

Open Minds and Willing Spirits By Reverend Litton Logan

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SCRIPTURES:

²⁶ Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south* to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.' ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' ³¹ He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.'

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?' ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea. (Acts 8:26-40)

Introduction and Comments:

Three elderly sisters, ages 92, 94 and 96, shared a house together. One evening, the 96-year-old sister went upstairs to take a bath. As she put her foot into the tub, she paused. Then she yelled down to the other two sisters and asked, "Was I getting in the tub or out?"

The 94-year-old said, "I'll come up and see." When she got half way up the stairs she paused. "Was I going up the stairs or down?"

The 92-year-old sister was sitting at the kitchen table drinking a cup of tea and thought, "I hope I never get that forgetful, knock on wood." She shook her head and called out, "I'll be up to help you both as soon as I see who's at the door."

This story is not unlike our text today, we got' a stay focused.

Sermon:

There is a long back story to Phillip's encounter with the Ethiopian Eunuch and it begins in Jerusalem and a perception of favoritism in the Jerusalem community of Jesus believers for the Hebrew widows over the Hellenist widows.

Widows, especially those without children, epitomized the truly helpless and needy in scripture. I point out again that to call someone a Greek or Hellenist was to identify them as a person enculturated in Greek values, language, and customs. To call someone a Hebrew or as Paul refers to them, Judeans, refers to Israelites infused with the values, piety, and customs of Judean Judaism as opposed to Jesus, who was a Galilean Israelite with his differences.

Also, I want to point out that the Hebrew word translated as eunuch, **saris** (Strong H5631, plural: **sarisim**) in the Old Testament is derived from the Akkadian expression **sha reshi**, which literally meant "he who is head, chief" and referred to court officials who served the king. Over time however, the Akkadian and Hebrew words were increasingly used in a specialized sense to refer to either intentional or naturally occurring emasculated men as royal officials.¹ The idea behind intentional emasculation was that woman, especially the Queen and the royal wives and concubines, would have been sexually safe around such men; thus, protecting the king's female properties and subsequently his line of descent. Furthermore, it was thought that a eunuch would be less distracted by sexual interests or family matters and therefore more focused on his patron's or king's business. Eunuchs were not always passive, non-sexual males however.

In the case of our story today, I tend to come down on the side of the Ethiopian Eunuch being a "chief official" because he is identified as a court official in the NRSV and the RSV and has been to Jerusalem to worship in the Temple, implying that he was either of the Israelite faith or a devout God-Venerator. Had he been an emasculated male he would not have been allowed in the Temple, not even the court of the Gentiles or the Court for the Others. (Deut. 23:1, NRSV).

However, another viewpoint is given that since the eunuch is reading from Isaiah 53 and the author is a more inclusive Hellenistic Israelite, he may have had in mind eunuchs mentioned later in Isaiah 56. In Isaiah 56, the author visualizes a more idealized time wherein such people would not be excluded or held in contempt. (Isaiah 56:4-8) Either way this man should be seen as a marginalized person or someone of an inferior religious and ethnic pedigree.

Ancient Ethiopia, the Land of Kush or Nubia shares little to nothing with the boundaries of modern day Ethiopia. There are multiple theories and legends about how there came to be Israelites in that part of the world. The most colorful and salacious legend is that the Kushites or Ethiopian Israelites were descendants of a union between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Sheba or Saba in ancient times actually included parts of Eastern Africa and part of the Arabian coast of Yemen.

To address these concerns about the widows and the perceived inequities, the Apostles have seven men of good repute ordained to the task of fairly administering the care and keep of all the widows in the Jerusalem Jesus-community. One of these deacons, a Hellenistic Israelite named Stephen, turns out to be a very powerful, charismatic evangelist.

