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Bridge Street United Church
April 28, 2024
Readings: I John 4:7-21; Psalm 22: 23-31; Acts 8:26-40

On Being Included

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch reflects several significant questions with which the early church had to wrestle. They are also questions with which we need to wrestle in our time and place. Before coming to those questions, I need to provide some background about the book of Acts.

The books of Acts, really a second volume by the same author who wrote the Gospel of Luke, provides an account of some of the growth of the Christian church. From chapter 9 onward, it deals almost solely with the work and ministry of the apostle Paul. Paul's ministry certainly involved a significant expansion of the early Christian church, especially among Gentiles, or non-Jews. But chapters 1-8 of the book of Acts tell of the early spread of Christianity that sets up that later expansion of the Christian church under Paul and other early Christian leaders. In chapters one through eight, we learn that the Christian church has its beginning in Jerusalem. From there it spreads outward to Judea. Then it moves into Samaria, that extension in part the work of Philip, who features so prominently in today's reading from Acts.

Now the expansion into Samaria was significant, for it represented an expansion outside what would then have been seen as mainstream Judaism. The Samaritans practised a form of the ancient Israelite religion, but there were differences between their practice of their faith tradition and Judaism. John's Gospel describes an encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman at the Samaritan city of Sychar. On that occasion, Jesus was passing through Samaria on a journey

from Judea back to Galilee. In their conversation, the Samaritan woman noted that for the Samaritan religious tradition Mount Gerizim was the key worship centre, whereas for Jews in Jesus' day Jerusalem was that centre. There were other differences, but also some shared history between the religion of the Samaritans and Judaism in Jesus' day.

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch represented a yet further expansion of the early Christian church beyond its early boundaries as one Jewish group or sect, among other Jewish groups in Jesus' day, and beyond a neighbouring region whose religious tradition shared similar historic roots to Judaism. The early church was expanding geographically—Jerusalem, the rest of Judea, Samaria, and now beyond—but it was also expanding in terms of other boundaries.

The Ethiopian eunuch represents that next expansion in terms of the story of the early church as we find it Acts. We do not know whether this Ethiopian eunuch was a Jew or whether he was what was then known as a “God-fearer,” namely a Gentile who was attracted to Judaism but who did not convert to Judaism. The requirement of circumcision proved a barrier for many male Gentiles who contemplated conversion. But unquestionably, the eunuch had a strong attraction to Judaism, for he had come to Jerusalem, whether for Passover or some other religious feast, and he was reading the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. What we do know is that his skin colour would have been dark black; the term Ethiopian in those days referred not to the country of Ethiopia but to someone racially black and from any part of Africa south of Egypt. He was also a person with great responsibility in the region from which he came, and he was wealthy. He had a chariot, and he was wealthy enough to own a scroll of a prophetic book, in this case, Isaiah, at a time when a hand-copied scroll was the only means to reproduce a written work. Scrolls were expensive.

But for all his wealth, and his social status as a key official in the court of Queen Candace, he was part of a disadvantaged minority in terms of Judaism in that day. If he was a God-fearer, a Gentile who was attracted to Judaism but who had not converted, he would not have been allowed beyond the outer precincts of the temple in Jerusalem. Regardless of whether he was a Jew or a Gentile, as a eunuch, a castrated male, he also would not have been allowed beyond the outer precincts of the temple. The book of Deuteronomy included a rule, and I quote, “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.” So, the eunuch could go to Jerusalem and participate in the religious feasts of the day and in other aspects of the religious tradition, but there were strict limitations as to how much he could participate. He certainly was not fully included in the religious tradition. Indeed, he was very much on the margins.

That said, the book of Isaiah offered a counter vision for the future. In a portion of Isaiah that includes a vision of what a restored Judah will look like after the people return home from their exile in Babylon, one finds those who had been the minority, had been among the disadvantaged, were now included. So, in Isaiah, chapter 56, one finds these words:

Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, “The Lord will surely separate me from his 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 sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off [Isaiah 56:3-6].

Jewish scholars who study Judaism in this period when Christianity is beginning make the point that in this time period there were rabbis who argued that the text of Isaiah ought to supersede that of Deuteronomy. So, there were differences of viewpoint within Judaism in that day as to the

status of a foreigner or of a eunuch. That said, the then prevailing view meant that neither could go beyond the outer precincts of the temple.

In the passage, Philip offers an interpretation of the book of Isaiah, an interpretation that makes clear that Jesus is the promised Messiah of the Jewish tradition. After that interpretation, the eunuch asks “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” According to the story in Acts, the eunuch stops the chariot, the two of them go to a nearby pool of water, and Philip baptizes him. Then Philip disappears, and the eunuch continues on his way home “rejoicing,” the text tells us.

