**Acts 8:26-39** May 2, 2021

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Easter 5

*Acts 8:26Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” 27So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. 29The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”*

*30Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. 31“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 33In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.” 34The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” 35Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.*

*36As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” 38And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. 39When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Breaking Ev’ry Barrier Down**

In the last couple weeks, God’s word has brought up a touchy subject. (In case you can’t remember, I had to look up one of the sermons, too!)

What’s the touchy subject? A story is told of Pulitzer prize winning poet, Carl Sandburg. More than sixty years ago, when poets hefted a bit more weight in the public space, a television interviewer asked Mr. Sandburg, “What is the ugliest word in the English language?” Being a wordsmith, he wanted to think about it. “The ugliest word…” Sandburg obviously had no regard for the importance of keeping things moving on a television set. “The ugliest word… “ he thought out loud. “The ugliest word is… Exclusive.” (Craddock, *Sermons*, 271) Exclusivity is a touchy subject. In fact, some might say it is the central concern behind much of the unrest of the past several years: exclusivity.

The last couple Sundays God’s word has seemed to favor the word Carl Sandburg judged as the ugliest. Last week it came up in connection with Jesus the Good Shepherd, the *only* truly good one. The week before that the Apostle Peter rubbed our noses in it when he declared, *“[Other than Christ,] there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”* (Acts 4:12)

Is that what Christianity is about? Exclusivity? Barriers?

In our reading, we take up with a man who was facing some very real barriers in his religious life. But before we take up with him, we have to take a walk with Philip. Who is Philip? In the months after Jesus rose from the dead, the membership in the Christian church in Jerusalem exploded. People were joining every day! So that church chose seven men to help Jesus’ twelve apostles. Philip was one of the seven. One day an angel from God told Philip, ***“Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”*** That’s all. No reason. No word about how far he should go. “Just start walking.” So he did. Somewhere down that road ***“he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.”*** And we are told one more important thing, ***“This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship.”***

There is lots of interesting stuff here. These Ethiopians were a kingdom that, strangely enough, was not where modern Ethiopia is, but where modern Sudan is. To the Greeks and the Romans it was a source of great curiosity. It was a kingdom and civilization on the edge of the known world, and a very different one at that. The people were physically different. The inhabitants were black Africans. The Ethiopian kingdom had a peculiar form of government. The kings, who were remote semi-deities, were largely ceremonial in their role. The queen-mothers, the mothers to the kings, were the ones who did most of the actual administration of the kingdom. “Candace” was the official title of the queen mother rather than the name of any particular queen mother. This Ethiopian Philip met was the minister of finance in her government. (Polhill, 223)

And, he had come to Jerusalem to worship. How in the world did that happen? How did this Ethiopian government official come to know the God of Israel? Well, we don’t really know. But already centuries before this, there were Jewish communities in southern Egypt. Somehow, the message of the God of the Jews had crossed the border to the nation here called Ethiopia. In this minister of finance was a convert so serious about his faith in *Yahweh* that he made a 1,500 mile pilgrimage to the holy city of Jerusalem. He was serious about the Lord, the God of Abraham! And yet, he had a problem. No matter what he did he could never be welcomed as a full member of the Jewish faith.

Up in Jerusalem he had certainly felt this exclusivity. On his perhaps once in a lifetime pilgrimage, he had entered the outer courtyard of the one temple of the one true God, but he could go no farther. None but full Jews were allowed to climb the steps leading up to the temple proper. There he stood, the summer sun shining on the magnificent white marble temple, him behind the three foot high dividing wall, watching the Jews file by him, carrying their sacrifices, climbing the stone steps rising, ascending up and up into the presence of God. It didn’t matter that he was a high government minister. It didn’t matter that he had journeyed weeks to get here. It didn’t matter that he was so serious about this God of Israel that he had his own copy of at least part of the Bible (no small thing in the days of hand-written manuscripts!), none of that mattered.

He was an Ethiopian and he was a eunuch. It wasn’t that he was black. Greeks, Romans, Arabians and Persians were all forbidden. Only God’s chosen race were allowed in. Now for this there was a remedy. If a man were to bind himself to the Laws of Moses on oath, to become a physical Jew, to go through the physical rituals that Abraham had gone through, then even foreigners could become Proselytes of Righteousness.

But this Ethiopian could not, because he was a eunuch. This is a delicate subject, so let me just say that if you have had a male cat or dog fixed… And this prohibited him from *ever* becoming a Proselyte of Righteousness. You can look that up in Deuteronomy 23:1.

He could travel 10,000 miles. He could keep all the Law of Moses better than any Jew, he could read the Law and the Prophets every day, believe it, set his life and eternity upon it, but he, a eunuch could never enter that temple.

Now before we get all upset and let the righteous indignation rise in our hearts, let us remember who made these rules. These were not human traditions formulated by the Pharisees and rabbis, Jesus’ enemies. The rules that kept this Ethiopian at a distance were not man’s but God’s.

