

## *Break the Rules*

Today we have a very interesting message from the Book of Acts. I love this story but a lot of my colleagues, when they look at the lectionary for today, would have chosen either the gospel lesson where Jesus says, "I am the vine and you are the branches." That's easy enough, and the epistle lesson is from 1 John and it talks about Love and that's pretty easy to preach on, so a lot of my colleagues would have chosen either one of those scriptures and done a lovely job with it.

And there are those who would have seen the scripture from Acts and said no way. I am not touching that. Some have even said you would have to be very foolish or very brave to touch this scripture.

Our story begins when an angel directs the apostle Philip to go south on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. On this road in the desert Philip meets an Ethiopian eunuch. Now, I don't know about you, but this strikes me as a really weird way to introduce someone; no name, just an Ethiopian eunuch. The author must have thought it was important because he tells us not once but five times that the Ethiopian was a eunuch. I know what an Ethiopian is. Philip has met a black African man in the desert.

Now that in and of its self is pretty remarkable. You will see later that this black man was the first missionary to Africa. But that can't be the reason why so many preachers shy away from this text. So what exactly is a eunuch?

According to the most current scholarship, in the first century a eunuch is one of two things. A eunuch could have been a man who had been castrated. Now for those of you who didn't grow up on a farm to castrate means to remove a male's testicles. So, this particular Ethiopian could have been a castrated male, or he could have been a male who wasn't like most males.

According to the scholars, men who showed a preference for other men or displayed little or no interest in women, or who were in any way effeminate, in the first century, these men were called eunuchs.

At this particular time in history, Eunuchs had three major roles in society. Because it was either physically impossible for them to father children, or because of their sexual orientation would make it highly unlikely that they would father children, eunuchs were often employed as military officers, domestic servants, or treasury officers. Without the responsibilities of children, it was thought that eunuchs would be fiercer soldiers because they wouldn't be worried about saving their own skins so that they could be around to care for their children.

Without children of their own to worry about, eunuchs were also free to be domestic servants and because of their lack of interest, eunuchs would be safe to employ around women. As they were unlikely to father children, rulers could trust that eunuchs wouldn't seek hereditary power

so they were often entrusted with positions in the treasury because they wouldn't need to amass wealth to pass on to their children.

This particular Ethiopian eunuch was a court official to the queen of the Ethiopians. Remember the Queen of Sheba; she was a queen of the Ethiopians. At the time Ethiopia was a wealthy and sophisticated place. An Ethiopian queen was called a Candace. So this particular Ethiopian eunuch was a court official in charge of the entire treasure of a rich and powerful queen.

Eunuchs were popular employees with queens. While rulers entrusted eunuchs with certain key positions, they were pretty much shunned by the rest of society. They were outcasts.

According to our story, this Ethiopian eunuch had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home. Now the Bible is very clear on the subject of eunuchs and worship. According to the Book of Deuteronomy that contains the law, eunuchs were forbidden to worship in the house of God.

Deuteronomy 23: A man whose testicles have been crushed or whose male member has been cut off is not to be admitted into the assembly of God.” Eunuchs weren't welcome into God's house. Mind you, according to the Bible, none of you are welcome here in God's house. The Bible forbids the wearing of more than one type of cloth at the same time. According to Leviticus 21:20, anyone who is wearing glasses shouldn't be here either, because one should not approach the altar of God if they have a defect in their sight.

Did you know that it is an abomination before God to work on the Sabbath and according to Exodus 35:2, anyone who works on the Sabbath should be put to death? Those of you who worked in your yards yesterday, which according to the Bible is the Sabbath, those of you who worked around the house yesterday, well, you should be rounded up and executed.

Any women out there who are having their period according to the Bible, well, you ought to leave right now, because you are unclean and you're making the rest of us unclean as well.

And you men shouldn't be smiling, because any of you who have had your hair trimmed, including the hair around your temples ought to know that according to Leviticus 19:27 this is strictly forbidden. As near as I can tell, the penalty for those haircuts of yours is death by stoning.