This story has several significant points. One is the role of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who sends Philip down a wilderness road to Gaza, a road on which he meets the eunuch. In the story, it is the Spirit who tells Philip to go over to the chariot and join the eunuch. It is the Spirit who, at the end of the story, snatches Philip away and sends him to another place. But I would like to think that the Spirit was also present with Philip as he wrestled, as he would undoubtedly have had to wrestle, as to whether the text from Deuteronomy, a text that restricted this man’s participation in community, or the text from Isaiah, a text that opened up the community for his participation, would apply.

In our tradition, we believe that the Bible speaks anew to each generation, to each context, such that we are able to hear God’s word to us and for us this day, when we read and reflect on Scripture. My words each week after I finish reading the final Scripture lesson reflect that theological understanding in our tradition. To say that does not mean that we treat Scripture lightly. In fact, the opposite is the case. I think that the Spirit helps us to understand Scripture in our day. I noted in the sermon last Sunday we might understand Jesus’ reference to “other sheep” differently now to the way those words might have been understood 70 years ago, let alone 100 or more years ago. And we need the Spirit’s help and guidance when we wrestle with apparently

conflicting passages of Scripture, as at least some Jewish rabbis were wrestling in Jesus' day with the apparent contradiction between Deuteronomy and Isaiah. We need always to wrestle hard and seriously with Scripture, and to do so trusting that God will give us guidance in that wrestling.

This passage also invites us to ask when the Spirit of God is leading us in a new direction. Because something is new does not make it right. Because it is something new does not make it wrong. But, with regularity, circumstances arise in which we need to seek wisdom and discernment. And it is a place where our tradition about Scripture, and about Scripture speaking anew to each age, can offer us guidance and can lead us in new directions. That spirit can help us to discern the new ideas that we ought not to take up and the ones that we should.

A second point about this story. This story is one of radical inclusion. This marginalized man is included at a time when the followers of Jesus are almost all still Jews, still individuals who practised Judaism as they always had, though they had now added to their Jewish practice some additional practices from the newly developing Christian tradition. Openness to the inclusion of everyone was hard then. It ran counter both to inherited traditions but even more to societal conventions. This man's race likely put him at some disadvantage. Being a eunuch unquestionably did. Philip had to overcome both those barriers. In the story he is led by the Spirit to do so. In the story, the Spirit tells him to join the eunuch in his chariot. When the eunuch asks if he can be baptized, Philip finds himself led by the Spirit to take guidance from Isaiah rather than from Deuteronomy, finds no indication from the Spirit that he should refuse this request.

The full inclusion of everyone, which I think is what we as a church are called to practice is hard. It is hard because we bring to church many of the attitudes of our society that make

distinctions about value and worth. Some of those distinctions we make are ones we can identify ourselves making. Others we make subconsciously, or even unconsciously.

The early church wrestled with inclusion. It is, I think, one of the key aspects of this story. And when we get a little further in a reading of the book of Acts, we come to the point where early church leaders become convinced that Gentiles, or non-Jews, are as welcome to become full-fledged members of the Christian church as Jews. That decision is the next big expansion. The church Luke is describing in Acts had to wrestle with what inclusion looked like.

As members of the contemporary church, we, too, need to wrestle similarly with how to make the church fully inclusive. My time as a United Church minister included a bitter debate in the mid-to-late 1980s about the inclusion of members of the LGBT community, both as members of the church and as ministers. If I think back to the rural village in which I grew up, I know that in the village most families were relatively equal in economic circumstances. There was no one in the village who was really rich when I was growing up. Nonetheless, there were two families who were “other.” One family was “other” by virtue of race and the other by virtue of poverty. Interestingly, the family that was poor was the more disadvantaged of the two.

I want to say that inclusion is something I think this congregation does quite well. I think that we do genuine inclusion better than most congregations I know. That does not mean that we cannot improve further. Being fully inclusive is hard, for we can exclude in ways we do not even realize. We need always to ask ourselves, as a community of faith, when and where do we exclude? What are the barriers we put up, some openly but most subtly, often unrealized or unknown, even to ourselves.

“What is to prevent me from being baptized” the eunuch asked? The answer, Philip decided, was “nothing.” May we be a community where each person who enters here feels

similarly welcomed, similarly included. And to the God who made us, each and every one, to the one through whom we have come to know that God most fully, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of that God with us and with us always be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

Resources

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

Willimon, William. *Acts*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988.