



The Most Fascinating People: The Ethiopian Eunuch

TEXT
Acts 8:26–40

July 12, 2015 — Sermon by Len Carrell

That is a great story, isn't it? It is a story of a man with great questions. It is a story of a man with great faith. It is a story of a man with great yearning, longing to be known. It is a story of a man with remarkable hope.

I'm sure many of us know this story. But my question is this: How many of us claim this story as a story of our own faith?

Well, maybe that's why this story made our series this summer. Maybe that's why the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in the book of Acts is such a fascinating one. Maybe, for many of us, we like to think of ourselves as Philip, and not as the eunuch. And maybe it is a wise decision for us to consider, even for an hour, what it must feel like to be him — even for just an hour.

You see, for the purpose of our study today, I believe we are being asked to think of ourselves in someone else's shoes. I believe that's a good and healthy faithful practice for our faith. I believe that is an important, an often overlooked, exercise in our culture today. And so, for that reason, I would like to believe — if only for an hour, but hopefully for much longer — that we can find humility and acceptance in

the message we walk away with today.

Because that is the claim this text has placed on my heart. That is the claim I feel called to share with you this morning. I see humility and acceptance to be the theme of what I'm reading here. And for me, and I'm hoping for you, that is what makes this story so fascinating.

I don't know if you can see it. Or maybe that's my job: to help us to see it. So, what I believe is that it's humility and acceptance that both the eunuch and Philip are teaching one another here.

And I also believe that this becomes a big lesson for us as a church: the practice of humility and acceptance, one that happens over many generations — because that's why we have this story. It is one we have to learn over and over and over again until we make it our own. But what I find so interesting about this story is that this is a story of how we, as a church, need to learn the lessons of humility and acceptance, together. And yet, we're going to have to learn them together, and not apart from each other.

On the front of your bulletin I ask the question "What is a eunuch, really?" And I didn't mean that question to be flippant,

or to sound naive or be tasteless in any way. I asked that question because for many years, long before I went to seminary, I taught this story in confirmation classes. And I'm always amazed how much time was spent trying to explain something which, quite honestly, I knew nothing about.

Let me tell you something that experience taught me. It taught me this: I love how young people are never afraid to ask questions that we as adults are sometimes afraid to ask of our faith — because as adults, we assume to know these answers. We're supposed to know them, right?

But I also say, in that little paragraph, that to spend too much time trying to understand what a eunuch really is misses the point of the text. I say that because we miss seeing this man's faith and courageous inquiry — and even the great questions he asks — if we only think about the fact that he is a eunuch.

But I also believe if we pass over the fact that this man identifies himself as a eunuch, and that the gospel writer does so as well, then we also miss another important point. And that is to say that as the gospel moves out into the world — especially as we see it being done here in the

book of Acts — it becomes apparently clear that God’s mercy shown through Jesus Christ becomes elastic enough to include everyone.

So this eunuch asks three really great questions. “How can I understand, unless someone guides me?” “Who is the prophet speaking about, anyway?” and “Why not me?”

He asks, “How can I understand, unless someone guides me?” This is a great question — a question I wish I had the courage to ask myself more often. But for him, this question already assumes that he knows he will be looked upon as an outcast when he arrives in Jerusalem.

What we are not told, however, is just how familiar he is with the words of Scripture. If he knows Deuteronomy 23, then he knows he will be excluded from the Assembly of God. But we know he is reading Scripture; however, the passage he is reading is from Isaiah. And Isaiah and Deuteronomy are not the same book. Isaiah is not the same book as Deuteronomy, not by a long shot. The good news we find in this text is that the prophet gives this man a more hopeful message.

In Isaiah, he would have heard these words: “God will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people” across many nations ... one of them being Ethiopia.

He would have heard that God will assure him that “the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath” will receive “a monument and a name better than the sons and

daughters” of Israel, “an everlasting name” that will never be excluded.

Many times in the gospel, we hear stories of people who sit on the fringes of society, who are then brought in by Jesus and looked upon as royalty in the kingdom of God. But in this story, we find a man who has a position of importance in a royal court, who is then rejected from the court of God’s people.

