

Fifth Sunday of Easter

ACTS 8:26-40

PSALM 22:25-31

I JOHN 4:7-21

JOHN 15:1-8

April 28, 2024

### *Eunuch Love!*

**“No one whose (parts) testicles are crushed or whose (part) penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord,” Deuteronomy 23:1. The word of the Lord? Thanks be to God? I cleaned up that verse big time, as best I could, at least somewhat! After all, as someone once noted, “parts is parts!” Isaiah, call him the prophet’s prophet, prophet without peer, would prophecy, “Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely separate me from God’s people’; and do not let the eunuch say, ‘I am just a dry tree.’ For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than the sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.” Pun intended by this accidental biblical writer, I am sure! Isaiah 56:3-7! Today we hear an ancient prophecy fulfilled in our reading this morning from the book of Acts, the Acts of the Apostles written in large part to describe the rapid expansion in the early Church! And with those seemingly contradictory biblical viewpoints, these opposing verses from the Hebrew Bible, we are off and running with our sermon for today.**

One of the things that you notice rather quickly when examining the grouping of lections that were chosen for this specific day on the liturgical calendar by those magical, mystical, lectionary editors is the subtle, and sometimes blatant, way that these pairings preach a sermon all their own, the message they sought to convey becoming crystal clear the more that we read them in comparison, side-by-side. In my estimation, such is the case today with the juxtaposition of the radical story of the Ethiopian eunuch’s conversion in the book of Acts and another of the numerous love texts, call them love stories, themes dominating the first epistle of

John. The connection becomes obvious with only a surface reading, transparently brought into view in a most enlightening way. As we make this, another homiletical journey this morning, we will retell the old, old story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch and ponder the message it sought to convey then and continues to convey now, perhaps needed now more than ever in our divided Christendom, much of it led by a rabid Christian nationalism, tribalism run amuck, tribe and clan dictating and dominating the discourse of many one-dimensional Christians and their narrow minded sectarian churches. **Spoiler alert! This epic tale is a quintessential hospitality text, yes, a narrative that is, what, wait for it, was, a part of my research. And on this day when you are throwing me a graduation party, I could not help but think how appropriate that truly is! Here we go on what we hope will be another sermonic adventure!**

The story is simple in form but deeply informative in what was surely received as a complicated, yes, controversial reading. As with many biblical stories, the radicality of a specific text usually gets lost in the weeds as we tend to benignly read these tales through our contemporary lenses, politely reading these legendary narratives more than two thousand years after they were first written and read. These familiar stories become commonplace for us, even diluted, tamed, by those who, by accident or intent, refuse to read them in the surprising, even shocking way they would have been understood as these poignant words first came across the radar of the ancients. We clean up these texts, throw in a little literary perfume, sanitize their meaning, dress them up, all to make them ecclesially, politically, socially, and theologically acceptable, uh, correct. Yes, we take the sting out of them, remove their fangs, to harmlessly make their bite more palatable, more suitable for every audience, their interpretation often masked or shifted to meet a local context with a specific agenda. I am always glad that this congregation does not wallow in that blindly and comfortably naïve, yes, let us call it ignorant, expectation! Good biblical exegesis, that is, interpretation, demands honest struggle, critical evaluation, a hermeneutic, that is, meaning, that requires transparency and unrestrained objectivity. Nothing else will do, nothing less will satisfy the minimum standard, the demand for rigorous reading.

**The not-ready-for-primetime-Sunday-morning-verse that I read for you to begin this sermon sets the stage, providing the necessary background for the story of**

the Ethiopian eunuch and Philip as it unfolds before us. Eunuchs in the ancient world served important roles in their trustworthy capacity, fiduciary and otherwise, call them essential workers, a term that the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us to use. The reasons for their functional practicality were obvious, they were a safe choice, unable to take advantage of the women entrusted to their care, if you get my drift. You know what I mean! In this lection from the book of Acts we read where this Ethiopian eunuch, Ethiopia not located in the same place we now know it to be in Africa, is going about his business as an official responsible for the treasury of the Candace, taking care of the queen in whose care he has been entrusted. The “Candace” was a title, much like Pharaoh or the Caesar, solely designated, royally bestowed, for the monarch of Ethiopia. The eunuch, despite his obvious limitations, was a VIP in his own right, living a life of class and privilege, even carrying a certain level of prestige. As J. Bradley Chance observes, “Castrated men regularly served in positions of government responsibility, particularly in overseeing financial matters and the royal herem. Philostratus tells an amusing story of a eunuch who was attracted to one of the royal concubines. The king wanted to execute the offender, but Apollonius of Tyana recommended that a more fitting punishment would be to let him live, given that he would never be able to satisfy his sexual longings.”<sup>1</sup> Ooh la lah! And being the multitasker that this eunuch obviously was, able to walk and chew gum, and all at the same time, on his return from worshipping from the outer ring vantage point of the court of the Gentiles in the temple at Jerusalem, he just happened to be continuing his devotional discipline while reading from the prophet Isaiah—wow, what a textual coincidence—meaning that he could read and that, because of his status, could afford an expensive scroll. And this is where his intersection with Philip, who magically appears out of nowhere, comes onto the scene to offer an interpretive intervention. Interestingly, but not ironically, the writer carefully notes that Philip had just come from an exciting evangelistic crusade to Samaria, of all places, the Samaritans considered bottom feeders, unclean half or mixed breeds, religious reprobates, according to Israelite perspectives. But just when you think you have hit rock bottom, you come upon a Gentile, a eunuch, probably a person of color, someone who would have always been kept at arm’s distance, never permitted to defile the inner sanctum of the temple, the holy assembly of the Godly. From this day forward, the gospel

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<sup>1</sup>J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, (Macon, GA, Smyth and Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2007), 136.

made clear, plainly so, that no longer would sexuality be a wedge issue, an impediment forbidding someone to freely worship God.

