

Acts 8:26-40
May 2, 2021
“How Many People Need to be Guided?”
Rev. Randy Smith

So, my *first* question on reading this morning's lesson from the Book of Acts was, "**How many eunuchs** are there out there in our world today?" And by "eunuch" I don't mean someone who is sexually disabled. What I am really asking about is reflected in the title of this morning's sermon: **how many people** out there, i.e., have **some knowledge** of, or **some interest** in -- the Christian scriptures, the Christian story, the Church's story, our sense of who we are and what we are about in the life of the world -- but who do not **understand** what they know or -- worse -- have a severe **mis**-understanding of these things, and who need therefore to be "**guided**" by *someone* into a right understanding?

But, digging even deeper, how many people out there in our world are "eunuchs" in the sense of **feeling** -- in *various* ways -- *fundamentally* "**excluded**" in life, *even* people who *appear*, on the surface, to be doing *okay*. But, beneath the surface, they feel as though they have **no** real *friends*. They **feel** as though they have **no** *group* to be a part of, no group who really *invites* them in, or who really *wants* them. That they just **don't**, in some way or ways, **measure up**: they don't make *enough* money, are not *successful* enough, or *attractive*, or *athletic* enough.

Or, even more **basically**, they are not the right *race*, or *ethnicity*, or *national origin*, or *sexual orientation*.

How many people are out there, i.e., who need to **hear** -- and come to **understand** in a way that heals their lives and relationships -- the Good News about the Jesus -- the one who was **unjustly excluded** to the point of *rejection*, *condemnation*, and a humiliating and painful *death* -- but who was then **raised** from the dead on the first Easter?

It's important that we understand where we are in the reading from Acts 8 this morning: we are sometime just after the first Easter. Now, for *many* Christians, **Easter is really enough**. They are happy, i.e., to get off the bus at the Easter "stop", and just celebrate the truth of Jesus' resurrection, and how it confirms their hope in Jesus as the Son of God, triumphant over the grave. But, Biblically, that's not how it works. Biblically, Easter is just the **beginning** of what the Christian faith, and life, are all about.

And the Gospel writer, Luke, makes sure that we know this by authoring the Book of Acts, which is in effect the "Gospel of Luke, Part II". We come into the story Luke tells where it's now been 50+ days since the first Easter Day and -- just as the Risen Jesus promised his first followers -- the Holy Spirit has already come upon them at the first Christian **Pentecost**, to give them the "**power**" they need to

be "**witnesses**" to others about the **resurrection** of Jesus, *and* all that it means, from "Jerusalem...to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). From that 50th day until this point, the Spirit has been **building the life-together** of the first Christian congregation in the world there in Jerusalem, and then **launching** members from that congregation into the work of **witness** in neighboring regions -- such as on the road running through the wilderness southwest of Jerusalem toward Gaza.

It is down that desert highway there that **Philip** -- one of the original Twelve disciples Jesus called -- is sent, Luke says, by an "angel" -- *viz.*, a *messenger* -- "of the Lord" (v. 26), and it is down that road that he encounters, of all people, an **Ethiopian**. In the Bible, Ethiopians are considered to be an *exotic* people, a *fascinating* people on account of their skin color ("Can Ethiopians change their skin? -- Jer. 13:23), a people who lived at the boundary of the known world, and a people whose Queen was known to possess fabulous wealth. This Ethiopian Eunuch -- such persons being considered in the ancient world to be more *trustworthy* -- is the man in charge of her entire **treasury**, which would mean he was a person of *high rank* in the Queen's court, and also of *considerable wealth* himself.

And what Philip **hears** him doing, while riding comfortably in his, no doubt, covered chariot in the noonday heat, is **reading aloud** from the Hebrew prophet, Isaiah (the norm in the ancient world). What Philip discovers is that this man has traveled some 1,500 miles to the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem to worship the Jewish God, and is now on the return journey home. **What**, you have to ask, could have prompted him to make this *extraordinary* effort to know more about the God of Israel?

