



The Unnamed Ethiopian

TEXT
Acts 8:26–39

June 30, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Brandon Frick

When I got to Princeton Seminary, I discovered the world of Ivy League eating clubs. Eating clubs are basically frats and sororities rolled up into one. They serve meals, and provide the location for the “social functions” on campus. And they paid big dudes from the seminary to provide security at these “social functions.” So, I was able to add “bouncer” to my resume. Thursday through Saturday nights, carloads of us would drive over from the seminary to the university around 10 p.m. and check ID’s, help the unruly find the door, and make sure that the future leaders of the world blew off some of that Ivy League steam as safely as possible.

You’re wondering, so I’ll go ahead and tell you. I’d get home around 3 a.m., we made about \$100/night, and I was never even in a scuffle — if you exclude my foolish attempt to stop Princeton’s heavy crew team from taking a midnight run through the house in their birthday suits.

The best event on the eating club calendar was the spring concert. The pay was doubled, and it was on a Saturday afternoon. So, I didn’t have to worry about

showing up to lead worship on Sunday morning bleary-eyed on four hours sleep. The first year I did it, I was assigned to be backstage with an artist I had never heard of: Rihanna. In case you are not up on your recent pop music, I will share that she has sold almost 40 million records since her days slumming it out with substandard security at the Princeton eating clubs.

When I got there that day, I headed to her tour bus and introduced myself to everyone. As I turned the corner and climbed that high first step, I almost collided with an exceptionally tall woman decked out in gold jewelry and platform heels speaking with a Caribbean accent. In my haste to meet her, I had almost knocked Rihanna over. Fortunately, though, this story doesn’t end with me taking out someone who owns more platinum records than I do pairs of socks. We walked off the bus together to the stairs leading up to the stage, and we waited for her queue.

As I stood beside her at the bottom of that staircase, I chuckled at the image of the two of us standing together: the Caribbean pop princess clad in gold and designer clothes and the hayseed seminarian in a secondhand “SECURITY” T-shirt, just trying to

make a few bucks on a Saturday afternoon. At that moment, I wondered, could there have been two more different people standing next to each other than the two of us? After her incredible performance, I walked her back to the bus and she was gone, headed for untold wealth and worldwide celebrity. And I was headed back to my dorm room, daydreaming about how I was going to spend the \$200 I had just earned — before my Protestant work ethic convinced me to set it aside for the fall semester’s books.

That moment was a collision — almost literally — of two different people, of two different worlds. At least that’s how I’ve come to think of it. And I’m sure Rihanna feels the same when she thinks about that moment today.

This is the only encounter I’ve ever had in my life that comes even remotely close to Philip’s encounter with the unnamed Ethiopian man.

Statistically speaking, Philip had a better chance of meeting a penguin on that desert highway than this guy. This unnamed Ethiopian has to be, quite literally, one of a kind. And while some of us pine for that kind of standing, we have to remember that when you are one of a kind, it’s hard to find a place where you

really belong. The way he is described makes this man, at least in my mind, the most definitive outsider in all of the Bible.

First, it tells us that he was from Ethiopia, which is like their way of saying Timbuktu. So, saying someone was from Ethiopia was like saying, at least as I heard it growing up, “Dey ain’t from ’round here.” In his case though, it was probably true, because he served the Ethiopian Queen as her treasurer. But his dark skin and the signs of his significant wealth would have certainly caught the attention of Philip and anyone else from Galilee traveling this wilderness back road. The last thing they would have expected to see, to put it bluntly, is a black man flying past them on a chariot. And if they looked hard, they would have seen him reading the Jewish scriptures on his way back from the temple. This means he’s one of the few literate people in his day, and that he’s either an Ethiopian Jew or a God-fearer, a semi-convert to Judaism, who worships the God of Abraham, but doesn’t keep the Old Testament law. Either way, the religious group to which he belongs is very small.

