



“About Whom, May I Ask?”

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Hayward, California***

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Acts 8:26–40

ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE

Today’s scripture is drawn from Acts, the ancient history book that details the account of events after Easter including the ascension of Jesus into heaven, the Pentecost, and the movement of the apostles out of Jerusalem to spread the Good News of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. I invite you, as you listen to the scripture, to imagine you are the man sitting in a chariot on a back road between Jerusalem and Gaza. You wear fine clothes and have an erect and regal bearing. As a royal treasurer from a distant land, you are a person of substance and some resource. You are obviously learned, reading Hebrew scripture in Greek as you sit in your chariot. You are also sad and disappointed. You have traveled over a thousand miles to worship at the temple in Jerusalem, only to be excluded because your reproductive organs have been damaged or removed to render you more fit for the service of your monarch. If being deprived of sexual desire and ability, secondary masculine characteristics, and the ability to procreate wasn’t enough, you have suffered disparagement and exclusion from the religion of your choice. You are returning home, defeated, and seeking solace in a religious text that speaks to your heart, to your life. About whom, you ask, does the prophet speak?

MUSICAL MEDITATION

“Alleleuia”

The Strife is O’er

SCRIPTURE READING

Acts 8:26–40

Susan Whiting

Then an angel of the God 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.) 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 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ He replied, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 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.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.'

The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 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?'"* He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip* baptized him. 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. 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.

SERMON

About Whom, May I Ask?

Pepper Swanson

The Revised Common Lectionary did not offer a scripture today specifically about mothers, so in honor of this special day, I chose a passage with a topic that I'm sure many women in the throes of labor and delivery often wonder about: *What's so wrong with eunuchs, anyway?*

The root of understanding why the Ethiopian eunuch was excluded from worship at the Temple in Jerusalem goes back to the very beginning of the Jewish story. In the Book of Genesis, the very first words that God utters to Adam and Even concern their sexuality. *Be fruitful, God commanded, and multiply.* Later in Genesis, as a reward for offering up his son Isaac, God promises Abraham offspring "as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand on the seashore".¹

As a nomadic people, the ancient Jews saw sexual reproduction of both their women and their animals as critical to their survival. As Genesis depicts, their religion reflected this criticality, making fertility an essential element of their covenant with God. From this emphasis sprung a moral code that favored human institutions and behaviors which promoted sexual reproduction and frowned on those that did not.

In other words, in ancient Israel, heterosexual marriage was *in*. Polygamy was *in*. Prostitution, homosexuality, abortion, infanticide, and sexual acts not conducive to procreation were *out*. And eunuchs? Eunuchs, incapable of sexual reproduction, were *out*. *Way out*.

The Levitical Code of the ancient Jews was specific in this regard: No eunuch could offer food to God, no animal with damaged sex organs could be offered as food for God, and no one who had been emasculated could enter the assembly of the God.² Making men eunuchs was a common practice when they were to serve royalty as guards, particularly of women, as intimates, or to be trusted with royal resources. Eunuchs were excluded from worship at the Temple in Jerusalem and most likely were subject to derision and contempt of their community.

¹ Genesis 22:17

² Leviticus 21:17-21, 22:24 and Deuteronomy 23:1

Jesus, we believed, called the Jewish moral code with its emphasis on sexual reproduction into question. He challenged ancient rules that allowed the expeditious divorce of women. He blessed women who had never given birth or suckled a child. He praised those who made themselves eunuchs, or celibates, for the kingdom of heaven. With an eye to the end time, he linked celibacy with eternal life. And he favored spiritual relationships over biological ones. In the moral priorities of Jesus, we see the seed of what would later become the Apostle Paul's position on human sexuality: Marry and procreate if you must, but it would be far better if you would devote your energies to spreading the Good News.³

And spreading the Good News is what the Book of Acts is all about. Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch is one of many miraculous events in Acts where an apostle of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, meets and converts a stranger to Christianity. But *what a stranger* for the Spirit to choose! If there was ever any question in the minds of the apostles "about whom" the Spirit intended to receive the gospel, it was clarified in an instant with the Spirit's selection of the eunuch, a religiously unclean and foreign convert to Judaism. As the eunuch says after Philip explains that Jesus is whom Isaiah speaks of, that Jesus has fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy: "What is to prevent ME from being baptized?"

The answer, apparently, is nothing. Nothing will stop God's saving grace from breaking through the geographic, ethnic, religious and sexual barriers of humankind. And nothing will stop the Spirit from extending the message of promise-fulfillment and universal acceptance across the globe. Much credit is given to today's scripture for speeding the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire by throwing open the doors of heaven and declaring universal inclusiveness to be the order of the day.

I wish I could say that history has perfectly reflected the theology so beautifully expressed in the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Unfortunately, despite the end of nomadic, agrarian culture and the rise of industrialization across the globe, Christianity has a checkered past and dicey present when it comes to accepting those who don't reproduce or form families in traditional heterosexual fashion. The struggle to guarantee inclusiveness for those disparaged for their sexual orientation and excluded within our religion and in our civic communities has spanned much of this century and makes headlines every day, leading us to ask ourselves and other Christians the eunuch's question over and over: About whom, may I ask, does the Bible speak? About whom, may I ask, does this hymn sing? About whom, may I ask, do we speak when we say everyone may attend, commune, and minister to us as Christians? About whom, may I ask, do we speak, when we say Christ died and was resurrected for us?

