

WELCOMING THE OTHER

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Despite the best efforts of the authorities in Jerusalem, the word, the message of Jesus is spreading. There are now thousands of converts in Jerusalem and the authorities have had it. The first persecution occurs and the disciples are scattered to the countryside. Rather than contain the problem this spreads the message and begins an even greater explosion in the number of followers.

Don't forget this important fact. Philip, Peter Andrew, all of the apostles and disciples and even Paul were Jewish. Today's story is just the beginning of the sending out of the word to the greater world. Just now the word is going out to others.

The story of Acts is the breaking open of the message of Christ to the whole world. The followers of Jesus at this time were not trying to supplant Judaism, but to take it in a new direction. A direction they felt was in line with the nature of their being the "chosen" people of God. Israel had been chosen to show the world about YHWH. The sin, was that they had become insular. They were not reaching out to others who did not know about God. They were happy with their small closed circle of believers.

Jesus regularly broke this barrier down during his lifetime on earth. From the Good Samaritan, to the wide group of people he selected to serve him and who he served this was not the group that was considered part of the inner circle. In fact most were explicitly excluded from those inside the circle. Tax collectors, Gentiles, lepers, those possessed by demons all were excluded from the temple worship. This is exactly what got him into so much trouble.

Even in this story we are still probably dealing with one Jew talking to another. The Ethiopian Eunuch might have been Jewish or what was called a God fearer. (One who believed in YHWH, but was not born Jewish.) He was very important member of the queen's court. He was a person of status and power since he was in charge of her entire treasury. Yet he was outcast because he was a Eunuch. Deut. 23:1 says that anyone who is sexually mutilated may not enter the assembly of the Lord.*

The passage he is reading is from Isaiah, and it is a notoriously difficult passage Isaiah has announced that he will gather the remnants and bring them back together and even the Eunuchs will be welcome. Please note that here we bring two passages of scripture into direct conflict. Isaiah overturns Deuteronomy.

The passage is fourth of the suffering servant passages and scholars today still debate who the suffering servant is. We had that discussion in EfM just this week. However for Phillip there is no doubt, the suffering servant is Jesus. The Spirit informs his reading of scripture.

There is an important community aspect of this passage. "How will I understand unless someone explains?" he asks. The answer is we find our meaning, how the Bible informs our world, only in community. This is not a solitary act. Only through discussion and prayer can we discern what the Spirit is saying. Oh the Spirit. Here we go again. What is the central theme through all of the passages that we have read in Acts this Easter. Led by the Spirit has been prominent in our passages for three weeks.

Please note that during this season of Easter we have been using Enriching Our Worship and the scripture passages all end with, "Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's People." How very different is this from "The Word of the Lord." One is open, the other feels somewhat confining.

Edward Hays parable the Board Room

A man in a near death experience finds that heaven looks like a private club. As he enters the club he walks into a room where there is a board meeting. Walking past hundreds of silent or at least very quiet figures he hears laughter in one corner. He finds in that corner Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha and Moses sitting in a large circle. There is a fifth chair, but the man cannot see who is in it. They are all bemoaning how dead and lifeless there club is. They comment that it is dead because all the words are now trapped on printed pages of the books on the shelves in the library all around them. Not only that, but there are all the commentaries and commentaries on the commentaries. The words once alive as they were told and lived are now lifeless.

Now I do not want to spoil the end of this parable, because I hope some of you will get the book and read it. The point though is that the words only have the power to save, to convert, to change lives when they are enlivened. Enlivened by each of us. The words must carry the life of the Holy Spirit in them as we allow them to enter our minds and most importantly our hearts. They only have life if they are heard, believed and lived.

What is to prevent me from being baptized the Ethiopian asks. Well many things, wrong country, wrong job and wrong sexuality. Yet Phillip sets that all aside, why. Because filled with the Spirit he knows this is the right thing to do. Phillip is not trapped by the words on the page, he is led, driven by the Spirit. Phillip is listening to the Spirit. He is not locked into a way of action by the written word. The revelation of God is a living, breathing, life-giving event.

Now this is tricky business. I am not for a moment suggesting we can just throw out a piece of scripture because we don't like the message. What we must do is look at what the passage means to us today in our context after first looking at the passage in the context it was written. That is what Phillip models for us today in his baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch. He opens the words of Isaiah to the eunuch in light of what he has been taught by Jesus and the Spirit.

Phillip then joyfully enters the waters of baptism, with the eunuch and then is transported away to spread the good news. I have said before, and I will make this statement again. I am with Philip in his open and inclusive view of who is inside and who is outside of the circle. When the day comes for me to answer for what I have done, I would rather have to ask forgiveness for having been too free, too extravagant with my message of the love of God, than have to explain why I did not spread that message to all. I would rather explain having loved too many than not have loved enough. I believe Phillip would agree, now how about you? Who is the other that you are called to welcome. Who are the others who we are called to welcome into our parish?

* A eunuch was a man who had been castrated, usually around age 10. They were often used to serve in the parts of the court populated by women.