

ACTS OF INCLUSION

Acts 8:26-40

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(online worship only)

Whenever life seems chaotic, we long for comfort. When it feels as if the world around us is changing so fast that we can't even wrap our minds around it, we gravitate towards things that are familiar. So during the pandemic, we saw picture after picture of people wearing their favorite soft sweat pants or yoga pants, sitting on their sofas typing on their laptops surrounded by afghans and throws. One young woman I know who works from home tells me she starts every workday in bed. She doesn't even get out of bed until noon. She just rolls over, plumps up a pillow behind her and starts in on the phone and the laptop. She wants to be **comfortable**.

The headlines in several food magazines declared 2020 "The Year of the Comfort Food Comeback." People reported cravings for the foods of their childhood, bowls of cereal and macaroni and cheese.

We didn't have the option of being out in the world, of meeting new people. So we retreated, we turned inward, we aimed for as much comfort and familiarity as possible. It's what we do when we feel stressed.

When we read through the book of Acts, we realize that our ancestors in the early church are experiencing stress and anxiety from both within their community and from outside forces. The church is growing rapidly, and that sounds like good news. It **IS** good news, but it's also change, and even good change is stressful. New people bring new ideas. And the new people are coming from different places. Within the early

church, some believers see Christianity as a sect of Judaism. The early Christians were Jews, just like Jesus. They still attend worship in the temple regularly - we saw that two weeks ago in the story of Peter and John going to temple and seeing the man in need of healing. But other believers are also attracted to the Christian story, and they were not previously Jewish. They are Gentiles, non-Jewish. So we see in the book of Acts some debate about how many of the Jewish laws are important in the new Christian community. How Jewish is the new church?

There is stress inside this group of believers, and - from the outside - Rome is intimidating and persecuting the Christians whom they see as a threat, just like Jesus was a threat.

The leaders of the church must have been tempted to say to each other, "Let's take a rest. Let's just put the brakes on for a few months, lay low, and wait for things to settle down. Maybe we're growing too fast!" But that's not what they do. They look to Jesus' life for an example, and they listen to the promptings of the Spirit, and they decide that what they are called to do is spread the good news to more people in more places. They go where Jesus had gone - to Samaria, to people generally considered undesirable. The church grows more. More Jewish Christians. More Gentile Christians. Samaritan Christians. **The Spirit knows no bounds and excludes no one.**

Meanwhile, we are introduced to a man from another part of the world, from Africa. He is a man who today we would call a seeker. He is spiritually curious, and has been to Jerusalem, to the temple, presumably on some sort of spiritual pilgrimage. He is a eunuch - that fact about him is so important that the word appears four times in

today's scripture. It was a custom of that time and place that certain young boys were surgically maimed before puberty. They were then set aside as servants for royalty or for civil service. Because they were eunuchs, they were not seen as political threats, and they were also deemed safe to serve among women of the royal household. It wasn't something anyone would choose for himself - that's probably obvious.

A eunuch like the one in our story holds an unusual position in society. He often has access to power and influence. We see that he has his own chariot and driver, and he owns a copy of scripture, which means he is a person of financial means. But he's been through a traumatic experience, and he isn't free. Some people considered eunuchs to be scarred, defective, even sexually immoral. In some circles they are only marginally accepted.

What we know for sure about this man is that he certainly has experienced prejudice, bigotry. He's been called names, he's heard derisive laughter both behind his back and to his face.

He is you, if you don't fit in. When you don't fit in. He is you, when what people notice first about you is your skin color. He is you when you inhabit a body that doesn't look like others, **OR** when you inhabit a body that doesn't match your own understanding of yourself. He is like the person who feels shunned because of who they choose to love, or the person who is ridiculed for a speech impediment or a disability.

Despite all of the ways in which he has been made to feel excluded, this man from Ethiopia is not defeated. He may have been victimized but he is **not** a victim. He uses what he has — the ability to travel, the ability to read - and searches out some

good news for himself. There is some spark of hope within this man that says, “I am not giving up. I believe that there is someone somewhere who will accept me for who I am, and there is a greater purpose for my life.”

He asks his driver to take him to the temple, all the way to Jerusalem, and now he’s on his way home. He’s reading scripture, reading from the book of Isaiah, reading aloud - which was the custom of the time - about a person who was humiliated, a person who was denied justice.

And here, our text tells us, the Holy Spirit intervenes in this man’s life. A messenger from God says to Philip, a leader in the church, “take the road from Jerusalem to Gaza.” Philip goes. Then the Spirit says to Philip, “See that carriage? Go run along beside it.” Philip does. We picture him jogging alongside the carriage, listening to the scripture being read. Philip doesn’t know who is in the carriage, but he recognizes the words of the prophet Isaiah and he says, “Do you understand what you’re reading?” The man replies, “No. I need someone to guide me.”