One **clue** is that we learn that he is particularly drawn -- out of what was almost surely a wider selection of writings out of the Hebrew Bible available to him -- to *one* of the passages from the early 6th-c. BC portion of the Book of Isaiah which have come to be called the "**Suffering Servant**" songs. There are *four* such passages, spanning cc. 42-52. They all describe some figure who has **suffered** in *various* ways, in *every* case *unjustly*, ranging from social exclusion, to outright rejection by his peers, to condemnation by his peers. From the quotation the Eunuch reads to Philip -- "In his humiliation justice was denied him" (v. 33) -- it appears that it is the **injustice** and *humiliation* described in the passage which has caught his eye -- which is really to say caught his *heart*.

Why? Well, you need to understand that, when he arrived at the Jerusalem Temple to offer worship, he was not permitted -- on account of his sexual status -- to come into even the *outer* courts of the Temple, where Gentiles were typically allowed. Which helps us to understand that he is a man who -- despite his wealth, learning (he can read foreign languages!), and even his social status in his own land -- is well acquainted -- underneath all the public, outward aspects of his life --

with the *fundamental injustice* of his life, the *fundamental humiliation* of being never really, fully *included*, fully *accepted*, on account of being never fully *acceptable* in life.

The question the Eunuch goes on to ask -- "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" -- makes for the *perfect opening* for Philip to tell him "the good news about Jesus" (v. 35). The one Isaiah speaks of, Philip tells him, is the Jesus who -- although rejected, and unjustly condemned to a humiliating death -- has now been *raised* from the dead, and raised from the dead *for the purpose of revolutionizing* the life of the world, leading humankind into a **new way of life** in the world which is based, not on the **power of exclusion** but instead on the **grace of inclusion**.

The **mark** of entry *into* that new way of life -- as Philip must have explained -- is **baptism**. And when the caravan happens -- miraculously? -- upon a body of water alongside the desert highway, the Ethiopian asks, "What is to **prevent me** from being **baptized**?"

It's a question which, if you let it, can almost make you cry. Because it's the question, I think, being asked of all those people *in general* who find themselves, and have always found themselves, in this life on the *outside* looking *in*: the under-educated, under-employed, under-housed; the under-respected, under-cared for.

There is a whole *population* around us every day who are *suffering* the **power of exclusion**: they *know* they **don't really count** in this world, that they are **not really wanted**. Some come to the Church Office, to beg for a relative pittance of assistance, to pay an electric bill, or the rent, or for just a tank of gas. *Some* act as though they are *entitled*; but *most* won't speak above a whisper, and rarely look up when speaking to you. In *both* cases, however, they *know* they are the people in this world who don't *really* count, who aren't *really* wanted. **No matter** how kind and helpful I am to them. They **know**.

But they *want* to *count*. They *want* to be *wanted*.

And then there is the *population* all around us every day who are -- effectively -- *enjoying* the **power of exclusion**. They *know* they "count" in this world because of all the visible and tangible signs -- their neighborhoods, houses, cars, vacations, etc. -- that they "count". They *know* they are **wanted**, on account of all the social, business, professional and other groups which *welcome* *their* membership (and financial support) -- including *churches*, which somehow get lumped together, and even allow themselves to be lumped together with all those other organizations.

Should folks in either of these groups come to the Church, however, asking to be received into the **new way of life** based on the **grace of inclusion**, we need to be ready. They'll need **guidance**. They'll need the **grace of inclusion** *poured over* their lives, beginning with the water of Baptism. They'll need to *then* be taught

how to exercise the **grace of inclusion** -- this world-changing new power granted us by the Risen Lord Jesus -- in all of their relationships with others.

Such that there is never *anyone* out there who has not heard the Good News about Jesus, the Risen Lord, whose resurrection changes everything, and so never *anyone* out there thinking there is *anything* preventing *them* from being baptized.

This is the fundamental ministry of *all* the baptized. As our Service of Baptism asks:

"Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, *in union with the Church* which Christ has opened to people of *all ages, nations, and races*?"

If God is, i.e., going to let **any** of us in, we all have to agree -- in advance -- to welcome any and all others God may send our way.