

5.1.25 Sermon Transcript – Acts 8:26-39

Have any of you ever been denied entry somewhere? I remember one time when I was studying abroad in London, and we took the train up to Edinburgh for a long weekend. It's actually a pretty long train ride from London to Edinburgh, especially if you're on a train that makes a lot of stops, and so we'd been on the train for probably about six hours. But we got into Edinburgh late afternoon, early evening sometime, and we got checked into our hostel, and I really wanted to get down to Holyrood House, which is at the bottom of what's called the Royal Mile. At the top of this big hill is Edinburgh Castle. At the bottom is Holyrood House, which is more like a palace. And there's some interesting history about there. In any case, I really wanted to go. And they were supposed to be open until 6 p.m. I rushed down there. And it was, I don't know, maybe 5:30 pm or something. So I thought, "I still have half an hour. I can get in and I can see things." But I got there and they said, "Sorry, we're not letting anyone else come in." I said, "But I've been on the train all day and I was rushing to get here!" They said, "Sorry, you can't come in today." I was super bummed out. I was also tired and sweaty at this point because I had rushed there. I just wanted to come in and check things out, but I was not allowed to go in. Of course this really was just it was late in the day they weren't letting more people in, but it was still very frustrating to me to have come all of this way and to rush and then to be told, "Nope sorry!" when I had been expecting to be able to go in. I did get to go back, but I know what it's like to have a particular expectation, than to be told "no."

In today's story we have the Ethiopian eunuch who has traveled from Ethiopia and he has probably just doing business up in Jerusalem when Philip encounters him. The eunuch had come a very long way, and he was a seeker. While he was there, he would have likely gone to the temple when he was in Jerusalem. He wanted to know more. He wanted to understand. He wanted to participate. He's what would have been called a "God-fearer" in the days of Jesus. But when he would have gotten to the temple, he would have been barred from total participation. Not because he was late, like I was to Holyrood House - but because of who he was. And so Philip meets this Ethiopian eunuch as Philip is on his own journey.

We know in the book of Acts that the whole mission statement is what Jesus says before he ascends: "I am going to empower you through my Holy Spirit to be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and even to the ends of the earth." And so Philip has started out closer to home. In this story today, he has been up in Samaria, where the good news is spreading. And now he's on the wilderness road down towards Gaza. It would have been a desolate road. But he's on this journey, and he encounters this Ethiopian eunuch. So first, who was this Ethiopian eunuch? What can we know about him? What can we know about eunuchs in this day and this time? First of all, eunuchs were almost always men who were castrated as boys, and they were basically raised up to be servants for the powerful. Perhaps they were to be attendants in a harem. Perhaps they were to be chief advisors, actually, of those in power. Some of them had very high administrative positions because they were seen as more trustworthy. They weren't going to be a threat to a dynasty. They

couldn't produce offspring. They couldn't really challenge anything. They were seen as "other," but they were also often in positions of power. And so we know that this eunuch worked on behalf of the queen of Ethiopia, and he was actually pretty high up in the pecking order. He had some authority on behalf of the queen of Ethiopia. So eunuchs often did have significant places as servants within households of the wealthy, of the powerful, of the rulers, but they themselves would never have enough power to be a threat to any kind of dynastic rule.

On the other hand, eunuchs were also outsiders because they did not fit into the gender binary. They were not really male. They were not female. What does this mean for this eunuch who is a God-fearer? Well, it meant that even though he wanted to participate in the life of the people of Israel, he could not fully participate because of his "otherness." Deuteronomy specifically says in chapter 23 that those who are eunuchs cannot be a part of the assembly. He could come and he could seek, but he was never going to be fully invited in, and there was nothing that he could do about it. But he wanted to know and he wanted to understand.

In today's story, he's probably with an entourage and they're traveling and he's sitting in that carriage, that chariot, and he is reading Isaiah because he wants to understand, but he has nobody to explain it to him. He has nobody who can help him understand because he has not been fully welcomed into the community that can help give him that guidance. And here comes Philip on this desolate road from Samaria down to Gaza and he looks and he sees this entourage coming and he sees the eunuch and he hears the eunuch reading aloud from Isaiah. Philip goes up to him and sits with him and begins to talk through scripture. And now remember to Philip, the Eunuch was a racial outsider down from down in Ethiopia. He was a national outsider. He was not from where Philip was from. He was a gender outsider. He was a religious outsider. There were all sorts of reasons that Philip probably had to really fight against his own internal thoughts or instincts about sitting down with this eunuch. This guy's totally different. Up to this point, Philip has not really encountered anybody who was truly an outsider to him. But he sits down anyway because the Spirit moves him. They begin to talk and as they're in proximity to one another and Philip speaks about scripture and the eunuch talks and asks questions, they come to a new place.