So how could he understand? Is he in or out? Is he accepted, or is he not accepted? Is it Isaiah, or is it Deuteronomy? How can he know the truth, really? How can any of us know the truth? He knows he’s going to need a guide and a teacher like Philip in order to understand.

We all could use a Philip in our life, don’t you think? Not only does Philip know Scripture, but Philip knows personally, all too personally, who the Scriptures are pointing to. But he has more questions for Philip. He asks, “Who is this prophet writing about anyway? Is he speaking about himself, or is he talking about someone else?”

The passage we find the eunuch reading here is a chilling one: “Like a sheep that is led to the slaughter, like a lamb that is silent before its shearer ... In his humiliation justice was denied him.” The words he is reading shed some light on the question he is asking.

How many of you have ever found yourself reading yourself into the Bible passage you’re meditating on? I know I have. And isn’t that why it’s such a powerful witness? Isn’t that why

we say, “Spirit of the living God fall fresh on me”?

Because it is not only God’s word for people back then, but it is God’s living Word for all of us here today. Not only does it tell us something about who God has been in the overall history of God’s great story, but it also tells us how God is active today. The Bible has something to say to us even now, right now, right here, as we are hearing it today. “The grass withers, and the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” Isn’t that why we pray these words — because we believe in God’s living Word to us today?

Well, if that is true, then the chilling reality of this story, the one we begin to realize in this man, is that this Ethiopian eunuch is sharing with us, and indeed with Philip, something all too personal about how “humiliation” and “justice” was denied him. He is sharing with us just what he experienced when he arrived at the temple to worship with God’s people in Jerusalem.

But we have to hand it to Philip, for Philip provides for this man an incredible Bible study. He witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ by assuring this man that God’s love is revealed to him — even in the passages that are painfully hard for him to hear.

Philip assures him, indeed all of us, that the God of Scripture, revealed in Jesus Christ, took on this “humiliation and the justice denied him” fully and personally, while dying on the cross.

For Christ even took on this man’s status to know him fully

and completely. And I am sure that even Philip would have interpreted Isaiah's words to mean something like this: "That the God you read about here is a God who emptied himself completely, taking the form of a slave just like you, being born in human likeness just like you, and humbled himself to us, so that God may be known to us fully, as someone just like you, and just like me."

Then came the water. And doesn't the water change everything for us in our faith stories?

This is where we see just how brave this man is. The Ethiopian eunuch sees the water and asks the easiest question of the day. I call it the easiest question of the day because it requires no answer from anyone else but himself.

I find his question to be brave, because far too often I'm afraid and fail to ask it myself? I find it far too difficult to ask myself, "Why not me?" I call him brave because he's finally feeling accepted enough to ask, "Why not me?" "What is keeping me from being baptized, right here and now, in this water?"

I find this man's faith so brave because he asks, "Why not me? Who's stopping me from receiving God's grace, right now? I know I am accepted, and I choose to live my life that way." And God's Holy Spirit whispers in his ear and says, "Yes, you are accepted. You are one of my beloved children. And I say, 'Yes.'"

So at the temple, he hears, "No, get out!" (Deuteronomy)

But here, the Spirit says, "Yes, you are my child!"

But this story is so much more than just knowing we are accepted; it is also about learning to become more accepting of others. And the way I see it is this. When we look at what the Ethiopian eunuch can teach us in this story, we learn that we need to ask the obvious questions and the not-so-obvious questions in order to understand how we are accepted. But when we look at what Philip can teach us in this story, we find out that sometimes it is the tough questions we are asked that help us to become more accepting of others.

One of my favorite writers is Anne Lamott, and she says it this way, "God loves us just the way are, and God loves us too much to have us stay that way."

Being accepted into God's grace, and accepting people with God's grace, doesn't mean changing who we are, or who we may be, or changing who someone else is, or who they may be, in order to become more accepting. It means all of us need to become more accepting of who people really are and who we are all becoming.