Members of a Hellenistic Israelite synagogue called the synagogue of the Freedmen hostile toward the Jerusalem Jesus group and took great exception to Stephen and his understandings of Jesus' message. These Hellenists plot against Stephen and are successful in having him stoned to death. One of the people who observed and encouraged this stoning was a young man named Saul, whom we come to know later as the Apostle Paul. This young Saul is reputed in his zeal for Judaism to invade the homes of suspected Jesus believers, and summarily haul men and women off to prison. No hearing, no trial.

After the stoning of Stephen, many in the Jesus community, especially the Hellenists, flee the city. One of these folks is Phillip, one of the original (Magnificent) seven, who ends up in a town in Samaria.

¹ Gerig, Bruce L. Eunuchs in the OT, Part 1, Introduction and Summary, Homosexuality, in the Bible. <http://epistle.us/homobible.html>, 4/27/18.

Phillip tells the Samaritans that the Messiah of Israel is coming soon. Now, the Samaritans considering themselves the true Israel would have homed in on Phillip's preaching. As we are all aware, there was long standing animosity between the Judean Israelites and the Samaritan Israelites that went back to when the Judean Israelites returned from the Babylonian Exile. The Judean Israelites considered the Samaritans illegitimate Israelites, having lost their religious pedigree through intermarriage with those whom the Assyrians had transplanted into Israel after its defeat in 721-22 B.C.E. Conversely, the Samaritans would have seen the Judean Israelites as the real illegimates, especially the Pharisees, because they had been influenced by strange, non-Torah doctrines during the Babylonian exile. Further, the priestly or Sadducean returnees were officiating before God in a Persian funded Temple in Jerusalem.

Phillip has preached and many Samaritans have espoused a belief in Jesus as the Messiah. In the Samaritan's understanding this would have been the Taheb or God's Restorer. The Apostles in Jerusalem get wind of Phillip's success and send Peter and John to check things out. Whether they go there to corral this upstart Hellenist or out of genuine curiosity, we are not sure. After Peter and John arrive and see what Phillip has been up to, they bestow the Holy Spirit on these Samaritan believers. Phillip, then under the direction of a divine messenger, leaves and heads down the road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza. We are meant to understand this stretch of road is an uninhabited or wilderness place, remembering that the wilderness is not only a place of chaos, and the demonic, but also a place of testing, discernment, and revelation.

Phillip intercepts an Ethiopian official and his entourage heading south. Our passages tell us this man is the treasurer of the Candace (Kan-duh-see) or Queen of the territory of Ethiopia. The official is reading out loud from the book of Isaiah. Reading out loud was the custom at the time. The passage the official is reading comes from the Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah. A Judean Israelite would most likely have understood these passages as referring to the whole of God's people as the Suffering Servant not just a single individual. However, given Jesus' persecution and crucifixion bolstered by his resurrection, many saw him as the epitome of the Suffering Servant.

Phillip interrupts the man's reading and asked him if he understands what the prophet says and means. The official, obviously confused, says ³¹ 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' In other words, how can I understand unless someone more knowledgeable than myself interprets for me? Phillips does this and the official comes to the point where he understands who and what Jesus was and is and wants to be baptized. Thus, his famous statement: 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?'

In this brief account, I have in a very broad stroke covered several major aspects of Acts chapters 6-8. What lies at the heart of this section is not only the continued movement of the Gospel but now it moves outside of Jerusalem by the efforts of non-Apostles and according to Judean Israelites, including the Apostles, it was going to people of dubious, religious, and ethnic legitimacy.

I hope you can see the big picture here. What we are seeing is the author's understandings of God's efforts in the Gospel of Jesus the Christ to unify those disparate and fragmented manifestations of God's people, but also to open the kingdom doors to others traditionally considered unworthy and outsiders.

These efforts failed within the greater context of the Israelite peoples of Judea and many of their ilk in the Diaspora. However, it had a degree of success among those Hellenistic Israelites, who had more fluid cultural and religious boundaries, allowing them to accommodate God's rather novel solution to the problem of divine-human alienation through the Gospel of Jesus the Christ.

