

Acts 8

Galileo Church

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There are so many things to say about the eunuch from Ethiopia in Acts 8 that I'm going to just take them one at a time, in this order: his scroll, his race, his testicles, and the day he found himself in the Bible.

First, his scroll.

While in Jerusalem, the man had bought a souvenir, a scroll of scripture, and we need to understand that such a remembrance would have been an extravagant purchase. Scrolls were hand-copied by scribes, one at a time, on long sheets of precious papyrus made from the ground pulp of sea reeds. Scribes were the only people who could both read and write, and there weren't many of them, and their painstaking labors produced – well, not much product. That the eunuch could afford such a costly prize, and that he could read it, tells us much about his education and wealth. He was a slave, but a well-funded and schooled one, raised to a high position in the Ethiopian government because of his skills.

The scroll he bought to take home with him was a piece of the Jewish prophet Isaiah, whose writings we are still reading today from the pages of our printed Bibles or the screens of our digital ones. Isaiah had beautiful things to say about God's future, and told the not-so-beautiful truth about the present moment, and his poetry speaks to the heart. This scroll would not have contained all of Isaiah's writings; they are long and scrolls are short. I imagine the eunuch picking up the scroll in the temple gift shop, handling it carefully, scanning some of its opening words, whispering a prayer that something in it would *speak* to him, give him a sign that the great God of heaven was paying any attention at all to him.

Which brings me to his race.

The eunuch from Ethiopia would have travelled over 1500 miles to visit Jerusalem, up the east coast of Africa through present-day Sudan and Egypt, the land route around the Red Sea taking weeks of difficult travel in his chariot, which was really a fancy covered wagon, pulled by horses and steered by a driver who would have been a lesser slave than himself. His master, the Candace, the queen of Ethiopia, had given him leave to make this pilgrimage to the temple of the Jewish God. We know that during the various conquerings of Israel by various world powers, Jews had been scattered

throughout the ancient world and non-Jewish people had come to know the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This eunuch was one such convert.

So in the world of Acts 8, the most significant thing about the Ethiopian's race is what he was not. He was not Jewish. He would not have been afforded entrance to the inner court of the temple, but godfearers, as they were called, could mill about in the outer courts, listening to the prayers of the faithful and ethnically pure. Gentiles were okay, as long as they stayed in their place. The stories about Philip the Deacon who got more than the committee work he signed up for, first about Simon the Magician in Samaria, and then about the eunuch from Ethiopia, are in the first place a confirmation of Jesus' insistence that his followers would take the news of God's reign beyond the boundaries of Jewish Jerusalem and out to the world in ever-expanding circles of preaching the gospel. When the Jerusalem Christians got wind of the Samaritans' conversion at the top of chapter 8, they sent the big guns, aka Peter and John, to check on things and straighten everybody out. When, later, Philip brought back the news of the eunuch's baptism to his superiors, they would have been – I don't know, skeptical? excited? terrified? pissed? – that people outside of God's covenant with Abraham could be included in Jesus's ongoing ministry.

For us, though, when it comes to race, it matters most that the eunuch was Ethiopian, meaning that he was black. I think *that* distinction meant less to Philip and Associates, as they themselves likely looked a lot more like the Ethiopian than like most of us in this room. But for us in this room, and especially now at this moment in American history, reading about the inclusion of an African person in the very earliest tales of our religious ancestry helps us remember that the church does not belong to white people, and God does not belong to white people. That sounds really basic, I know, but the church has not always understood this, and we have reaped the harvest of the church's racism in our contemporary churches and in contemporary culture. It was the church, after all, that gave its blessing to European slave traders way back when, and churches that built balconies with secret staircases just like the secret staircases here in the Farr Best Theater, so people of color could attend worship or the movies without offending the white majority. The church now bears responsibility for racial reconciliation in our country. It is a heavy burden, but the eunuch's baptism calls us to pick it up.

But before we celebrate too much the redemptive "black is beautiful" possibilities of this story, we need to talk about the eunuch's testicles. Because they were a problem.

This is what Jewish scripture says about people like the eunuch:

[Leviticus 21:16](#) The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: [17](#) Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer food to his God. [18](#) For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, [19](#) or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, [20](#) or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a

man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles.

[Deuteronomy 23:1](#) No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD.

There are more, but you get the idea. Our forebears in the faith were extremely bothered by physical inconsistency in human bodies. They appreciated smoothness and symmetry and sameness. In their attempt to make beauty for our God-Who-Is-Beautiful, they imagined that anything other than the healthy, whole human body would be an affront to the God who made those bodies. So they excluded people who didn't fit.

The eunuch, it should be said, had risen to his position of relative power in Ethiopia because he was a eunuch. Indeed, he was probably castrated as a child so that he could fulfill this exact role. Genital mutilation of children produced docile adult slaves. Eunuchs were trustworthy around women and money, it was thought – because without testosterone, they didn't want sex, and without heirs to share it with, they didn't covet wealth. Get yourself a eunuch to take care of your wives and concubines and you were set, thus demonstrating that heteronormative assumptions were at work long ago and all over the world, and proving that the concept of the "gay boyfriend" is really very ancient, and quite biblical.