This eunuch who has been told no over and over again when it comes to his seeking after the God of the people of Israel, he finally asks Philip, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Maybe it was a test. Maybe he was expecting that barrier to be erected again. Maybe he was expecting the "no" yet again. In that day and time, there would have been multiple barriers preventing him from being baptized! But Philip recognizes that the Spirit is teaching him something new, so he responds "Nothing! Nothing is to prevent you from being baptized!" Any barriers or categories that would have excluded the eunuch prior to this moment in time, no longer exist in the reality in God's kingdom in the world. It doesn't matter what race you are. It doesn't matter what nationality you are. It doesn't matter if you fall

outside of the gender binary. It doesn't matter if you're a religious outsider. God has said yes to you in the Holy Spirit.

I think this is as much a conversion moment for Philip as it is for the eunuch, as they share this experience together of seeing that the Holy Spirit is moving in new ways and is breaking down boundaries and human categories. All of Acts is about how the Holy Spirit breaks down barrier after barrier after barrier and God continues to draw the circle wider and wider and wider saying, "You may have been told in the past that you cannot be a part of this. You may have been denied entry, or access, or inclusion in the past, but in my kingdom those rules are null and void. In my kingdom there is nothing to prevent you from being baptized, which is the symbol of being a part of the community of faith. It's a sign that points to a deeper reality."

In Acts, we find that the Spirit disrupts the way that things are. The Spirit tears down barriers. Scripture is what Philip and the eunuch talk about – and Scripture is not a gatekeeper. Scripture is rather a guide for what it means to be loved, and understood, and received by God, and to be a part of a community of faith. Philip not a gatekeeper here. Rather, he's the one, who at the prompting of the Spirit, is flinging open the gate and saying, "This isn't my job anymore. God's Spirit says yes. God's Spirit says come."

I can't help but wonder, what is this passage telling us today? What is the Holy Spirit calling us to today? Who is the Spirit calling us to be today, in a world where there is such division between "us" and "them," (and there are so many different definitions of us and them)? There are so many barriers and divisions around race, and nationality, and gender, and religion. There's so much fear, there's so much hatred, there's so much separation. And God says, "This is not a part of my kingdom." This is not who the Spirit calls us to be. The Spirit calls us to be like Philip. The Spirit calls us to be like the eunuch.

And we are called to be in proximity to those who are different from us. For Philip, he's brought into proximity with this person who's radically different from him, who has had very different life experiences from him - yet in that encounter, in that conversation, in that posture of openness to one another, the Holy Spirit does something new. I can think of a video that I saw a month or two ago, and it was a really powerful video to watch. It was a snippet from a state legislature hearing, it might have been in Iowa. In, there was a bill being brought forth, an anti-transgender bill, and they had called one particular man there to testify on behalf of this bill – to lift it up, to affirm it, to try to help pass this anti-transgender bill. The man gets up there, and as he's offering his testimony "He says, you know, you all invited me here to speak in favor of this bill, but before I was up here, I met some of the transgender folks who were here, and I was talking to them, and I realized that they're just people, and I realized they're not that different from me, and I'm sorry that I'm here and wasting your time, but I can't speak in support of this anymore." That was a powerful video to watch. One, because how often do we see someone actually saying, "My mind has been changed. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I failed to see." (So kudos to that man for having the courage to voice that and not to dig in more deeply) But two, it was just so

powerful to see the way in which proximity and a posture of openness can be transformational.

Philip is on this desert road from Samaria down to Gaza. He's on this journey and he doesn't really know what's happening. He just knows the Spirit is compelling him, that the Spirit is moving him. He, himself, is converted to a new way of seeing and understanding and that he is a part of God's ever-expanding kingdom. The Holy Spirit is knocking down boundary after boundary after boundary. As the church, we are called to walk in this same way. We are called to be open – open to our neighbors, to those who we might call “other,” so the Spirit can move in ways that perhaps we are not expecting, or in ways that we can't understand. Philip and the eunuch walk away from this encounter changed by the God of love, by the God of grace, by the God of mercy, by the God who never gives up on any person and says, “Yes, you are mine.”

“What is to prevent me from being baptized?” the eunuch asks. The answer at one time might have been, “Well, everything!” But through the movement of the Holy Spirit, through the work of the Spirit, the answer becomes, “Nothing! Nothing at all can prevent you from being a part of this kingdom of God, this family of faith! Nothing can prevent you from the dinner table that Jesus invites us to. Nothing!” May we as the church live this out through the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.