I want to take a moment and get away from this manuscript and tell you a little bit about my story. I have struggled many times with these questions: "How can I understand?" and "Why not me?" So how did I get here, in front of you, called to be one of your pastors in this church? Well, it wasn't supposed to work out this way. I moved to New York City two weeks shy of my twenty-first birthday. I had my

eyes set on the "big Broadway." I was supposed to win a Tony Award being a song and dance man. That was my dream; that was what I was being called to do.

But God had another idea. God decided that God was going to use my talents in a whole different way. I kicked my calling around, and I kicked my faith around with it. See, when I was there, I met the love of my life. I met my wife in theater school, and for many years we dated and didn't date and then dated some more. And for many years, I said "I have to succeed. I can't get married; I can't go forward in my life because I need to succeed."

I needed that success. And what was so amazing about that feeling was, I realized later, that I was wanting to pretend life on stage, but I was rejecting the one that was sitting right in front of me. And I thought, what kind of actor would I be if I was pretending to know what life was all about, but not living truthfully with what life is all about right here in the present?

So it wasn't until I was sitting in front of a pastor who was doing my marriage counseling with my wife and me — we had decided to get married. Thank goodness she said yes. But we were sitting in front of the pastor, talking about our marriage and our lives and our faith, and he asked my wife, "Tell me about your faith story." She just filled the room with her life growing up at Brick Presbyterian Church and all of her life being in that church.

I grew up in church. I grew up in the Methodist church in Katy, Texas. Actually, the church was the first place I did a show. I was eleven years old, and I played Charlie Brown in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. Church had taught me and helped me find my talent, but then I went running. See, I was a typical person in that time right after confirmation class when I didn't really understand how the church had anything to offer me. I didn't understand what my place was at that time. I was your typical spiritually hungry person who was institutionally suspicious. I kicked my faith around.

So I was sitting there in front of this man, and he said, "Len, tell me about your faith story." I said, "Hey look, my faith is between me and God. I don't want to talk about my faith." And I gave him this whole dissertation about how I was really skeptical of denominational religion. I mean I just gave it to him. But then I said, "I tell you what, I want to get married in a church, and I want to get married under God. That's really important to me." And he took off his glasses and said, "Why?" It was a good question. It was a tough question that was asked of me.

So I wasn't very accepting of the church. I wasn't very accepting of my faith. And I've been asking that question my whole life since then. Why the church? And I keep asking myself that question, and it makes me affirm that this community that is the church is important in my life. I would never have been able to get here without that help

because when my pastor in New York came up to me and said, "We know you're going to seminary; we're just waiting for you to figure that out for yourself."

I said, "Are you kidding me? Do they even accept somebody like me? I have a musical theater degree." I was terrified of seminary. I mean, I was a horrible student. Me writing papers — and then learning to read Greek and Hebrew — was going to be devastating to my life. This was not going to work out or be the right place for me. But eventually, I went there; and now I'm in front of you, as one of your pastors. But it wasn't because I didn't struggle.

I had a theater teacher once who told me, "Len, if it's the last thing I ever teach you, I'm going to teach you the difference between being a performer and being an artist." What that meant back then was a whole different thing, but as I look back on it now, I understand what that means a lot more — because we all have an artist inside us just waiting to emerge. We all have this person inside us just ready and waiting to become who we really are; just ready to emerge from within us; just waiting for us to realize who that person is.

And it's sometimes hard to be who that person truly is. You see, anybody can be a performer; that's what's on the outside. But the artist within is who we all are waiting to meet.

So I tell you all of this because I also struggle at accepting myself for who I am — as well as accepting others for who they really are. I don't know about you,

but I sometimes find it difficult to ask, "How can I understand?" or to say, "Help me understand." I also find it tough to sometimes say, "Why not me?" I often wonder why those two things are so intertwined.

Why is accepting ourselves for exactly who we are and who we are becoming, and being more accepting of others for who they truly are and are becoming, so intricately connected? I think it may be that we need to trust God in both of those things. We have to trust God to help us to grow together, in a love and a life for each other.

We are going to sing a song in a minute called *Help Us Accept Each Other*. This song is both a reminder and a prayer. It is both a hope and a promise. It acknowledges both a daily command and our daily struggle. It is about forgiveness of ourselves and of others. It is both a free gift and a costly lesson. May it be so!

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.