And finally, the thing that would have pushed him to the fringes of the ancient world is that he’s a eunuch. So either by vow, or more than likely, by forced disfigurement, he cannot have children. It did not matter where you went in the ancient world, the inability to have children was considered a curse. And eunuchs were viewed as the embodiment of that curse, so much so that the Old Testament has an

ongoing internal debate about whether eunuchs could participate fully in the law and its rituals. The second-century Greek writer Lucian described eunuchs as “hybrid and monstrous, outside of human nature.” And the Jewish historian Josephus urged people to drive them away.¹

His religion and education, his country of origin and wealth, his life as treasurer and eunuch: all of these would have placed him on the outside looking in anywhere he lived, even in Ethiopia — but especially in the southern backwoods of Galilee. So, the Holy Spirit — like a parent nudging her child to go talk to the new kid at the playground — convinces Philip to go talk to this man. He must be an obedient extrovert because he *runs* to the chariot. He overhears the Ethiopian man reading from a scroll containing the book of Isaiah, and then, for some odd reason, breaks the ice with this new friend by saying, “Do you understand what you are reading?” Now introducing yourself as a know-it-all to a stranger is not a tactic advised in the book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, but before you get too critical of Philip, let me tell you firsthand that I’ve made this type of strategy work in my own life, and not in the way you may be thinking.

About halfway through the final semester of my senior year, I developed a little crush on a girl who lived three townhouses down from mine, and she was a psychology major. For the sake of this story, let’s call her “Maren.” That year, I was taking psychol-

ogy, and every night we’d start chatting on Instant Messenger. Ya’ll remember Instant Messenger? It was like texting, but from a computer heavier than most of our TVs now. So, she’d write, “What are you doing?” and I’d respond “Trying to get my head around all this psychology stuff.”

“Well, I could come by and help.” [Fist pump.]

“Cool. Just come by whenever.” And then I’d sit at the kitchen table and eagerly stare out the window for Maren. She’d show up, and we’d talk for hours and hours — not just about Pavlov’s dogs and experiments with rats, but about everything, anything to not have to say goodbye because we were crushing hard on one another.

I did great in Psychology, partially because I was taking it pass/fail and was carrying a 98 average for weeks before I sought out that extra “tutoring.” But more importantly, the whole teacher/student dynamic not only made me a new friend, but a lady friend. So, as odd as it is, Philip’s strategy is a winner in my book. With it, Philip put into action one of the essential tenets of the early church: The gospel is for EVERYONE! It doesn’t matter where they’re from, the color of their skin, or what they drive; the good news of Jesus Christ is for all people.

If the Spirit calls Philip, an upstanding churchman, to share this good news with a stranger in the wilderness, then you better believe that the Spirit is doing the same with us. The challenge set before the church, even before there was a church — when it

was just Jesus calling, dining, and loving the outcast and oppressed — has been not to walk, but to run — run *toward* those we might be otherwise tempted to run *away* from with good news. This will remain the challenge for the church, and for Village on Antioch at this, the start of our third year, and beyond: to run towards those forced to the margins and to share with them the good news that just because they've been pushed to the outside, doesn't mean they're outsiders. Their place is inside; inside the church, and inside the very heart of God.

Now, delivering this kind of news means that we will have to be open and probably a little uncomfortable, but that's the call of the Spirit. It wasn't the Ethiopian's responsibility to break the ice; it was Philip's, and now ours — because to expect people already in vulnerable situations to further make themselves vulnerable is not only unrealistic, but cruel. So, our ministry to the vulnerable must begin with our own vulnerability.

I see this already happening here: at the Food Pantry and Cross-Lines, greeting and welcoming on Sunday mornings, blessing animals and dressing up for VBS' alien day. (Boy, some of our leaders went all out last week.) But, if we *continue* to do this, what might we imagine, in the year to come, for ways to begin new relationships with those pushed out to the margins?

Please don't misunderstand me: This is not just about *us* helping *others* on the margins, but about *them* helping *us* too.

That's what happens in any Spirit-bound relationship, and in today's text. The Unnamed Ethiopian makes Philip and the church stronger just by asking three questions. His first question is how he can understand the scriptures without someone to help. He gets just how deep scripture goes and how important it will be to have community as he plumbs its depths. After reading the passage from Isaiah that describes a lamb slain unjustly, he asks Philip who he thinks the passage is talking about. That's a really important practice: to ask someone else what they think, before we begin pontificating.

