The Spirit of Inclusion

Acts 8:26-40

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The Acts of the Apostles is one of the most fascinating books in the bible. It tells the story of the church’s transformation from a regional broken faith called Judaism to a worldwide faith that follows Jesus. Read through it and you notice two patterns.

The first pattern follows the commission Jesus made just before his ascension, saying: *“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”* In those words Jesus gave a glimpse of what the first disciples of the new church would be up to for the rest of their lives. Traveling beyond their limited parochial preferences of faith to places and ideas never imagined.

Jesus didn’t speak in grandiose terms. In fact he was specific about what was going to happen to this little sect of Galilean Jews who spent three years following him. It wasn’t going to be easy. They were going to be challenged to do things that were so out of character, that for most, it would be the end of them. Nor were their actions going to be on account of their ingenuity, or ideas, rather they would be compelled by the Holy Spirit’s power and inspiration.

This is the second pattern you will notice. Almost everything happens in the Book of Acts by the power of the Holy Spirit. The changes don’t come from committees or disciples putting study teams together working toward compromises. The book could more accurately be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. There is no human power or gain, no creative thought on the part of the disciples, necessarily. It’s more like the disciples had no choice. They were actors in a universal drama. The Holy Spirit writes the script and directs the action.

We see it in this morning’s lesson. Philip finishes up in Samaria with a huge number of conversions and then, rather then glorying in success, he is told to get up and go south on a desert road connecting Jerusalem to Gaza.

Philip did as he was directed without questioning and without having any idea why. Like in this story, everything in the book of Acts happens by the Holy Spirit…

By the Holy Spirit’s power the church was exploding into the world and while doing so it was going to reshape itself and its people in the process. The lesson learned by us throughout the Book of Acts is this: the church is always being shaped and reshaped by the Holy Spirit… I spoke about this last Sunday when I pointed to a sea change the church is about to experience at this 500 year mark in its history, when we need to shed some old assumptions so we can take on new and deeper understandings… by the power of the Holy Spirit.

History tells us that just about the time we get comfortable with who we are, and who we worship with, you can bet things will change… confirming the statement that “the only constant in life is change.” And as I said last week there seems to be a 500 year pattern to this radical change when the Holy Spirit directs us to weed through our basement of beliefs, and our attics of assumptions, and start advertising another 500 year all church rummage sale so we can make room for the new emerging church we are about to become.

The last all church rummage sale was the Great Reformation. Before that it was the Great Schism, before that the Great Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire in the 6th Century and before that it was this time instigated by the Acts of the Holy Spirit known as the Great Transition.

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is skillfully placed right after the Holy Spirit’s baptism of the Samaritans. Luke, the author of Acts, is organizing the story based on Jesus’ prediction of the church’s growth

* from Jerusalem (where the Holy Spirit caused the disciples to speak in foreign languages on Pentecost, Acts 2)
* to Judea where the disciples were scattered after Stephen was stoned to death (Acts 8:1), and Samaria where Philip *“proclaimed the Messiah to them”* and Peter and John, by the Holy Spirit, baptized a bunch of Samaritans.
* Today we find the Holy Spirit placing the church in front of the Ethiopian eunuch.

You see the patterns don’t you. The church is ever expanding in what was formerly considered, foreign, unrighteous, nasty, never to be messed with, territory and its does it by way of people most devout Jews wouldn’t touch with a 39 ½ foot pole because they were unclean and different, like this Ethiopian enuch.

An angel told Philip. *“Get up”* and go out into the middle of the desert by noon. Out in the desert Philip meets a man, or is he a man? He’s a eunuch, a chamberlain in the court of the queen of the Ethiopians named Candace. He’s different in two ways: he’s black and he’s been castrated. He’s returning from visiting the Jerusalem Temple. He’s reading Isaiah from a scroll.

What we need to know is, according to Jewish law, because of his physical and sexual confusion caused by castration; he was legally excluded from faith. Without getting into graphic details, if you want to know more, refer to Deuteronomy 23:1 where it says eunuchs shall not have a place in the congregation of the family of God. In essence, because of his sexuality, as a Eunuch he was cut off, cast out, scapegoated, and excluded, from fully participating in the Jewish faith.

In the Jewish faith the Eunuch was an outcast in the days of the early church. This should not be surprising to us because in many ways that’s human behavior at its worst and we’ve all witnessed it. If someone is different the first reaction of too many folks is to be suspicious, or vicious, and to bully and cull out of the herd the one that doesn’t look like us, dress like us, talk like us, believe like us, think like us. They are a threat.

* Put a black man in a white neighborhood and people get suspicious.
* A gay student walks the halls of a High School there is a good chance they will get marked and bullied by a few students. In the back of the perpetrators minds their justification might even be rooted in bad religion.
* Exclusion is a fearful behavior taught to children at an early age. Go to a play ground in an elementary school and it doesn’t take long to figure out. Kids with the funny clothes, who are unathletic, or just different, get picked on and are excluded from the flock.
* Churches aren’t exempt, a married couple gets divorced and in some churches they are fenced from the communion table. Yes, even the church is quick to cut off, to exclude, its own kind from fully participating in its life.

The Holy Spirit challenges the boundaries we build to exclude “us” from “them.” If there is any theme we must pay attention to in the Book of Acts, it is exactly that. The Holy Spirit always calls us out to examine behaviors of exclusion and to **repent**, to be **changed**, **transformed**, to **turn around** and **work** toward a gospel of inclusion.

So whenever we say “no” to someone because they are different, it’s time for us to take a serious look at who we are, if we are to be called Jesus’ followers.

Back to Ethiopian Eunuch. Philip meets him as he reads Isaiah 53: *“He was led like a lamb to slaughter, like a sheep before its shearers is dumb. He didn’t open his mouth. Justice was denied him. He has been cut off from the land of the living. Who will declare his posterity?”*

As Philip climbs onto the Ethiopian’s chariot the first question asked by the Ethiopian is *“Who is that?”* Is the prophet talking about himself, or somebody else I don’t know about? Why is he so interested in this obscure passage from Isaiah?

I’ll tell you why. Because he is a Eunuch. And scripture as he understood it said quite plainly in Deuteronomy 23 that Eunuch’s shall be excluded cut off, from the congregation of God. To the Eunuch’s way of thinking, this was a deal killer when it came to fully participating in his faith-of-choice. His sexuality excluded him. As a eunuch he wants to know: *‘who is this who, like him, is cut off from the land of the living, without posterity, without a future?’*

Using that passage, Philip pointed to Jesus as the one who shared the experience of being cut off and now it is Jesus who invites the Ethiopian eunuch to be grafted in… and restored to wholeness… to be included in this new and unusual church of inclusion bound by the Holy Spirit which is forever knocking down walls that divide and welcomes those excluded from life into the inclusiveness of the Gospel.

The end result is full baptism. Philip realizes nothing stands in the way of the Eunuch’s full baptism by the Holy Spirit and so he baptizes him. Once again, the Holy Spirit at work doing the unexpected and raising the eyebrows of the flock.

This story gives us an inkling that this faith of ours, because of the Holy Spirit’s breath, will not be limited by physics, or genetic wiring, or appearances, and the Holy Spirit cannot be contained by humankind’s preferred laws, rules and regulations.

The implications are unlimited and wild when it comes to tearing down the human barriers we build between full participation in the church’s life and those who are different from us, whether by race, gender preference, genetics, culture, physical handicap, or even political opinion. The Holy Spirit will not be limited by the narrowness of human prejudice.