a foreigner who is potentially a Jew, and is extremely powerful as he is tied to a queen.¹ Despite his prominence though, he is open to someone instructing him and giving answers to the text he reads.

The original audience of Luke would have been captivated by this Ethiopian. In the Greco-Roman world, the term “Ethiopian” was often applied to black people, those with dark skin which was admired among Jews and Romans.² This reminds us not to consider the Ethiopians as despised or belittled as some other scholars assert in reading this text. Instead, it intrigues the original audience and thus invites us to think about the people who intrigue us for whatever reasons.

During conversation with Philip, he is converted and then inquires about being baptized into the faith. He is thus baptized by Philip in the body of water near them and then Philip is whisked away by the Spirit. We assume from the text he could have previously been a Jew or one of the God-fearers, people who were captivated by those with a single deity who was not in idol form. Whatever the case, he is brought into the Christian faith.

The story is placed strategically between several accounts. Before this story is the account of a Samaritan who is baptized, and then this account is followed by the baptism of a Gentile.³ Thus, we are seeing how God is bringing various people into the community of faith without their national or familial background playing a role in their identity in the Christian faith. Once they join the Christians, they are made united in Christ with those different from them.

¹ Willimon, William H. “Acts,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 71.

² *Ibid.*, 72.

³ *Ibid.*

Application

Families can be both a beautiful and complex thing. Some families function as primary forms of community where if you are related to someone, you spend your time with them, your vacations with them, and they are the people you trust the most. For others, it can be the complete opposite. Family is great for the holidays and for emergency forms, and that's all. Unfortunately, there are families which are splintered due to toxicity or needed boundaries from narcissists or predators. And of course, there are also families separated due to vocational needs and quality of life issues. Yet everyone, if honest, seeks for a group to be their family.

In the Christian tradition, one of the beautiful components of belonging to the faith is having a wider family from whom we can call our various "brothers" and "sisters" in Christ. I know in recent years, I have come to see some of my colleagues and friends as family, people whom I could not imagine life without. They are people who see my strengths and growing edges and love me all the same. God has placed them in my life, and they become the spiritual fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers who are part of my tribe, complementing the beautiful biological family I belong to.

Today's scripture lesson points us to this beautiful gift we are called to embrace when it comes to being united as a family. Philip and the Ethiopian could be no more different from one another than could be. On one hand, you had someone who was a Jew from the tiny little country of Israel with no noble or elite status. And on the other hand, you had an exotic foreigner from a distant land who had wealth and prestige, with close connections to royalty. As they read the words of scripture together, God united them as brothers in Christ, making them a part of the family of God.

One of the reasons Christianity grew as wide as it did in the early church was due to how the movement was open to so many kinds of people. This was a faith where the lowest street dweller and the wealthiest family in town could be brought together because of the name of Jesus. There of course were issues as we discover in letters such as the dilemmas in Corinth and themes in the letter of James. Yet this happens in any movement where diverse groups of people are coming together and trying to figure out their identity.

If there is one thing today's church could embrace a little bit more from the early Christian church is the fact of how all sorts of people were coming to faith in Christ. This was the primary factor of what united them. It was not about where they came from, what their background looked like, what their social class dictated, or the color of their skin. The church did not have time to sit there and be the gatekeepers about who could come in and who should stay out. Instead, people were embraced and seen as new brothers and sisters in Christ.

One of the components I think which has crept into American Christianity is we struggle with sitting in grey because it is easier to see things in black and white. Our culture in some ways depends on this polarity in how we approach solving problems and doing life together. As a result, we end up making smaller families where there is no true freedom, and we even tell the Holy Spirit how certain people have no place in the family and they're better left out on the road or somewhere else.

These passages in Acts tell us a different story and the Ethiopian eunuch is just one part of the narrative. Samaritans joined the Christian Church. Gentiles joined the Christian church. Poor people joined the church. Rich Roman centurions joined the church. The list goes on and on. And as these people joined, the constant exhortation given by God was for them to keep going and growing together as a people of faith. They had been united as brothers and sisters in Christ with the command to love one another just as Christ loved all of them. This was a family

not meant to be broken apart on who did or did not find someone acceptable. God had united and what God has united let no one tear asunder.

How have you seen fellow Christians as family in Christ? What are ways we can make sure others from backgrounds different from our own know they are part of our family in Christ? How can we check ourselves to make sure our family is inclusive and not exclusive? Who is God convicting you to love as different as they may be from you? What are ways you can promote unity in your local church instead of divisiveness?

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