And his final question, it is a humdinger. They're riding in his chariot; he sees water and asks, "What is to prevent me being baptized?" That sounds a little wooden, so let me offer the Brandon translation. He asks, "Is there any reason I can't get baptized right now?" This puts Philip in an interesting position, because it is unfortunately true that in the church, when someone starts a question with "Is there any reason I can't ..." someone eagerly finds a reason they in fact cannot.

Our church's constitution clearly states on page 34, Section C, Roman numeral 58: *Well, the thing is, we're gonna need you to fill out some paperwork. It's not much. ... Or the classic: We've never done it that way before.*

Philip could have said to him, "So we're about to have this big conference in Jerusalem in just a few days, or weeks, maybe months. So if we could just hold off on your baptism until the

pillars of the church decide, I could meet you back here, and we could do it decently and in order. I'll even write up a certificate for you!"

But Philip doesn't. He walks out of the chariot with this man from Ethiopia, who would have been on the outside looking in to every social circle in the world, and shows him, as he is surrounded by the waters of baptism, that Christ has unabashedly claimed him as his own. How tragic would this story be if it didn't end this way; if Philip would have found something to prevent them from this incredible moment? Thank God that these two people, who knew the good news of Christ crucified and resurrected, just couldn't imagine a reason why that God, a God who loved that deeply, wouldn't welcome this spontaneous act of worship. In just three good questions, this newly-baptized brother has shown Philip how community should work, what humility looks like, and how to be open to the Spirit, which blows where and will it may.

When people can open themselves up like that, relationships that build each other up are naturally formed. It is always easier to stay in the blocks instead of racing with all our might, but when we run alongside Philip, with the Spirit at our back, we find victory with and in each other.

Last October, before many of you arrived for our service night, I got to see just one form of this. When I opened the main doors, I saw a few of you talking with a young man. I believe

it was Michael, and he literally just wandered in off the street when he saw cars in the parking lot. And you were having a heavy conversation. I know it was heavy because of how relieved Kelly Thomason sounded when she said, “Oh look, well there’s our pastor right there! He’d be great to talk to.”

At that point, folks started leaving the conversation, as the need to get ready for everyone else became pressing. In just 13 minutes, Michael asked me a few questions. “So, why do you ordain women? Doesn’t the Bible forbid it?” “What’s your position on euthanasia?” “Could a Jew become a member of your church? I mean, you worship the same God, right?” I can’t remember the details of my answers because I kept chuckling to myself, “Who is this guy?”

I don’t know that my answers were really that significant; the most important part of meeting Michael’s need that night was to just talk, and not sell him on anything. He needed to meet people who would heed the Spirit’s call and share their lives and faith with him — who would be open and vulnerable with him — and he did. Michael didn’t get baptized that night. We haven’t seen him again, but I’m hopeful. And I’m thankful. Just like the unnamed Ethiopian, he has made us better for having shared his life with us.

It’s our second birthday, VOA! I am told the second anniversary is supposed to be marked with a gift of china, but I just couldn’t settle on a pattern, and I need to save up for next year

— because I’m told next year’s gift is pearls.

The gift this year, to each of us, is the story of this unnamed Ethiopian — who shows us how our life together should be, what true humility looks like, and how to be open to the movements of the Spirit; who challenges us to seek out, and not turn away from, the collision of different worlds and peoples; who shows us how we can not only share the good news with others, but our lives with one other. Maybe this year we’ll make our way to the Michaels of this world, instead of them making their way to us. If we can do this, and I think we can, we will have to dream big and run hard. And just when we think we can’t find a way to go one step farther, it is my hope and prayer we will ask ourselves just one question, VOA: What is to prevent us?

Now to the one who calls us and sustains us on this journey, to this one be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

¹As cited in Wilson, Brittany E. ‘Neither Male nor Female’: The Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8.26–40 in *New Testament Studies* 60, pp. 403–422.

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The sermon can be read online at <https://www.villagepres.org/people-like-us.html>.