These two stories about Philip's outreach, intentionally juxtaposed against one another by the Lukan writer, was a blatant reminder to these early and us later readers, that these people groups typically lived their lives on the fringes, existing by the barest of sustenance on the margins of society, surviving as the dispossessed and disenfranchised whose hope was always at the mercy of those born with a variety of silver spoons, trust babies all! The eunuch, however, was a fortunate exception, making a good living, but was still an outsider, an other. We know how the story ends, Philip interprets Isaiah based on a newly developing Substitutionary Atonement theology that we tend to now call into question if not outright reject as divinely sanctioned cruelty and archaic retributive justice. The eunuch converts, a brand spanking new proselyte to the follower of the way of Jesus movement, is baptized, with everyone living happily ever after. Philip was then suddenly teleported to Azotus, ala Star Trek.

As Chance notes, "This story has puzzled interpreters because it appears to offer an account of the conversion of a Gentile!"<sup>2</sup> And in the unfolding drama of the book of Acts, Luke opens the floodgates, Katy bar the door, all bets are off, release the hounds, the insular Genie that limited the imaginary boundaries of the gospel was now let out of the bottle, unbound and let go, yes, let loose in every conceivable way on the world. The gospel was now gaining momentum as the Spirit of Christ was fully recognized, hospitably inviting and welcoming all comers, the Church becoming a living, breathing, organism of hospitable inclusion. Yes, even the likes of eunuchs! The Great Commission described at the end of the Gospel of Matthew is coming into focus and full flower, coming to fruition right before the very eyes of the reader, all nations now meaning all nations, yes, "to the ends of the earth!" No longer would there be a separatist, segregated, worship assembly, no outer and inner rings creating boundaries and borders, a systemic religious apartheid—shout out to the thirty-year anniversary of the abolishment of this demonic practice that once defined South Africa—categories thankfully demolished in the baptizing waters of Christ. A new day had dawned, the promises of Joel, the assurances of Pentecost, fulfilled! Even

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 135.

Peter, one of the last holdouts, would eventually get the memo and become convinced that God shows no partiality, Paul's influence finally getting through Simon the rock's thick and stubborn skull. Quoting Chance once more, "The gospel to which we bear witness is an inclusive gospel. It delivers to the Ethiopian eunuch what texts such as Isaiah 56:3-7 could only promise!"<sup>3</sup> Promises made! Promises kept! Promises fulfilled! Check!

Chance adds, "The tough task for us is to decide how we respond to those who *want* to worship with God's people, but whom our traditions, *even scriptural traditions* seem to disqualify. What do we say to the woman who has given birth to an illegitimate child who wants to come to our place to worship and raise her child among God's people? Do we follow the counsel of Deuteronomy 23:2, banning from our congregations 'those born of an illicit union . . . even to the tenth generation?' What should be our word to that unmarried, cohabitating couple who want to come and worship among us?"<sup>4</sup> After all, scripture forbids it! Chance then hits close to home for many, asserting, "And despite attempts at revisionist re-readings"—I resemble that remark—"it is very difficult to make scriptural testimony regarding homosexual behavior read positively, or even neutrally . . . But what do we say when the gay or lesbian couple comes and stands outside the gates leading to our sanctuary because they want to worship with God's people?"<sup>5</sup> Yes, these decisions may be easy or easier for us First Congregational United Church of Christ folks, but they are still way too difficult, impossible for many, continuing to be considered too controversial, too divisive, for way too many in the Church universal, holy, catholic, and apostolic today. Chance finishes his wonderful tirade, "Are *we* the ones who send the bastards, fornicators, and homosexuals off to read their Bibles alone on a deserted road? Or are we the ones who track them down, join them in the chariot, and talk about how Scripture finds its meaning in the gospel of Jesus Christ? . . . One cannot read the Acts of the Apostles and offer any legitimate interpretation that claims that this narrative advocates passive non-involvement."<sup>6</sup> In other words, it means what it says and says what it means! No equivocations! No exceptions! **No qualifications!** Yes, we must follow Philip's noble, gracious, and righteous lead

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 140.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 141.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 141.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 141.

because we are called to do so. We are called to love unconditionally as does our God! The eunuch, on a certain day way back when, asked the pivotal question of the curious considering Christ down through the ages, a question each and every one of us has and will continue to ask in every generation, “How can I understand Scripture unless someone guides me?” That is our job one, each and every day, the gracious answers always available to everyone, “no matter who they are or where they are on life’s journey!”

**And so, we come full circle this morning, back to where we started with my initial premise. In our ongoing readings from the Johannine epistles, the letter writer of I John continues to emphatically highlight, to demonstrably emphasize, the essence of love as the touchstone of our faith, indeed, our guiding light. I steadfastly stick to my opening contention that the lectionary editors intentionally paired the readings of I John and the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in the book of Acts, these lections more than illustrating the radicality of love as reflected in the gospel according to Christ Jesus. The eunuch represents the outer bands, the far reaches, of an outcast, an outsider, not an insider despite his inside job, and that if we truly believe the tenets of the gospel our tents must be wide enough, broad enough, “extravagantly welcoming” enough, radically hospitable enough, expansively inclusive enough, vulnerably open enough, to embrace everyone. After all, in our own way we are all eunuchs! We are any and everyone who has ever faced discrimination, exclusion, in any toxic form. Being loving means loving all and all the time! There is no middle ground, no wriggle room. Eunuch love is the only way forward for the contemporary Church to survive, even creating a window in which to thrive, if it is to have a bright, a vibrant and vital, relevant and relational future. Full hospitality is the only hope! May it be so! May it be so!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and loves eunuchs and all of us! Amen and amen!**