

## **Sermon: Is It Really A Question of Logistics?**

Year B, Fifth Sunday of Easter

[Acts 8:26-40](#); [Psalm 22:25-31](#); [1 John 4:7-21](#); [John 15:1-8](#)

Offered May 3, 2015 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH  
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Way back in January, I asked the congregation to listen to the Holy Spirit and pick four topics for our kids to study in Sunday School from a list of five. Today's story from Acts is the one that we didn't include in this year's curriculum.

And you can kind of see why. It's a good story, don't get me wrong. Philip is obedient to the Call of the Holy Spirit. He shares the his experience of Jesus with a traveler in Israel. Philip so clearly loves Jesus and knows him to be the Messiah described in the Scriptures of the Jewish people that he wins a convert to what will eventually become a new religion.

But the way it's written, it just doesn't feel like real people would say stuff like that. "*Do you understand what you are reading?*" (Acts 8:30) "*How can I, unless someone guides me?*" (Acts 8:31) "*Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?*" (Acts 8:36). They all seem written by the same people who wrote the film strips we had to watch in Health class. Even 2,000 years later, Jesus doesn't sound like that, even in Luke's Gospel, and Luke wrote both his own Gospel and the book of Acts. So it's not the author. Let's see if we can find some ways to come into more authentic contact with the people in it.

First off, let's look at Philip. We know from his name that he is from the Greek speaking community in Judea. One of the issues the early church struggled with is who to reach out to. There was a strong core of people, led by Peter, that wanted to focus mainly on the Jews of Jerusalem. Philip seems to have understood that Jesus' message needed to go far beyond that community. Philip shows up in other stories well outside of Jerusalem, talking with all sorts of people.

There's also a tiny detail, one single word in this story with Philip, that is hard to notice amidst everything else that's going on. This was a patriarchal society. The oldest male in the family was usually the most powerful. He was responsible for the well being of a whole network of relations. So all the men, even if they weren't the patriarch of their family, wanted to be seen as having this power and responsibility, to have the wisdom and importance of these influential community leaders.

If you got to see your dad when he was over 60, get a good strong image of him at that age in your mind. I know that there are some of you who are dads and you are over 60, so you may be able to speak from personal experience. With this image of a man with plenty of life experience in your mind's eye, tell me this: did you ever see him run? Exactly. Patriarchs walk. They do not arrive sweating and out of breath. And yet, Philip runs to the chariot. You could argue that Philip was running to catch up to the chariot, but it's not likely he would have been able to catch a chariot already underway. Running here shows how anxious Philip is for this conversation to take place.<sup>1</sup> He gives up some of his gravitas as a patriarch to answer the Call of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Rick Strelan, "The Running Prophet (Acts 8:30)", *Novum Testamentum* 43, no. 1 (2001), 31-38.

Now let's turn to the traveler in the story<sup>2</sup>. There's actually a lot of details packed into this story about him. He was an Ethiopian. Technically, he was from the land of Kush, which was along the upper Nile, in what is today North Sudan, north of the land we call Ethiopia. With that little bit of information, we know his skin would have been dark brown.

Some of you know the work of Stephen Jay Gould, the evolutionary biologist from Harvard. He wrote a very popular monthly column in *Natural History* magazine, while his own research centered on land snails. He writes about visiting Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania with members of the Leakey family who found some of the oldest hominid skeletal remains there. He said he's the only person to find fossilized snails in Olduvai Gorge. Of course he also said that to get to his snail, he walked right by a hominid skull just breaking through the ground that the Leakeys were thrilled to recover. We're not going to find snail fossils in Olduvai Gorge until we send a snail guy in to look for them. The snail guys aren't going to find hominid skulls because that's not what resonates for them.

We need to have all different kinds of people look at the stories from the Bible and tell us what they see. Because they will see things that we miss. And they will walk right past things that we focus on.

One of the trends in Biblical scholarship that has happened over the last 50 years is that more types of people are writing commentaries than ever before. For close to 1900 years, we almost exclusively heard from privileged men from European backgrounds. They built up an amazing body of work, but it was only once commentaries from women were published regularly that we really began to recognize the real influence of women in the Bible. Hearing those women's voices was also important, because it allowed women to see themselves in the Bible story without having to navigate through a man's experience first. Not only women, but people of color, people with different sexual orientation and identity, people of different economic classes.