And don't go telling me that the New Testament means that the laws of the Old Testament are no longer valid, because in the New Testament Jesus insists that he has not come to abolish the law, because Jesus said, "it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped." So according to the New Testament, the law stands.

Now lucky for you, I don't take the Bible literally, otherwise....what am I saying, if I took the Bible literally, I'd have to keep my mouth shut, because women are supposed to keep silent in the church!

All I know is if you take the bible literally, then we'd need a pretty big pile of stones and very few of us would make it out of here alive.

Fortunately for us, our church, Central United Methodist Church does not teach or preach that the Bible is to be taken literally. Literal interpretations of scripture belong to those who are called Fundamentalists or the Wesley Covenant Association that is leaving our denomination.

Christian fundamentalism is just as perverse and just as dangerous as Jewish and Islamic fundamentalism. Fundamentalist Christians represent a small but vocal minority within the Christian church. Methodists are not fundamentalists.

The next time someone asks you if you believe in the Bible, the answer is no. Believing in the bible is a form of idolatry! We don't believe in the Bible. We believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel can be found in the Bible, but the Gospel cannot be contained by the Bible.

Jesus' life, death and resurrection reveal the nature of our loving and gracious God. Like Jesus, we proclaim that wherever two or more of us are gathered in Christ's name, Christ is there also and the Holy Spirit will direct and guide us. We need to study scripture in community so that, guided by the Spirit, the community can correct and steer us in light of the Gospel.

Therefore, guided by the Holy Spirit, I can say that all of you are saints and sinners and all of you are welcome here in God's house, despite your haircuts, your impaired sight, your multi-materialled clothing or the state of your genitals.

Therefore, guided by the Holy Spirit, I can stand here, as a woman, without a hat, wearing my glasses, and proclaim the Gospel wearing I don't know how many different types of material.

Because of that, none of you will have to go home from here today and drag your children out into the town square so that, for the crime of not properly honoring your parents, your kids can be stoned until they are dead, because that's what it says in the Bible.

In the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we know that God is love and nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, and all that God wants from us is that we should love God and love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

But just try telling that to the religious authorities in Jerusalem at the turn of the first century. You can bet that the Black African, gentile, Ethiopian, Eunuch wasn't welcome in the Temple. So he left Jerusalem and was on his way back home, riding in his chariot, reading aloud. That he was reading the scriptures aloud is not the remarkable part.

You see the concept of reading silently in your head, hadn't been invented yet, all readers read out aloud in those days. We know from Augustine that up until the fifth century, people hadn't figured out how to read silently! In fact, when people first began to read silently in their heads,

the religious authorities thought that it must be the work of the devil and more than a few of those quiet readers were burnt at the stake.

What is really remarkable is that the Ethiopian eunuch actually had the ability to read at all. This Ethiopian eunuch must have been fairly well off because he was reading from the book of the Prophet Isaiah and one of those scrolls would set you back quite a bit at the turn of the first century.

So we know, he is a man of some wealth and importance, not only because he can afford his own scroll but he actually knows how to read it, not in his native tongue, but in Greek.

I imagine him riding along, ticked off that he wasn't welcome in the temple because of his identity as a eunuch, reading of all things the book of the prophet Isaiah. Somehow, we're not told how, the Spirit tells Philip to run after the chariot and join it. Philip goes after the chariot and he must have heard what the Ethiopian eunuch is reading and recognized it, because Philip asks him if he understands what he is reading. Apparently he must have been having some difficulty because he invites Philip to hop in and explain.

The passage the Ethiopian eunuch was reading was about the Suffering Servant of God, who was cut off from the people of God. It was no accident he was reading this. Surely, he was trying to figure out why he himself was being cut off from the people of God because if he was reading this passage, he likely also read the neighboring passages where God promised to bless all those who had been excluded and cut off because they were different.

Isaiah writes in Chapter 54:1 "Sing, O barren one who did not bear; burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labor! And do not let the eunuch say, "I am a dry tree...I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

And this one: Isaiah 56:4 Yahweh declares "eunuchs who keep the Sabbath and follow the covenant will have an everlasting name and blessing, better even than sons and daughters, an everlasting name that shall not be cut off."

