



May 11 – Powerful Questions

These stories from the book of Acts tell us of the early days of the Church. This particular encounter is at a time when the Church is rapidly growing. Those outside of the Jewish tradition are now outnumbering those who were within the Jewish followers of Christ. With both groups, there is a movement away from temple and synagogue. The Spirit is on the loose, and that means any place can be a spiritual place.

This story about Philip and the Ethiopian is not about them. It is about the Holy Spirit. It is about the way that the Holy Spirit is at work in both of them. It is about the way that the Holy Spirit is opening doors for new encounters. The Spirit is moving. Philip and the Ethiopian simply surrender to the movement of the Spirit.

It is eye-opening that one of the first places the Spirit moves in Acts is into this relationship. This is a story about radical inclusion. This Ethiopian is a diplomat. He is important enough to be riding around in a chariot. He is also important enough that he was allowed to travel all the way to Jerusalem to be able to worship. The story of radical inclusion starts with him. Our tradition often tries to paint it that Philip is the inclusive one. Philip is inclusive, but the Ethiopian goes first. His actions would be comparable to a foreign diplomat traveling through Washington D.C., having a street preacher tap on the window, and then inviting the person in for an impromptu Bible Study. See...eye-opening inclusion. This beautiful interaction starts with the Spirit and continues through this Ethiopian.

The questions asked created a road map for all of us. How am I to understand without someone guiding me? He is looking for guidance. It is not about having the scriptures in front of him. It is about how to interpret these Scriptures. About whom is this speaking? He is open to hearing the Good News. He is all ears. His openness to inviting Philip into the chariot and hearing the Good News has paved the way for what comes next.

His last question seems to be about the water. Look, here is water. What would prevent me from being baptized? This seems like a simple question. It is a loaded question. He is described as an Ethiopian. At the time that the book of Acts is written, this was taken to mean that he had dark skin. He was not like the people from this area. Ethiopia represented the unknown lands far away. It was symbolic for what they envisioned as the ends of the earth. He is asking if he is allowed to be baptized. Does this God welcome someone from far away.

The Ethiopian is also described as a Eunuch. Simply put, this is someone who does not fit into societal norms in terms of gender. This person would (likely) not be able to become a full convert to Judaism. He would be seen as unclean, because of this identity as “other.” The Ethiopian is asking, “Does this God really welcome all?”

Philip has been welcomed with a radical sense of inclusion, joining in the chariot, and entering a Spirit-led conversation. Here, Philip continues to follow the leading of the Spirit. His response was as eye-opening as it is today. He has no hesitation whatsoever. The chariot stops, and he proceeds to baptize the Ethiopian Eunuch. In doing so, he boldly proclaims the leading of the Spirit. Philip is moved to continue his ministry elsewhere. The Ethiopian returns home a changed person. Legend has it that this person becomes a missionary in Ethiopia.

I wonder how many others have the same question: what would prevent me from being baptized? Or, does this God really welcome all, including me? Historically, the Church has answered differently than Philip. It has been a “Yes, if....” There is a reason the early church told this story. It would have been easy to avoid it. Instead, the early church chose to include this story of inclusion. It is radical. To some it is offensive. Yet, that is what makes the Good News offensive, all the people it includes. Amen.

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