These are critical questions that, far too often, go unanswered. Maria Harris, a well-respected Christian educator, says that what we teach people is comprised of three components: what we say (the explicit), the manner in which we say it (the implicit), and what we don't say, which she calls the null curriculum.⁴ To Harris, to say nothing about an issue is not neutral or benign but is to present information that is inherently skewed by the failure to include options, alternatives, and perspectives worthy of

³ Pagels, Elaine. *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*. New York: Random House, 1988

⁴ Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People*. TN: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989

consideration. We cannot assume that because we do not speak up and answer the “about whom” question of our faith that our silence will be interpreted as inclusiveness.

We are fortunate to be part of a denomination and a church that has spoken up in favor of the broadest possible type of inclusiveness in several important ways. You can reach out your hand and touch two of them: the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible and the New Century Hymnal.

Until recently, virtually all English translations of the Bible have used masculine nouns and pronouns both specifically (to refer to males) and generically (when the reference is not necessarily gender-specific). For those of us who were taught this custom, this means “men”; sometimes means “men only”; and sometimes, if women were lucky or daring, it means “men and women”. It took the 1960s, an era of consciousness-raising about the status of women and racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities, to open our eyes to the “null curriculum” of our grammatical system. In 1989, the Bible in front of you was published as the NRSV Bible using a policy of inclusiveness in gender language. For the first time, the traditional linguistic sexism that had restricted or obscured the meaning of the original text and the imagination of its reader was eliminated from Scripture.

The New Century Hymnal, published in 1995, represents the most even and consistent approach to inclusive language of any hymnal ever published. Rather than choosing to present only new hymns in inclusive language, the UCC presented the hymns of other ages in ways that seek to maintain the theology and beauty of the original but without some of the biases of the time in which they were written.

Here at Eden we have adopted policies that answer the “about whom” question inclusively. In keeping with the UCC’s Inclusive Language Covenant, Eden uses inclusive language in such a way that gender, race, ethnicity, age, physical ability, educational attainment, financial status, and national origin do not become word barriers that prevent persons from recognizing that they are created in the image of God and are included among the people of God. And, in 1994, responding to the call of a 1985 General Synod resolution asking UCC congregations to declare themselves open and affirming, Eden Church completed a two-year process of discernment and voted by secret ballot to welcome persons of all sexual orientations in the full life and ministry of the church including membership, leadership, and employment. We can pat ourselves on the back for accomplishing in 129 years what the United States has not accomplished in over 233 years and what Christianity has not accomplished in over 2,000 years.

Today’s scripture invites us to reflect on how well we put policy into practice. Are we as inclusive and welcoming as the Holy Spirit and the apostle Philip would have us be? Are we inclusive and welcoming in our explicit, implicit, and null communications and teaching? What are we saying, as individuals and as a church, about inclusiveness by what we say and don’t say and by what we do and don’t do? How can we be more welcoming to those who have been excluded from our faith and excluded from living free, open, and fearless lives within our community?

Besides being the sum of what we do and don’t communicate, being inclusive and welcoming is an art and a skill. In a recent class on Christian Worship, an African-

American lesbian colleague described the first order of Sunday business at her church as asking all newcomers to stand up and identify themselves, followed by an exuberant and physical welcome of hugs and hearty handshakes. When I said I thought that might scare some of Eden's more timid newcomers away, she was surprised. And we were both surprised to learn another colleague was seeking a new church because she couldn't convince her congregation that due to a traumatic attack when she was younger, she emphatically did not want to be hugged. Although being welcoming is about much more than hugs and handshakes, I think this story shows the complexity involved in being welcoming and inclusive and that sometimes complexity is more about personal relationships than about policy.

Despite being comfortable speaking publicly, I am not naturally an outgoing person. In reflecting on how I personally could be more welcoming and inclusive here at Eden, I came to the conclusion that if I merely rely on Eden's open and affirming policy and its use of inclusive language to speak for me, I myself wasn't actually saying or doing much. Instead of embracing and including others, I would be embracing my own null curriculum and allowing silence to speak volumes. It seems to me that to be part of creating a truly accepting church and community, I need to do as Philip did under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit:

First, I need to show up. And I don't need the Holy Spirit to tell me to go to a back road and look for a chariot because there is so much I can do in my own community: Stand up for the kids at gay prom, support local efforts to increase representation of same-gender families in school curriculum, wear Eden's rainbow flag pin, get a lawn sign, sport a bumper sticker, protest legal defeats and celebrate victories. Second, I need to ask important questions such as Philip's gentle and polite: "Do you understand what you are reading?" Questions like: "How can I help?", "What needs to be done?", and always, always, "About whom, may I ask, does this church, this town, this state, this country, speak when they say we are all created equal?" Third, I need to testify to others about my own experience with the importance of inclusiveness—as a woman born in 1962, I owe my education, my career, and my freedom to be a stay-at-home mom to the first generation of inclusiveness that was hard fought and won by early proponents of equality of women. And, last, I need to act on my belief that there is nothing, nothing in this world, to stop us from claiming and celebrating God's inclusive message for all people.

I believe that if we do as Philip did—show up, ask questions, testify, and act on our beliefs—we can all, regardless of our sexual orientation and reproductive ability, fulfill God's first commandment to Adam and Eve: Be fruitful and multiply. The fruit of our labor will be the true acceptance of, not some, but all the people of God and what we will multiply will be the material, vocal, and miraculous presence of God's love in our homes, our churches, and our communities. My friends, on this special day honoring mothers, let us praise God and the risen Christ for granting that we may all, every one of us, be fruitful and multiply. Amen.