

REJOICING ON YOUR WAY
Acts 8:26-40
(idea borrowed from Dr. Timothy L. Owings, pastor,
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A theologian received a postcard in the mail. It only had six words on it. It said, “I am the one Jesus loves.” In talking to his friend who sent the card, he learned that the statement had come from the author and speaker, Brennan Manning. Manning was referring to Jesus’ closest friend on earth, the disciple named John, identified in the fourth gospel as “the one Jesus loved.”

If you were to ask John, “What is your primary identity in life, who are you?” he wouldn’t say, “I’m a disciple, an apostle, an evangelist. I’m the writer of one of the gospels.” He would say, “I’m the one Jesus loves.”

What would it mean if you and I came to that place – where we saw our primary identity in life as being “the one Jesus loves?”

Sociologists have a theory of the looking-glass self. You become what the most important person in your life thinks you are. Well, what if you became who God thought you could be?

There is a story of an Irish priest who, on a walking tour of a rural parish, sees an old peasant kneeling by the side of the road, praying. Impressed, the priest says to the man, “You must be very close to God.” The peasant looks up from his prayers, thinks a moment, and then smiles. “Yes, he is very fond of me.” (Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace*, p. 68-69)

Today we learn that none of us is beyond the grace of God. There is nothing you can do, there is nothing you have done to make God love you less. And there is nothing you could do to make God love you more. Your relationship with God is based on His endless grace.

We come to our next sermon in our series of sermons from the Acts of the Apostles. Today we have Philip the deacon preaching to a Gentile, a non-Jew.

Is there anyone beyond the grace of God? Who is the person with whom you would not initiate a conversation? Who is subclass to you? The poor? A homosexual? The woman dying of AIDS? The young person with more piercings and tattoos than hair? You tell me. Who is someone beyond the grace of God for you?

Eunuchs in the first century were employed to guard harems and to serve as treasurers. They were the servants of kings and queens. Unfortunately, the thing that made them trustworthy – the emasculation – left them physically deformed. Because of hormonal imbalances, their bodies were

affected, their physical development irregular. Some historians think their arms and their legs grew longer than normal. They were odd.

But something more is going on with this eunuch's story.

Eunuch's were considered to be less than fully human ("No one who is emasculated shall enter the assembly of God," Deuteronomy 23:1), less than fully human in the eyes of the Jews. The eunuch had been to Jerusalem. Perhaps he had heard the story about Jesus, the crucified rabbi. He'd gone to worship.

Look at the end of verse 27

...and he had come to Jerusalem to worship.

But no matter how loyal he was to the God of Israel, no matter how far he had journeyed to worship the God of the Jews, he could never be a Jew. He could never be a full member of the people of God. He was an outcast. He was forever separated, forever estranged. He could read the Bible, the Old Testament scripture – why, he even had a copy of the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. That was a rare possession in those days. He could pray. He could fast. He could give alms to the poor. He could observe all the Jewish laws. He could do everything – even more than most Jews did – but he was forever beyond the community. He was always beyond the barrier of being part of the people of God.

But eunuchs embraced Isaiah 56:3b-5

Nor let the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." For thus says the Lord, "To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant, to them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial, and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off."

This passage promises that in the *eschaton*, the end, they would be returned to full worship.

Philip, the deacon, felt the most unusual leading in his life. Look at verse 26. "But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, 'Arise and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a desert road.)"

It's interesting. Philip, in the beginning of this chapter, has preached to many Samaritans, to multitudes. And yet Philip, the one who had preached to the masses, was now going to be sent by the Holy Spirit to share Christ, face-to-face and one-on-one, with the most unlikely character – with an Ethiopian, an African eunuch.

Philip had this crazy idea, a longing, a nudge from the angel of the Lord – one that really seemed off-the-wall. It was one thing to go to the Samaritans, but now he moves close to the absurd.

"Hey, Philip," said the angel, "get up and go down the south road from Jerusalem. Go down the Gaza road, the desert road." Gaza was the last stop for water in southwestern Israel before entering the desert on the way to Egypt.

Does anyone ever hear from God to go down the Gaza road? Philip did.

The eunuch from Ethiopia was riding, plodding along slowly in his chariot. The fact that he had a chariot meant that he was a man of great wealth. The fact that he really had a copy of the scroll of the prophet Isaiah meant that he was a man of means. He was connected politically. But he was an outcast religiously. He was beyond the barrier of respectable folk.

