

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter: Acts 8:26-40

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This past Thursday was one of those days where the stars aligned, or maybe it was providence, or chance, or the Holy Spirit. Anyway, this past Thursday, I had the same conversation three different times with three very different people. All three conversations came with the same question / allegation. "If Jesus came back tomorrow, would he recognize his church? And would today's Christians recognize him?" It's a fine question, probably one of those questions we ought to be asking ourselves with some regularity. It's kind of a temperature check. Like, we say we believe all this stuff, we say we follow Jesus and his teachings, so how are we doing?

Now, y'all know I'm pretty partial. So my kneejerk is to say that there are probably a bunch of Christians that are getting it wrong, a bunch that Jesus wouldn't recognize and that wouldn't recognize him, but when it comes to St. Thomas', well, we would. Obviously, right? I mean, that much is true. We're good at this. Y'all are good at this. Easy peasy. But -- you had to know that was coming, right? But if we're honest with ourselves, shoot, I'll own it, if I'm honest with myself, I'm not sure it would be quite so obvious. I've met my fair share of street preachers. I've had God's capital-T Truth preached to me from the sidewalk, and I've rolled my eyes at the crazy dude on the corner. I've heard evangelists calling for repentance in the center of a college campus, and I've stood back to watch the spectacle and ridicule the faithful. And I mean, sure, we all know that some people are just plum manipulative and some approaches to religion are gross and make us feel like we need a shower after catching some hateful vitriol draped in the robes of the Gospel. But that's not really what I'm talking about. I mean, maybe I should work harder to see Christ in those folks, too, but today, I'm more interested in something else. I'm more interested in "someones" else.

I'm more interested in those places that we don't even hear the name of Christ. So, let's rewind for a second, rewind all the way back to those robe-and-sandal wearing days when the disciples debated the meaning of Jesus' newest parable and the religious folks of the day tried to catch him up in a gaffe. You see, in some ways, Jesus' day was no different from ours. The religious authorities had their set way of doing things. Religious people didn't have one set of beliefs but many, it just so happened that one sect was in power. And that sect had its ways of managing the belief of the faithful, their way of converting new members, their way of sniffing out trouble and sorting out conflict. Nothing new then, nothing new now. Jesus' day also had street preachers, tons of them, and many of them claimed to be the messiah. A fair number of others were called the messiah by their followers. If you've ever read the Books of the Maccabees, Judas Maccabeus was one of those, a messiah that led the Jews in a fight for freedom.

So when Jesus comes along, it's not terribly surprising that folks roll their eyes or watch and ridicule. It's no surprise that so many did not recognize him as THE Messiah in large part because the market was diluted. But also because he didn't act like the Messiah was supposed to. The Messiah, for most of the Hebrew scriptures, was meant to be a militaristic leader, not a peacenik. The Messiah was supposed to challenge foreign rulers, not established religion. The Messiah was supposed to be ritually clean and adherent to the Law to a capital T. But Jesus went and surprised folks all the time. He subverted their expectations and stayed true to his purpose. And those that believed believed deeply, and those that didn't, didn't. One of the biggest faults they found in him was the company he kept. He spent his time eating with, working miracles for, and preaching to the last people in the world that the religious authorities would go to. He touched lepers. He drank with Gentiles and \*gasp\* foreign women. He showed compassion to prostitutes, sometimes accepting lavish gifts that came from questionable money. He made himself unclean, he urged his followers to follow the Spirit and hold the Law loosely, especially if it was a question of the needs of a person vs. adherence to the Law. His followers took this to heart and went places they shouldn't. They dealt with people they shouldn't. They ate what they

shouldn't. They welcomed who they shouldn't. And all the while, the establishment built their case against them all. Strike after strike after strike.

Well, Philip on the road to Gaza finds himself in one of these situations. It'll become a calling card for what it means to follow Christ, but it's also exactly the kind of thing that would get a guy in trouble. Philip runs into an Ethiopian eunuch, and an amazing story unfolds. The Ethiopian's reading Isaiah and Philip offers to unpack the passage, which leads to the Ethiopian's baptism and Philip's Holy Spirit-guided teleportation. Great story, right? Yay for making new Christians! But, as you might expect, it's deeper than that. See, that Ethiopian represents a whole lot all at once, and it's all the kind of things that a good religious person should avoid. First off, he's an Ethiopian. Now, there's some debate in biblical circles about why that matters, but nearly everyone agrees that it does. It may be significant because many believed the Ethiopians incapable of understanding the religious complexities of Judaism. If that's true, then Philip's wasting his time with someone that doesn't even get it. Inversely, another take says it matters that he's an Ethiopian because some claimed to be descendants of the great Jewish exile half a millenia before. They'd fled, and when they fled they claimed to have taken the Ark of the Covenant with them for safekeeping. And then belief and practice diverged. You might imagine this far-off place of "safekeeping" would be quite the thorn in the Jerusalem elites' side. Either way, he's an Ethiopian, and that has baggage. Not only is he Ethiopian specifically, but more generally, he's a foreigner. And there was great distrust of foreigners, especially in religious circles. There were proper channels for a foreigner to convert, but they'd rarely ever shake the label of convert, rarely ever be allowed full participation. Even if he were brought in, he'd always be a target of suspicion because he was a Gentile. And then there's the third piece. He was a eunuch. Now, there are basically three ways someone would get that label. Either someone else would perform the operation, usually if the eunuch was to be in some royal service. The eunuch might do it themselves, usually as a sign of extreme religious devotion. Or, the eunuch could've been born that way, as what we would call "intersex."

