



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Do You Understand? John 15:1-8; Acts 8:26-40

The more I read through his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, the more I appreciate the gift of writing which Luke obviously possessed. Tradition has identified Luke as a physician who was an occasional traveling companion of Paul. Whether or not that is correct, no one can fully determine. Reading some of his stories, like this one about Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, however, I think Luke might have been an aspiring magician or illusionist. He often writes about things that sort of take your attention away from what is really happening. When you finally recognize what has happened, you realize the world has changed right before your eyes and you didn't see it coming!

I think Luke enjoys using a little slight of hand or, rather, "slight of story" on us his readers. He enjoys telling us about Jesus' post-resurrection appearances when Jesus suddenly appears in a room with locked doors or disappears just as quickly. At the end of his Gospel and the beginning of the book of Acts, Jesus commissions his followers to share the Gospel and then ascends into heaven! When Peter and others are thrown in jail for preaching the Gospel, an angel opens the doors of the prison and allows them to escape before locking the doors again. And in this story of Philip and the Treasurer of the Queen of Ethiopia, once the man has heard the Gospel and been baptized, Philip vanishes and then reappears, not in Gaza (which seemed to be his original destination), but in Azotus a little over twenty miles north of there. What is it that Luke is trying to hide from us—or, maybe, cause us to see?

We may have a hint in the first question Philip asks the Ethiopian whom he encounters as the man rides in his chariot toward home and reads aloud from the prophesy of Isaiah. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asks. Perhaps Luke is asking us the same thing. As we read this story in the Book of Acts, do we understand what we are reading?

It is an odd story. We are told that an angel of the Lord told Philip to "get up and go south on the road toward Gaza." Luke likes angels and often includes them in his stories. We don't know precisely who this Philip is.

There was an apostle named Philip who introduced his friend Nathaniel to Jesus. There was also a fellow named Philip, a Greek convert who was one of the six people chosen to assist the Apostles in caring for the needs of the believers gathered in Jerusalem. After Stephen was stoned to death for his faith and Saul began arresting believers right and left, Philip went to the region of Samaria and shared the Gospel. He was a freshly minted convert and eager to introduce the Gospel to anyone who is interested. In the story before us, when the angel said, "Philip, get up and get on the road south toward Gaza," he didn't blink an eye. He slipped on his sandals, girded his robe around him, and headed south.

It just so happened (or was it planned?) that he came upon a man riding in a chariot and reading aloud from the scroll of Isaiah. Now, how often does that happen? And this was not a run of the mill Hebrew traveler. This guy was unique and Luke tells us quite a bit about him—maybe more than you really want to know! He was Ethiopian which means that he was a foreigner from a region that many people considered to be the end of the earth. He was a eunuch, which meant that he was an outsider since the teachings of Deuteronomy (23:2) forbid anyone who was castrated from entering the temple. We know that this man had been to the temple to worship and likely was limited to one of the outer courtyards.¹ Ralph Milton has written a compelling description of what might have been going on in this man's mind:

I didn't get to choose what I would be. When I was a child, my parents had me castrated. They weren't being mean. They were trying to guarantee me a place in life—work in the royal palace where they hired castrated men to guard the harem.

So I'm grateful to them—and I'm angry at them. I hate them for it. Because when teen age came along and my friends found their voices dropping and their parents talking marriage, my voice stayed high and my parents said, "No, you cannot be married. You are different.

And my friends snickered at me and taunted me. "Yoooo nuck! Yoooo nuck!" The only thing I knew was to try harder, to be a better scholar, to excel at everything—more capable, more responsible. I was a model teenager.

¹Mikeal Parsons, "Acts of the Apostles" in *The Mercer Commentary on the Bible*, Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson, eds. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 1096-97.

It worked. I went to work as a guard in the harem, as my parents had arranged, and soon I was chief guard. Before I knew it, I was Chancellor of the Treasury. But it was never enough. People feared me, but nobody loved me. I seldom got invited to social functions, but when I did, the men, especially, found me embarrassing. They would avoid me, if at all possible. Sometimes I caught snippets of conversation like "half a man," and "He's a freak." So I tried even harder. I worked all the time.

The Queen sent me on diplomatic missions to Egypt, to the Nabateans, to Damascus. Each place I went, I learned everything I could, especially about their gods. But there was no god anywhere for half a man like me. A eunuch.

The Queen sent me to Jerusalem on diplomatic business, and there I visited the Hebrew Temple, a magnificent place. I read their scrolls that told me of a god who led a people out of slavery, a very different kind of god who at times seemed to love—to actually love people.

They have a most unusual prophet, the Hebrew people—a prophet named Isaiah. I bought the scroll and took it with me. The priest who sold the scrolls had to check with his council to see if it was legal to sell a Hebrew scroll to a black man. It was, provided the black man paid three times the going price. I paid. I wanted that scroll.

This Isaiah seemed to prophesy a ruler, a leader who was a servant, a leader who earned the right to lead through suffering with the hurting people of the world. A most unusual prophet, but I found my heart warmed as I read his scroll. I too had suffered, far more than I admitted even to myself. Yes, I was strong and I was powerful, but I was only half a man.

On my way home, as my carriage bumped along the road, I was reading out the scroll. "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer."

I had to laugh. That was me all right. I was six weeks old when they cut me. You can't protest when you're six weeks old. I read on. "In his humiliation, justice was denied him." Is this Isaiah talking about me or what?

