

## Inclusion, Conversion, Revelation and the Stranger<sup>1</sup>—Acts 8: 26-38

(April 28, 2024-5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Easter)

The late comedic actor Groucho Marx is famous for having said he wouldn't want to be a part of any club that would accept him as a member. That still gets a lot of laughs. But, as with a lot of comedy, it's a joke rooted in pain. Marx was Jewish, and he was turning the pain of exclusion in acting and social circles into laughs.<sup>2</sup> We tend to think questions of inclusion, questions of who is in and who is out, are a recent phenomenon. Whether that be the debate about the value of identity politics to the health of our society, reactionary laws against trans people, heated rhetoric over immigration or debates over the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion policies in the corporate world. As the experience of Groucho Marx shows, questions of inclusion are not a contemporary phenomenon at all.

Inclusion is at the heart of our faith story this week. We meet up with Philip, not the disciple, but one of the first non-disciples 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 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 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 unease. 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

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to the reflection this video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bht9nPULF5w>) featuring American Quaker, theologian, activist and author Parker Palmer was shown.

<sup>2</sup> Nathan Abrams, *Groucho Marx and the Spirit of American Humour*, JewTh!nk, March 16, 2021, <https://www.jewthink.org/2021/03/16/groucho-marx-and-the-spirit-of-american-humour/>

<sup>3</sup> 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.

removed shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.<sup>4</sup> I don't think we do that one in Sunday school.

According to scripture the Ethiopian official's transgression of gender categories made them profane by nature. According to this injunction, there is no room for Eunuchs under God's tent. It says something about the Ethiopian official's faith that he went to Jerusalem to worship knowing the religious establishment could turn him away. It reminds me of all the faithful 2slgbtq+ folks who have stuck with the church even though the church has so often not been unfaithful to them. Like these folks, the official sought God anyway.<sup>5</sup> So his question is less about timing and convenience and more about daring to suggest that he to is worthy of God's blessing, that he to 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. As Parker Palmer says, Philip's view of the world becomes larger, his life is expanded and deepened. I don't think it is a leap to say as Palmer does, that Philip feels more at home in the world because of this encounter, for the Ethiopian official is no longer someone to be guarded about but rather a fellow traveler on the road of faith, in this case.

That's what often happens when people with the privilege and power to exclude set about life with hearts open to the stranger and the Spirit. That's what happens when inclusion is seen not as an act of charity, not as the process of admitting others to our club but something to deepen, enlarge and enrich lives. What happens is that people with privilege and power are converted—changed. New aspects of God, the Holy, the Sacred are revealed. 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

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<sup>4</sup> Nadia Bolz Weber, *Sermon on Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch*, <https://queermergent.wordpress.com/2009/06/08/sermon-on-phillip-and-the-ethiopian-eunuch/>

<sup>5</sup> 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 this is not scriptural, 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. As Palmer quotes the poet Marge Piercy,

...it starts when you say *We*  
and know who you mean,  
and each day you mean one more.<sup>6</sup>

May it be so.

Rev. Joe Gaspar

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<sup>6</sup> Marge Piercy, *The Low Road*, text found here, <https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/piercy/lowroad.html>, read by the author at the bottom of the page here, <https://margepiercy.com/>.