But no, not really, because to say that the eunuch was gay would be to use a category the ancients just didn't have. It would be nearer the truth to say that he was queer – that is to say, he didn't fit the heteronormative assumptions about manhood, or even personhood. He was *other*. And because he was *other*, he was excluded, even from the outer courtyard of the temple, even from the arena of the Gentiles. What an irony: his religion of choice kept him out of worship, away from the prayers and the hymns, apart from the people of God, because of something about him that was no choice at all.

Which brings us to the day the eunuch found himself in the Bible.

It's not Leviticus he was reading, nor Deuteronomy. Not the lists of rules and exclusions of the Law, but the poetry and passion of the prophet Isaiah. When Deacon Philip jogged up beside that chariot, he could hear the eunuch reading – all the ancients read out loud – from Isaiah chapter 53:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.”

Now, when we Christians hear those words, we usually think of Jesus, the silent sheep led to the slaughter, humiliated and unjustly treated, his life taken from him. Isaiah 53 comes up in our schedule of readings around the time of his crucifixion during

Holy Week each year. But when the eunuch read this poignant description of a suffering, humiliated man treated as less than a man, having never heard of Jesus, he wondered if it might be about himself. He asks Philip, his roadside tutor, whether it might be possible that the prophet could speak of someone he doesn't even know. "Does he write from experience, or does he describe someone else?" asks the eunuch. Because if it's someone else, it might be him, and if it's him, it just might be that God is paying attention to him after all. Maybe God had been paying attention all along, to the child who stood silent before the shearer, humiliated, suffering, his life truncated to serve a system that cared nothing for him. Could it be that God felt something for the eunuch? Could God be sending him a message through the prophet?

When Philip gives the surprising answer – that the one who most closely fits the poet's description is Jesus, the messiah, the savior of the world, the eunuch feels himself overwhelmed. How unbelievable – that the God of the universe, the God to which God's people have denied him access all this time, has come among human beings in such a humble form, more like a eunuch than a holy man, more like a slaughtered sheep than a roaring lion, more queer than not, this Jesus of whom Philip speaks. God-in-Christ presents Godself to the world as a broken body, excluded from the inner court of the temple. Indeed, his own exclusion is written into scripture exactly as the eunuch's was: in Deuteronomy 23: "Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse forever." The eunuch and Jesus were two of a kind; queer and left out and the closer to God's heart for it.

It would not have taken long, I think, to convince the eunuch of that fact. A few stories about tax collectors, and lepers, and prostitutes, and other assorted misfits with whom Jesus ate and drank and made his life, and he would have recognized himself as one whom Jesus would love. But it would not be so easy to believe that Jesus' people would be as welcoming. After all, it was the very religious who had kept him out of the temple all these years. Even if *Jesus* loves him, it's likely in *his* experience that the Jesus-people won't, will still raise an objection, will still say, "No, not you, not as long as you're like that, not unless you can change yourself to be more like us, conform to our way of being, our version of normal." So when the eunuch's chariot passes by a pond by the side of the road, he asks the driver to stop and takes a long look at Philip. "You see there's water there," he says, gesturing over his shoulder with his thumb. "Does anything prevent me from being baptized?" But likely he means, "Does anyone prevent me from being baptized? Surely someone will object. Surely someone will say no to someone like me."

Our interpretation of what happened that day on the road out of Jerusalem toward East Africa depends a lot on how long we think Philip and the eunuch rode together, and how much of Isaiah's poetry that souvenir scroll contained. They had begun by reading Isaiah 53 about the suffering servant, the sheep led to slaughter. And just a couple of pages over in our paper Bibles, a couple of swipes of the screen of our digital ones, they could have read from Isaiah 56, a poem about the surprising things that happen when God comes near to the people of God.

Isaiah 56:3-5:

- 3 Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,
 "The LORD will surely separate me from his people";
and do not let the eunuch say,
 "I am just a dry tree."
- 4 For thus says the LORD:
 To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
 who choose the things that please me
 and hold fast my covenant,
- 5 I will give, in my house and within my walls,
 a monument and a name
 better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
 that shall not be cut off.

I'd be willing to bet my new truck that an ancient scroll that started with Isaiah 53 got at least as far as Isaiah 56 and the prophet's prediction that one day, even the eunuchs, even the eunuchs from Ethiopia, would be welcome in the house of the Lord, in the presence of God, recipients of God's blessings, no longer cut off, no longer excluded, but received, loved, and honored for their faithful worship against tremendous odds. Against ***scripture*** that seemed to exclude their kind, against ***tradition*** that disallowed their presence among God's people, against the ***prejudice*** of God's people themselves who could not imagine welcoming the queer into their number. And then, behold, there was water by the side of the road, and not a soul nearby to speak out against his baptism. Only the windy Spirit of God, blessing the whole event with the breeze of acceptance and welcome.

Here stands our eunuch, dripping wet, baptized now and drenched in the welcoming Spirit of living Jesus. Deacon Philip is gone, whisked away by the Spirit to another place, a quick return trip to the hub of the Christian mission. Acts 8 ends with this charming detail, that the eunuch saw Philip no more, not ever again, but went on his way rejoicing. And, I imagine, wondering just how he would tell anybody back home what had just happened. I would suggest he start with the scroll. Then talk about his race. Speak frankly about his testicles. And show anybody with eyes to see that he has found himself in the Bible. He has found himself in God's own heart. This is the testimony of the emerging church. Thanks be to God.