Over several centuries, the barriers of Jewish distinction among the more Hellenistic Jesus-believers and non-Israelite God-Venerators turned Jesus believers, became less and less

important, and one's relationship with God in Christ communities, regardless of its constituents, began to dominate. Sadly, even this success was fraught with and is still plagued with doctrinal, theological, philosophical, and ethnic divisiveness. But, even in its apparent failures across millenniums, the Spirit of Truth keeps pushing God's agenda wherever it finds open minds and willing spirits.

I hope we understand as Western Christians that God's vision for the world is not necessarily going to be a cultural amalgamation or a one-world government and economic system of western design. Rather, God's plan for humankind as outlined in scripture is that the human heart and mind will be universally oriented toward the care and concern of others, creatures, and creation through our power and capacity to love, not to dominate or control.

This means that those who differ in Christological and theological viewpoints, especially wherein these things are shaped by cultural traditions, must respect others and their beliefs and perspectives and vice-a-versa. It also means that we must trust God to be God and to discern and judge the intentions of the human heart independent of religious, creedal formulations as the Spirit leads people to and in the Christ.

I, as many of you, have directly or indirectly been party to doctrinal disputes and discord. I have been denied communion in a church as an ordained minister because I was not a member of that church. I was told by one minister's wife that we at the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) were just a social club using the Christian name. This same minister's wife showed up at my door one day during her church's community-wide preparation for an evangelist crusade in a town of 450 people to ask me that if I died that night, did I know where I would go? Knowing this canvassing was going on and thinking this was some kind of joke, I promptly told her, "Yes, I know exactly where I would go. I would go down the street to Kenny Landman's Funeral home." Where upon she stomped off muttering something under her breath.

I have heard hundreds of stories like mine, some unbelievably horrible and insensitive. I know of many people today who are not in church, any church, because of insensitive, wrong-headed, and judgmental sectarianism, not judgmental moralism. All of this in the face of our text today that does not detail anyone's conversion from one religion to another. All we are told is that Judean and Hellenistic Israelites, Samaritan Israelites, and an Ethiopian, possibly a God-Venerator or of a person of doubtful Israelite heritage, came to understand and embrace Jesus as the Messiah within the context of their own particular Israelite faith expressions, understandings, and associations. Do you see that?

Missing this point in our western Christian biases is not unlike the atheist scientist that came to God and said, "We've figured out how to make a human person without you."

God said, "OK, let me see you do it."

So, the atheist bent down to the ground and scooped up a handful of dirt. But God stopped him and said, "Oh, no you don't. Get your own dirt!"

Look, I more than most understand that it is important to know who is in and who is out in our religious, social, ethnic, and national in-groups; it is human nature. But there is plenty of room to acknowledge Christ and live out God's mandates without bullying, condemning, and vilifying others. I get so sick and tired of people, especially Christian people, running around harping on world peace, justice, mercy, compassion for the oppressed and disadvantaged, while doing stuff like I've described in the religious or political arenas of their lives. It's crazy making, schizophrenic. The peace-makers are more often the conflict makers.

⁴⁰But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea. (Acts 4:26-40). Phillip, as one of the Jerusalem seven, stops at Caesarea, a symbolic boundary of Israel, and a major Roman sea port that leads to the lands of the others. The author, I think wants us to see that the

Hellenistic Israelite, the Apostle Paul, is soon to take up the baton of the Good News in Christ and move it beyond the boundaries of Israel out to those Israelites like himself and others whom God will call.

In closing, we stand bound in God's spirit to all others who have heard and responded to the power and presence of the Christ. We stand amid all those who acknowledge God and seek God's ways as they move along their spiritual journeys and revelations. We may not agree with many of these others on matters of doctrine, dogma, or cultural perspectives but, by God, we are all called; so, I pray that we will allow the spirit to lead us into living in peace and harmony until that Great Day when all will be revealed and all that is hidden made known or we meet God in death. This is not always going to be easy because some of these religious people can be abrasive and crazy acting in their quest for religious certainty as opposed to living by faith in God's love for all as made known in Jesus the Christ.