Regardless of how the Ethiopian came to be a eunuch, the religious authorities in Jerusalem would've looked at him as a member of a sexual minority (in a bad way, of course), a gentile, and an Ethiopian -- and you better believe that came with all the baggage each of those categories carried. He was three strikes in one man, and Philip follows the Spirit right to him, and baptizes him without hesitation. He touches the man, he goes into the water with him. He shares intimate space and intimate conversation with the last person he should've. And the Spirit takes him on to his next task.

My brain goes to a whole lot of places with this, but I'll try to keep it down to just two for now. First, I've always wondered what happened with the eunuch afterwards. In Acts, there's not really much to go on. He's Baptized, then Philip disappears, he rejoices, and the story moves on. And I kinda love that. We're left to imagine what this convert does with his newfound faith and kind acceptance. Much has been made of him being the first black Christian. Much has also been made of him as the first queer Christian. Much has focused on who he was. But while that's all fantastic and I think it's amazing that this momentous thing happens, and then the narrator moves on. Like, it's so extraordinary in so many ways that this specific person was baptized, that this person of all people would be brought into the fold, but in the way the narrator moves on, I wonder if there's a sense of how ordinary it *should* be. Yes, this is the last person you would expect to be welcomed in, so he's exactly the person you should welcome in. And then nothing happens, at least not in our telling of it. The heavens don't break open, the world doesn't end, the greatest disciple who ever lived doesn't emerge. It's just normal. There's space under Christianity for extraordinary people to come and just be, saved by Christ and loved and blessed and quietly living out the grace bestowed on them.

But I'm also thinking about Philip. He's followed Jesus long enough to know the rules and the ways to live into them, and the ways to bend them when need be. He's faithful enough to see the humanity of another

person beyond the Law that defines him and to share generously. He's brave enough to talk about the deeply personal faith they now share, and he's brave enough to hold this three strikes of a man in the waters of baptism. Philip's faith has taken him right to that place he "shouldn't" be and shown him it's exactly where he should be. And he's rewarded with a miraculous experience and a story that continues to inspire. I guess when I'm reading this now, I wonder what exactly this story wants us to do. If we're looking for Christ today or if we're trying to live right so Christ'll recognize us when he shows up, what do Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch want us to do?

It's a tough question, right? I mean, I guess it's not really all that tough to answer, but it's a trick to live it out. I think the answer's gotta be pretty obvious. We're supposed to follow that Spirit of God wherever it takes us and to whomever it takes us. We're supposed to find the last person we "should" be around and go to them anyway. We're supposed to be open to who they are and we're supposed to answer their questions, love them, be with them bravely, and offer the Love of Christ that cares nothing for the things that divide us. Like I said, easy answer, hard to live out. Let's think for a second who this person is now, where this story asks us to go. What does it look like for a Christian to love someone intersex? Or to love anyone of LGBTQ+ folks? Maybe that's a hard question for you to deal with, and if it is, I encourage you to keep dealing with it. But let's really push this. Let's lean against those boundaries in our minds and imagine who else we're called to encounter. By the way, when I say encounter, I don't mean, like, someone you just meet along the way and call it a day. That's easy enough. No, to take a word from the Gospel, who could you abide with? Who should we risk our own status for? I think what today asks of us is to imagine that last person you would ever want to be around, that person that all of your friends or employers or good church goin' folk would gossip behind your back for, and go to them. Are they trans? Are they covered in tattoos? Do they show more skin than you'd like? Do they thump Bibles in public? Did they break a window at the Capitol Building? Do they wear a badge or do they cover their face with a bandana? Do they refuse to wear a mask? Are they just annoying? Or a little weird? Or poor? Or smelly? Or foreign? Or different in any way?

Well, folks, that's where we go. That's who we go to, that's where we find Christ, and that's where Christ will know us. Can Jesus recognize us if we don't go there? Well, sure, Jesus has shown us too many times that there's not much of a limit to what he can do. But will he like what he sees? Look around folks. And for you on Zoom, take a gander at all those little screens. Are we comfortable with who we see? I am. I love y'all. And I think that might be a problem, or maybe not a problem, exactly, but it's at least a challenge. Jesus came and troubled the waters. First with John at his own baptism, then at Cana, and with the blind and the lepers and at least one woman of the night, then through his followers when he told them to go forth and baptize. Go down into the waters with anyone and any kind anywhere. Philip troubled the waters with the Ethiopian Eunuch, and from all that, you better believe our waters need some troubling, too.

I love y'all, and I'm ready to go to those people that make us blush or wince or a little afraid. And I hope you're ready, too. Because if we do this, it will change us. The Spirit will move us from the road we're on now to something new and wonderful and grace-filled. And if we're lucky, we'll get a little better at seeing Jesus as we go. And if we're lucky, Jesus'll recognize us, too. And if we're lucky, maybe he'll be happy with what he sees.