The carriage stops, and Philip jumps in. These two look at each other. Here is a black man, well-dressed, and here is Philip, dusty and sweaty from running. These two look at each other and they enter into a sacred conversation.

There are moments like this in life. Moments where you just click with someone else. You do away with the chit-chat, no more small talk, you go deep. The Ethiopian says to Philip, “Who is the prophet Isaiah talking about here? Could it be that this scripture is acknowledging someone like me? Someone who knows what it’s like to feel humiliated, someone whose entire life has been lived under profound injustice?” (For

what could be more unjust than being mutilated against your will, and then forced to live as a servant?).

Philip says, “Yes, this scripture acknowledges **you**. And let me tell you about someone else who was humiliated, even to the point of death. Let me tell you about someone who noticed all of the outsiders of the world, all of the people on the margins. Let me tell you about someone who advocated for justice and wholeness for everyone who was denied access to full community.” Philip goes on to tell this Ethiopian eunuch about Jesus and his ministry of inclusion. He says, “Even though Jesus is no longer physically with us, Christ’s spirit remains. The Jesus movement is growing. We’re baptizing people every day, eating together, sharing our possessions, spreading the good news.” The man listens, takes it all in.

And then he realizes that the chariot is going alongside a body of water. He says, “Look! Look at that water! What would keep me from being baptized?” The answer to his question remains unspoken. But all of the reasons pass between the two men. We can almost hear the answers click through Philip’s mind, one reason after another that **would** prevent the man from being baptized. “Well, for starters, some people believe that you shouldn’t even be allowed in the temple. You’re not Jewish, you’re not even from our country. You have pledged loyalty to the queen for whom you work. You’re a eunuch. You belong to the wrong nation, you hold the wrong job, you possess the wrong sexuality.” But Philip doesn’t heed those excuses. Instead, he hears the voice of the Holy Spirit speak a different answer to the man’s question. “Absolutely nothing,” whispers the spirit. Nothing will prevent you from being baptized.

And so it happens. The carriage stops. Philip baptizes the man, who returns home full of joy, to spread the good news of Jesus to the people of Ethiopia, the people of Africa. The message of the transformative power of Jesus the Christ spreads throughout Ethiopia and north to Egypt - because of the Ethiopian eunuch and his rejoicing. Today the Coptic Orthodox church is still alive in that region of the world, and they trace their beginnings to this man, this story. The Ethiopian Coptic church is known for some beautiful sacred art.

In this year of our Lord 2021, I have spent many hours in conversation about diversity and inclusion. I have spent many hours trying to determine how our church can help people of different political persuasions understand each other, so that we can work together towards a more just and compassionate world instead of lobbing barbs at one another. Just this past week, I spent a considerable amount of time with a group of people struggling to understand the rapidly-changing language around gender identity.

And then I turned my attention to this story, from over 2,000 years ago, this story that presents to us a beloved child of God who is of a different race, a different nationality, a different political persuasion, a different gender identity. Sometimes it's hard to see the relevance of a passage of scripture, but this one is extraordinarily relevant.

This story has a happy ending, a joyous ending; it is a story of the transformative power of the risen Christ, alive in the Ethiopian eunuch. It happens because Philip and the Ethiopian spend time together. They sit in a chariot together, talking about scripture together, looking into one another's eyes. They come to know each other, not as caricatures or stereotypes but as people. They engage in sacred dialogue together.

They are both open to the promptings of God's Spirit - first Philip, when he jogs alongside the chariot on the road, and then the eunuch when he invites Philip into the chariot.

And so when that question is spoken, "What is to prevent me?" "What would keep me from being baptized?" these two have already crossed over the barriers that would prevent the Ethiopian's baptism. Together they hear the whisper of God's Spirit which says, "Absolutely nothing. Nothing is to prevent you."

It's extraordinary what happens when we listen to the promptings of God's spirit. I hear the Spirit saying to us, "Avon Lake UCC, what is to prevent you from becoming even more a community where all people are welcome and fully included? When you return to in-person worship, might you foster opportunities for sacred conversations, so that people who live and think differently can tell their stories, in an environment where they feel safe to do so, so that we can begin to understand one another better? What is to prevent us from creating a more just and compassionate world, beginning right here, right now?"

We've spent time in our comfort zones. Perhaps we needed to for a while. But now the fresh wind of the Spirit is blowing, calling us to leave our comfort zones and follow, so that we can be the people God needs us to be in this time and place. What will keep us from following God's spirit?

Let us pray. Holy God, known to us in the breaking of the bread, give us courage to follow you into the new. We may be tempted to be fearful of change, so remind us that you are already there in the future, as you always have been, as you always will be. Amen.