As a true believer, this man accepted those facts. He would never be allowed to touch the temple, but he was okay with it. There are people like that. People humble enough in heart to take God’s “no” for an answer, to realize that some things are for us and some things not. It is not a trait celebrated or encouraged in our world. In fact, it is despised. But it is an attitude that accepts that God is in heaven, and I am on earth. It is an attitude that should reign in the heart of every Christian when we hear God tell us things that we do not want to hear. This man’s attitude exemplified Jesus’ first words in the Sermon on the Mount: *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled”* (Matthew 5).

This man did not let the barriers dampen his love for the Lord. Instead of marching away from Jerusalem feeling victimized, bitter in heart, complaining about “the rules,” he rededicated himself. He got into his chariot, started his journey, and opened up the Scriptures. He read them, studied them, dug into them. Whatever had happened in Jerusalem, it had strengthened his religious conviction.

He opened the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He read the prophet who more clearly than any other prophet, looked into the future of the Messiah’s kingdom and prophesied a time when Jew and Gentile would stand on equal footing. In one obscure passage, he even said that even eunuchs would have the rights of sons and daughters in God’s kingdom (Is 56:3).

As the Ethiopian read from Isaiah, Philip ran up to the chariot. Philip heard him reading and asked, ***“Do you understand what you are reading?”*** This minister of finance’s humble spirit bleeds through, ***“How can I, unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.”*** Then he shared this passage with Philip, ***“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.”***

I think the eunuch felt a point of contact with his reading. He read about this one so humble, so righteous, and one without descendants. And the eunuch asked Philip, ***“Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?”*** He wants to understand. He knows there is more here than he is getting, something important, so he asks Philip to explain. And explain Philip did.

As they rode down that desert road, Philip explained more and more about The One the Ethiopian had doubtless heard whispers of in Jerusalem, but had not really known. As he heard more of the Christ, the Ethiopian’s mind widened. He heard possibilities and promises. Forgiveness won not by sacrifice on an altar in the temple, but on a cross. A life lived after death, as a down payment on and proof of the life we too shall have. He heard about the acceptance Jesus had modeled in his own life, for the lepers and the tax collectors and the sinners and the foreigners and the unclean. A rabbi who would touch the dead and the demon possessed and proclaim them in the kingdom of God. As he listened, they came to some water and this perceptive man, with math skills good enough to be in charge of the royal treasury put two and two together and he asked—he who had known so many barriers in his faith—he asked, ***“Look, here is water. What shouldn’t I be baptized?”*** and…

I am reminded here of psychology class way back in college. One experiment the professor mentioned (and here I might be mis-remembering, but this is what I remember) about what happens when barriers are continually put in front of us. In the experiment an animal would be in an enclosed place and food would be placed outside. A door would be opened, but every time the animal would make a motion toward the door, the door would close. Eventually the hungry animal would completely give up, even though he could see and smell the food. He wouldn’t even try. It can happen to people too.

It happens to some, but it hadn’t happened to this Ethiopian. He was used to barriers; to “No;” to God’s grace being doled out by the teaspoon rather than the gallon. But in Jesus he heard something—if he heard right and he is not at all sure that he did—he heard that in Jesus, *in Jesus*, the wall around God is knocked down, all the exclusivity vaporized. That in Jesus forgiveness free and total is poured out through his blood for anybody, *absolutely anybody*, and so he asks out of curiosity and hope for permission from this Jew, “Can I really? Can I really, after all these years, be one of God’s children just like you Philip? Not just something in the future, but right now? Can I be baptized? What barrier are you forgetting to tell me about?”

And Philip, maybe Philip said, “Well, I guess, I hadn’t really thought of it that way. We haven’t really had this situation come up before, and so I suppose I should ask Peter, James and John back up in Jerusalem. But you’re not going to be back this way again, are you? So… well… as I understand it—now mind you, some people might not like it—but I guess from what I know about Jesus, Yes, you can. You can be baptized.” (Following the lead of *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock* on this text.)

“***And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.”***

Some traditions say that the Ethiopian went back to Ethiopia and started the Ethiopian Christian Church. It’s one of those traditions that you kind of have to say, “Maybe he did and maybe he didn’t.” But one thing we do know, this man already electrified by his visit to Jerusalem, so excited about the one true God as he read his Bible while traveling down the road, that after Philip, there was a whole new level of joy in his life. How could he not be like the branch attached to the vine in our Gospel reading. Knowing Jesus, how could he not bear abundant fruit in his life? How could he not strive to know God and love his fellow man?

And so he went on his way, chariot and attendants riding the thousand plus miles back to Ethiopia, rejoicing. Rejoicing! Say, I wonder what song was on his lips. Maybe it was hymn 397, verse 6, “Just as I am; your love unknown // has broken ev’ry barrier down.” Amen.