Imagine how powerful these words were in a time when the whole promise of eternity hinged on sons and daughters, something a eunuch could never have. It was as if Isaiah was speaking directly to him! Foreigners and eunuchs were supposed to be welcomed at God's table! Those who had been excluded were supposed to be included, despite the fact that the religious authorities were hung up on the rules that were laid out in Moses' day.

Philip shared the Good News of Jesus with the Ethiopian eunuch. This Suffering Servant the eunuch was reading about was someone he could identify with. This was a Messiah who had been cut off, just like him.

Suddenly the labels that prevented this man from full inclusion in the assembly of the people of God are overcome. And not even the dry desert can defeat them, for suddenly there is some water and the man asks Philip: "What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

Well according to the rules, Philip should have answered "there's everything to prevent you from being baptized." First of all, the Ethiopian eunuch hasn't confessed what it is he believes. He hasn't been to baptismal classes. Philip isn't an ordained elder in the church and he doesn't even know how to baptize. And anyway, the church hasn't yet approved the baptism of gentiles let alone foreign black eunuchs.

No good United Methodist pastor would baptize you without first attending to the rules. The church needs a little good order. Without the rules where would we be? Surely we can't just baptize anyone and everyone who asks for baptism? Besides the Bible says....

But what does Philip do when the eunuch asks him, "What's to prevent me from being baptized?" Philip jumps into the water and baptizes the man. No messing around, no consulting the rules, no calling the Bishop to see if it's all right. Philip doesn't answer the eunuch with any of our concerns, he doesn't ask the Ethiopian if he is a self avowed and practicing eunuch or if he's a don't ask, don't tell kind of eunuch.

Nor does Philip qualify his response with reservations such as "well, we can baptize you, but we can never ordain you." Or, "well, we can baptize you, but we can't promise not to discriminate against you."

Philip doesn't share the church's concerns. The Ethiopian commanded the chariot to stop and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water and Philip baptized him. Philip just hops out of the chariot and jumps into the water and boldly baptizes this inquiring, scripture reading, Christ-seeking eunuch. Maybe, just maybe, we can learn something from Philip's radical act.

Maybe instead of talking and arguing among ourselves for years and years, we ought to just jump into the water and trust the Spirit to take care of the details.

According to the story, when they came up out of the water, the Spirit snatched Philip away and the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing. On his way rejoicing, this unnamed Ethiopian eunuch, became the first Christian in African.

Incidentally, the Christian church in Ethiopia was in existence long before the church in Rome. Ethiopia has one of the longest standing Christian communities in the world. Today, most of the people of Ethiopia are Christians. Centuries of Christianity resulted from Philip's unlikely mission to an Ethiopian eunuch, through the Spirit's call to cross the traditional boundaries that existed. Those traditional boundaries could be supported by quoting scripture and yet the Spirit

prompted Philip to cross those boundaries anyway. In the church, we have helped to build and also tear down some of the strongest boundaries of all.

Some boundaries we have begun to break down, through the Spirit's help, and others we have only strengthened by our action or our inaction.

In the name of Christ, Christians have justified slavery and Christians have fought against slavery. In the name of Christ, Christians have oppressed women and Christians have fought against the oppression of women. In the name of Christ, Christians have condemned LGBTQIA + people and Christians have affirmed LGBTQIA + people.

The Gospel is not a respecter of boundaries. It doesn't matter what the religious establishment says, No one is cut off from God's love.

Scripture insists "there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love."

The Holy Spirit is driving us into the world. We are not being sent to condemn, but to offer the benefits of the grace and love of God, so that in the words of the prophet Isaiah, God's house will become a house of prayer for all people.

A house of prayer for all people, for God is love and there is nothing in heaven or on earth that can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus.

This, dear brothers and sisters, is the gospel of our God. So what in the world are we waiting for, for Christ's sake, let's jump into the water so that we too, can be on our way rejoicing. Amen.