Today's story says that there is a man with deep brown skin in the Bible. Before we go any further, we have to make sure this fact is clear in our minds. A number of you are going to remind me during coffee hour that probably none of the people in the Bible had skin color like mine. Amen. And yet, the Easter issue of one of the monthly magazines I get from the Methodists has a cover photo of someone wearing a coarse white robe showing his palms that have clearly been pierced. The photo is cropped so the person is shown from the chest down, but the skin color of the person with the stigmata is the same as mine. Our biases go so deep that sometimes we can't even see them. If we are going to bring meaningful relationships with Jesus Christ to other people, we have to be aware that what they resonate with may differ from what we see. If, like Philip, we read Scripture with them, we may see things we never saw before. We may ask questions that are new and that may take us into unnerving territory because what we thought we knew, we can begin to doubt.

So, the traveler is black. He's also a eunuch. There is discussion about what technically that means during this period, but regardless of the exact state of his body, his sexual identity is different from the vast majority of the people around him. Because of his different sexual identity, he is excluded from certain social and religious activities within the community.

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<sup>2</sup> Tolonda Henderson, " 'What is to Prevent Me From Being Baptized?' Reading Beyond the Readily Apparent", *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 93, no. 3, Fall 2003, 14-22.

He is the treasurer to a wealthy and powerful queen, so he must be fairly wealthy and powerful himself. He's in a chariot, which is how the rich people travel. He has a scroll of Isaiah that he's reading from. That alone is a sign of enormous wealth, since it took such technical skill to produce one that they were incredibly costly. Plus he has the education to read, and probably in Greek, the common language of the time. Most people at the time read the Old Testament in Greek rather than Hebrew.<sup>3</sup>

He's returning from worship in Jerusalem. He's returning from a pilgrimage. His sexual identity may prevent other people from seeing him as a Jew, but apparently he sees himself as a Jew. There certainly were large Jewish communities throughout the region, including his part of Africa. We know that debating the meaning of Scripture was part of the Jewish community. Think about all the challenges to Jesus. Many of them come because he's got insight into the meaning of the holy texts but he isn't one of the pre-approved people who are allowed to debate and instruct on the meaning of Scripture.

So when the Philip asks the traveler, "*Do you understand what you are reading?*" (Acts 8:30), I don't think we can understand his response of "*How can I, unless someone guides me?*" (Acts 8:31) as an untutored request for assistance. It's much closer to an invitation to debate Scripture. With our 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective of slavery and racism, we may have this image of Philip leading the uneducated black man into the community of the disciples of Jesus Christ. When we look at what's really there, it's far more like a Washington DC diplomat inviting a street preacher into his Lexus for a little Bible study.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, the traveler does hear something new in the reading from Isaiah that he hadn't heard before. That the Messiah had been humiliated simply by being whom God had called him to be. That the Messiah had been denied justice. Whatever the traveler gains in the discussion with Philip, he recognizes something he wants to be a part of, so he asks, "*Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?*" (Acts 8:36).

This can't be a logistical question. It has to be the question that we all ask ourselves. Is there something wrong with me that keeps me from becoming a Christian? No, there is nothing that keeps you from becoming a Christian. Nothing in this world or the next. You have to do the incredibly hard work of loving God and loving your neighbor. If you are as ready to embrace your Call from God as Philip, then you can become a Christian. If you are as willing to humble yourself as this rich and powerful man in today's story, if you are even willing to set out on the pilgrimage to find out what happens when you live in this world as God invites you to, not as other people expect you to live, then you can become a Christian.

Jesus has told us *I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit* (John 15:5). If we are willing to stay connected to the vine that is Jesus, regardless of how other people think we should be, then we will *bear much fruit and become [his] disciples* (John 15:8).

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<sup>3</sup> Abraham Smith, " 'Do You Understand What You are Reading?': A Literary Critical Reading of the Ethiopian (Kushite) Episode (Acts 8:26-40)", *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 22, no. 1, Fall 1994, 48-70.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "Fifth Sunday of Easter, Homiletical Perspective, Acts 8:26-40" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 457.