

Inclusion, Conversion, Revelation and the Stranger—Acts 8: 26-40 (April 29, 2018-5th Sunday in Easter)

Recently, I listened to an interview that gave me a fresh and hopeful perspective on a seemingly hopeless problem. Jamil Jivani was the subject of the interview; he is the author of a book entitled, *Why Young Men: Rage, Race and the Crisis of Identity*. It's about the recruitment of young, western-raised men to the Jihadi cause. I'm going to simplify for the sake of brevity here. Jivani says, that these young men are struggling to find their place in a world that often rejects them—a world where racism limits educational and economic opportunities, a world where authority figures are seen as and often are the enemy, a world where poverty sends the message, "we just don't care about you". Jivani says that in the midst of these soul-crushing factors, these young men are looking for meaning and belonging, and they are going to find it with those who passionately pursue them. He says ISIS treats these young men like they need them, because they do. The solution to the problem of radicalization of western young men is to compete for their futures, to treat them like we need them. The problem isn't just one of good versus evil. It's about inclusion, making these young men feel needed, that they have something to contribute to society.

Questions of inclusion, of who is in and who is out, are all over the place these days. Whether that be the debate about the value of identity politics to the health of our society, the rhetoric over immigration south of the border and talk of building walls or even this past week in Toronto where that horrible, evil tragedy was carried out by a young man who felt alienated from society.

Inclusion is at the heart of our faith story this week. We meet up with Philip, not the apostle, but one of the first non-apostles commissioned to go and spread the word of what God had done through Jesus. Our story says, God leads him to someone who is about as opposite from him as there could possibly be—a black man from Ethiopia, a high-ranking government official, a eunuch, more than likely surrounded by soldiers. Philip hears him reading from the prophet Isaiah. Judaism had many admirers from all over the near eastern world of the time.¹ In fact, there is a Jewish community in Ethiopia today. As well, people read aloud in those days. Historically speaking, silent reading is a recent phenomenon. As Philip hears the man reading, the Spirit says, "Go over to him and join him". Despite the strangeness of the one to the other, they engage in a friendly discussion about the scripture as they travel along. It's a discussion marked by curiosity and inquisitiveness.

At some point, they come across a body of water. Then the Official asks the question that changes everything, "What is to keep me from being baptized?" To us it sounds like he's saying, "We've got water here, you're here, I'm here, why not now?" But to a first century audience it is a question heavy with the burden of religious regulation and a

¹ F.S. Spencer, found in Freedman, D. N., Myers, A. C., & Beck, A. B. (2000). *Eerdmans dictionary of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, p. 433.

challenge to the norms of inclusion, of who and what was considered sacred and worthy of God's blessing. The official might even have asked the question with a certain amount of fear and uneasiness. Because, if he was reading Isaiah as he returned from Jerusalem having gone there to worship, then I would bet he was also familiar with Deuteronomy. Specifically 23:1, where it quite explicitly states that no one whose genitals have been removed shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.² I don't think we do that one in Sunday school.

This law strictly forbids a Eunuch from entering the assembly of the Lord. Their transgression of gender categories made them profane by nature. According to this injunction, there was no room for Eunuchs under God's tent. It says something about this Ethiopian official's faith that he went to Jerusalem to worship despite the fact that in all likelihood the religious establishment would turn him away. It reminds me of all the faithful lgbtq+ folks who have stuck with the church even though the church has so often not been faithful to them. Like these folks, the official sought God anyway.³ So his question is less about timing and convenience and more about daring to suggest that he too is worthy of God's blessing, that he too belongs under God's tent; "Am I hearing you right? Because if I am, I am acceptable to God as I am and there is nothing to prevent you from baptizing me."

The scripture jumps right to the chariot stopping and Philip baptizing the official. What is missing is the transition. I love the missing parts because it leaves room for our imaginations. I imagine a long silence. I imagine Philip trying to reconcile the injunction of the Hebrew scriptures with this man's faithfulness, the good news of Jesus and the pull of the Spirit. I imagine a realization, a revelation washing over him, perhaps accompanied by a tear that God is doing a new thing here. I imagine a resolve that expresses itself not in words, but in action—the baptism of the Ethiopian official, the lifting of the panel to God's tent, an invitation inside.

So, perhaps what we have here is not just the conversion of the Ethiopian official by Philip, but also a revelation of God to Philip that expands his definition of what and who is holy and sacred, because of his willingness to have an encounter with the stranger. That's what often happens when we set about the work of inclusion with hearts open to the stranger and the Spirit. That's what happens when we see the work of inclusion not as an act of charity, not as the process of admitting others to our club. What happens is that we ourselves are converted—we are changed. New aspects of God, the Holy, the Sacred are opened up to us. If we're doing it right, in a spiritual sense, the work of inclusion is about encountering God in the stranger.

Let me share a story about this. In first year seminary, I befriended a classmate; Paul was his name, Paul worked for the Metropolitan Community Church in Toronto. The MCC

² Nadia Bolz Weber, *Sermon on Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch*, <https://queermergent.wordpress.com/2009/06/08/sermon-on-phillip-and-the-ethiopian-eunuch/>

³ Ibid.

is pre-dominantly made up of LGBTQ+ Christians. Paul told me that it was not uncommon for evangelical Christians to show up at the Sunday services and pull out signs condemning homosexuality. After one such service one of these evangelical protesters approached Paul. Paul was quite angry and ready to lay right in to her. But, he never got that far. This woman was crying, and she asked Paul for forgiveness. She said words that melted his rage. She said "I came here expecting to find Satan, but as the service went along what I sensed instead was the presence of the Spirit, I don't know what this means, but I do know that I am truly sorry."

One of the problems with some iterations of Christianity is the notion that all that we need to know about God, about what is holy and sacred is contained in the bible. In other words, revelation ended 2,100 years ago. So, our definition of God, our understanding of the sacred is trapped in a certain historical context. But, even in scripture there is change and evolution. New understandings arise. The Spirit is constantly doing new things; our faith is not static, revelation is ongoing. At its best faith is constantly trying to catch up to where the Spirit is heading. The Spirit is always heading in the direction of right relationship, pulling strangers together, including everyone until the fullness of God's glory is wholly revealed.