He, however, was a God-fearer – a non-Jew who worships the Jewish God.

He was chauffeured along his chariot, plodding along carefully, and he was reading a passage (probably aloud) from the prophet Isaiah. He lingered in that remarkable passage of scripture where we learn about the sacrifice of the Christ for us. Look at what he read.

Verse 32

He was led as a sheep to slaughter;
And as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
So he does not open His mouth.
In humiliation His judgment was taken away;
Who will relate His generation?
For His life is removed from the earth.

Philip ran up right next to the chariot and asked, “Do you understand what you’re reading?”

“How can I,” he said, “unless someone guides me.” The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, what’s going on in this text? Is the man talking about himself, or is he talking about someone else? Who is it who suffers the humiliation, the shame? Who loses their life?”

The word for guide (*hodegeo*) is used for leading a blind person.

I love the response that Luke gives. Look at verse 35. “And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.” To “open the mouth” in Acts indicates a “lecturing on scriptures” (Acts 10:34; 18:14).

Maybe Philip told him something like this:

Sir, you couldn’t know it, but the prophet is talking about Jesus. He has more in common with you than you could possibly imagine. Jesus, too, was rejected. He, too, was an outcast. He dangled on a tree – crucified, buried. And we believe. And we have seen the risen Christ. He lives.

Even as Philip talks, grace is beginning to beam into the eunuch’s life. As he hears the good news he wonders to himself, “Maybe there are no barriers at all. Maybe I have been told a half-truth. Maybe the gospel is for me, too.”

Good news begins to well up in his soul. The more Philip talks, the more the waters of grace begin to spring up in that barren, dry life. There is a new life, a new future.

As God would have it, the chariot goes (verse 36) right next to a pool of water. “Look! Water!” he says. “Look! Water! Can I be baptized?”

He was probably really asking a question like this: “Are the barriers really removed? Is the good news of God really for me, a Gentile, a eunuch? Is my physical barrier something that we can overcome? Is the racial prejudice against me something that has truly fallen in Christ? Look, there is water. Is the story of the crucified Christ really for me? Look! Water! Can I be baptized? Look! Water! Can I be plunged into that water and die with Him and be resurrected with Him? Look! Water! Can I, too, have my sins washed away? Look! Water! Can I enter into the initiatory rite that makes me part of the people of God? Look! Water! Can I start life anew? Can I be plunged into the grace of an almighty God?”

Baptism is a powerful symbol. It says that what’s happened on the inside of us is made public on the outside. Like Jesus died, we go under the water. And like Jesus was resurrected, we come out of the water. It’s a metaphor of death and burial and resurrection. That’s New Testament baptism – immersion into the water that represents participation with Christ on the cross. It is your faith in Christ that saves you. It is your baptism that declares that salvation.

It’s a symbol not only of dying and rising with Christ, but a symbol of having our sins washed away. “Arise and be baptized,” it says in the Acts of the Apostles, “and wash your sins away.”

Maybe the eunuch was thinking: “For years I’ve traveled to the temple in Jerusalem at holy days. I’ve seen the laver of water where people could be baptized and brought into the people of Israel. I’ve never been given that opportunity. Here’s water. How about here? How about right now?”

The chariot stopped. The two men got out. The chauffeur held the horses. We are told that Philip and the eunuch went down into the water together. And Philip baptized the eunuch, now his brother in Christ.

Look at him. Look at him closely. He comes out of those waters a transformed person.

There is a road to Gaza – a road that goes south, a desert road, a road that leads out of Jerusalem, the center of religiosity – for all of us, a place where the Spirit nudges us to go, where He allows our life to intersect with someone so unlikely for us as the Ethiopian eunuch was so unlikely for the deacon Philip.

There is something that impresses me, although I don’t see it all that often – maybe that’s why it impresses me, it’s a rarity – when I conduct a funeral and I look at the congregation and see an eclectic crowd. I’m burying a Caucasian Baptist woman and I look in the congregation and I see African-Americans, folks from Latino descent, Asians, and Caucasians, and I realize this woman had friends from many different places. She loved beyond the barriers that sometimes keep the rest of us loving people mostly who are already much like ourselves.

It doesn’t happen often, but occasionally I see folks at the funeral who have gone beyond cultural barriers with something more powerful than the color of skin or the level of income – or even language. And that something is a unifying grace. Heaven forbid, if I did your funeral tomorrow,

what kind of crowd would I see? Have you even considered going to Gaza to reach out to those who seemed to you before to be unreachable?