At that point I looked up and saw a man walking along beside my carriage. He was smiling at me. "Do you understand what you are reading?" he asked.²

How many times have we asked ourselves that very question while reading scripture? The wealthy, powerful, influential Treasurer of the Queen of Ethiopia admitted that he didn't have a clue as to what Isaiah was talking about. He invited Philip to join him on the chariot and, as they rode along, Philip shared the entire story of the Gospel from the history of the Hebrews to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection—just as Jesus had done for the two disciples whom he met on the road to Emmaus following his resurrection.

Philip must have done a good job because when they passed a pool of water, perhaps nothing more than a glorified mud puddle caused by recent rains, the Ethiopian asked Philip to baptize him and he did. Again, Ralph Milton's version of the story fills in the blanks:

Philip held me under that water for an eternity, it seemed. But it was a glorious eternity, in which my old self dissolved into the water. And when he raised me up, I knew I was a brand new person—a whole person.

I stood there in the warm, spring sunshine, thanking this new God that I had found, this God who sent such a warm, accepting Messiah. And I knew that everything had changed. I was a different kind of being. Yes, it was the same body I had been so ashamed of. But I wasn't ashamed anymore, because I knew God loved this body of mine, loved all of me. Unconditionally. Even if I didn't try harder.³

Do you understand what has happened? Luke has tricked us into seeing the height and depth and breadth and power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This man was, perhaps, the first Gentile convert to the Christian faith—which means he opened the door for you and me. He was antithetical to everything the Hebrew people had believed God wanted in his people: he was a foreigner, he was not a Jew; his skin was a deep, rich hue of black, not olive colored like theirs; he was a powerful official of a foreign ruler, not someone who wanted to restore the sovereignty of the Jewish nation; he was a eunuch—he could not father children and continue the sacred bloodline of

²Ralph Milton, "The Ethiopian Eunuch: An Aggadah Based on Acts 8:26-40," *Rumors* (May 3, 2009); available online: <http://ralphmiltonsrums.blogspot.com/2009/04/preaching-materials-for-may-10-2009.html>.

³Milton.

the Jewish people. But he was exactly what Jesus was looking for in a follower: someone who wanted to be loved and included and appreciated, someone who opened his heart and was eager to discover the truth, someone who wanted to know God and be a part of God's family.

With a flick of the wrist, a little smoke and some mirrors, an angel, a vanishing man, and a risen Savior, Luke astonishes us with the scandal of the Gospel that Jesus could love someone like the Ethiopian eunuch or even someone like me or you! Is it magic or an illusion? No. It is the Gospel. It is the truth!

When he was living and traveling and teaching, Jesus often instructed his followers using parables. During that Passover feast before he was arrested, Jesus told a lot of stories and parables and gave examples that he hoped his disciples would remember when it was their turn to share the Gospel with other people. I wonder if he didn't look at that goblet of wine as it came back to him after making it around the table. Maybe it was the way the flicker of a candle reflected in the wine at the bottom of the cup. Maybe it was the heady aroma of the wine that caused him to think of its humble origin. Whatever prompted it, he told his closest friends that they were like the branches of a grapevine and he was the vine. God, their heavenly Father, was the vintner who grew the grapes and tenderly cared for the vines, pruning them at just the right time in order to get the healthiest vines and the best fruit. There are a lot of things we can say about that image, but one of the strongest impressions it makes on me is the reality of our connectedness. We are attached to Jesus, we grow from Jesus the vine, and we are all connected through him. At times, the branches may appear to be a tangled, lifeless mess, but as long as there is life in the vine, there will be life in the branches. As long as there is life in Christ, together we will produce great fruit.

The Ethiopian eunuch, Treasurer of the Queen, wealthy, powerful, lonely, insecure, unloved, misunderstood, and hungry for grace felt the vine of Christ wrap around him in a loving embrace and he was grafted into the family of God.

We need not be distracted by the fantastical things Luke tells us in his stories for he is hoping we will look closely to see the truly amazing truth of the Gospel that God in Christ loves the entire world—including you and me and everyone else—and is willing to die and live again so that we might live better together and forever.

April 29, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We may not hear angels singing, O God, but we do know the heavenly anthem that floats from on high and circles our world with its melody. Certainly in this room, we love one another. Help us, we pray, to learn to love the people who will never enter this room or share a pew with us.

We learn to love because we know what it is to be loved. Thank you for that gift, O God. We know that we are not always easy to love. We know that we try your patience and test your mercy, but we also know that we are loved even when we are not lovely. Thank you for that love.

As one expression of our affection, we pray for one another in times of illness or heartache, of challenge and trial. We always seek renewed health for all, but we especially pray for wholeness of body, mind, and spirit, O Lord. Help us and provide for us what we alone cannot.

On this day, we offer our gratitude for Mark Pichowicz and his ministry among us. You have gifted him with the wonder of music and a heart for worship. Thank you for bringing him to us and, as he journeys to a new place of ministry, bless him and all whom he will serve. Continue to enable him to share the Gospel through his music and to always offer glory to you for his gifts.

Continue to look kindly upon us, O God, and have mercy on our world. Heal our wounds, erase our divisions, feed our hungers, and illumine our minds as you enlighten our hearts. Make us your own, we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.