There is a road out of your life, and a road out of my life, that ends up in Gaza.

Remember, “Philip, get up, go down the south road from Jerusalem. Go down the Gaza road, the desert road.”

We all want to go to Jerusalem. We want to sing the Songs of Ascent as we climb that holy hill. “We’re marching to Zion.” Everybody likes to sing that one. But nobody really wants to sing, “We’re going down to Gaza.” When we rewrite the hymnal, let’s take that one out. We don’t like the Gaza song. We want to go up to Zion.

Everybody wants to go up. Who dares go down the desert road to Gaza? Who dares allow their culture to be intersected with the culture of another?

We learn a lot from this text. We learn it’s our responsibility, as part of the people of God, to allow our lives to intersect the lives of the unlikely as we share the gospel. We have a responsibility, just like Philip, to initiate relationships with the spiritually marginalized who are longing for guidance. You notice he didn’t ask Philip for a teacher. He asked him for guidance. “How can I understand unless someone guides me?” (verse 31). A teacher tells you what to do. A guide goes with you – as Philip went with the eunuch, even into the water.

The Italian novelist Ignazio Silone wrote about a revolutionary hunted by the police. In order to hide him, his comrades dressed him the garb of a priest and sent him to a remote village in the foothills of the Alps. Word got out a new priest was in town, and a long line of peasants appeared at his door, full of stories of their sins and broken lives. The make-believe priest protested and tried to turn them away, but to no avail. He had no recourse but to sit and listen to the stories of people starving for grace.

Everyone is starving for grace

Maybe we, too – maybe you individually – maybe we, as the corporate people of God, need to hitch a ride to Gaza.

- Maybe we need to hitch a ride to listen to the cries of the single mother whose son needs a positive role model in his life, a father figure.
- Maybe we need to hitch a ride to cry with the young person who has lost her innocence and wonders whether God loves her, whether she can ever love herself again.
- Maybe we need to hitch a ride from Jerusalem religiosity to a Gaza-faith.
- Maybe we need to hitch a ride to move from “pew Christianity” to “do Christianity,” to doing the love of God rather than simply talking and studying about it.
- Maybe we need to hitch a ride to says yes to teaching children in our church, to being a chaperon, a sponsor, to working in some of the many outreach and mission endeavors of this fellowship – they are too numerous to even mention, to being out there on the Gaza road for Christ.
- Maybe we need to hitch a ride with a family trying to cope with a mentally challenged child.
- Or with a divorced man or woman who needs uncommon grace.

Maybe we need to hitch a ride to Gaza.

His name was Jimmy. He was a homosexual. Someone, in some ways like the Ethiopian eunuch, who was beyond the barriers, outside the reach of the people of God. But his family was part of our church in Waco, and when he developed AIDS I began a ministry of visiting him and praying for him. He found and enjoyed God's forgiving grace.

Those were hard visits. Those were going down the Gaza road and into the desert for me. Not because I didn't care, but just because I wasn't sure I'd know what to say, what to do. Eventually, after so many visits, I went to his home and watched him die – holding his hand and the family's hand as he left this realm and entered the realm of the eternal.

A mother who hurt. A father who hurt. Both because of their son's sickness and because of the way in which sickness had captured him. A brother who was a minister, who was struggling to walk that road of both loving the gospel and yet loving his brother with gospel grace.

But Jimmy was not beyond God's grace. He just needed forgiveness – like me and like you.

Two folks were riding a bus to work. The woman was a stranger to the man. She was reading Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled* – a book that stayed on the *New York Times* best seller list longer than any other.

“What are you reading?” asked the man.

“A book a friend gave me. She said it changed her life.”

“Oh, yeah? What's it about?”

“I'm not sure. Some sort of guide to life. I haven't got very far yet.” She began flipping through the book. Here are the chapter titles: ‘Discipline, Love, Grace,...’”

The man stopped her. “What's grace?”

“I don't know. I haven't got to Grace yet.” (Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* p. 29)

What about you? Have you gotten to grace yet? There is really no other way than to finally get to grace – God's love for you through the crucifixion and resurrection of His Son. And there is no one within the sound of my voice who is beyond the grace of God.

Acts 8:39

The eunuch rejoices on his way – the joy of grace and the exuberance of being included in the people of God.