

## **We Are All Included**

Summerlea U.C.  
Rev. Scott A. Patton  
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Isaiah 56:1-8  
Acts 8:4-8, 26-40  
**The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**

**Prayer:** Loving God, open our hearts and our minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the scriptures are read and your word is proclaimed, we may hear what you are saying to us today. And now, may the words of my mouth... Amen.

Every year at this time, we have an opportunity to remember the very beginnings of the early church. We are reminded of what a life-changing time it really was for those who were there at the church's very beginning. Just before Easter, we recalled the final moments of Jesus' life on earth, and we were reminded that Jesus was rejected by both the Roman authorities and the religious authorities, and was put to death in a horrible and degrading way.

We also recalled how the early disciples, so full of hope and excitement about the way of life that Jesus had been leading them into, suddenly found their hopes crushed as they saw their leader and friend being put to death. They also suddenly found themselves living in great fear that the authorities would be coming for them next.

But then, the disciples began to experience the presence of Jesus, alive and with them once again. We can only imagine their bewilderment and their incredulity at these events that defied explanation, and yet were happening right before their eyes.

And in almost every encounter they had with the risen Jesus, he had told them to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit had come among them so forcefully and powerfully, and it was beginning to become clear that the Spirit was leading them in some new directions, and leading them to some new understandings of who was included in the family of God's beloved people.

The first disciples could see that God's Spirit was being given even to those who had previously been excluded from the faith community. The disciples could see what God was doing in their midst, and the church was growing by leaps and bounds as the Good News of Jesus Christ was being proclaimed far and wide.

In today's reading from Acts, we begin to see some of the new understandings and directions that God was leading them into, as the circle of inclusion grew wider and wider.

First, it was the Gentiles who were receiving God's Spirit. The very first people who had the name "Christian" applied to them were those who had come into Christianity out of Judaism. One of the very first controversies in the early church was whether or not the early converts to Christianity were required to follow the Jewish religious laws. This requirement eventually fell by the wayside when it was seen that God's Spirit was being given even to the Gentiles and others who had traditionally been seen as being outsiders.

Philip, one of the original twelve disciples, was appointed to go and preach the gospel in Samaria. Now, I want to make sure you are aware of what I'm saying here. Samaria, of course, was the home of the Samaritans, whom Jewish people were forbidden by law from associating with.

Philip went to Samaria to preach the gospel, and his mission was so successful that Peter and John were also sent there. Philip was running an evangelistic campaign that made a Billy Graham crusade look like a Sunday School class! And this is the point at which things get REALLY interesting!

In the middle of all that success, God speaks to Philip and says, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza," and it makes a point of telling us that this was a wilderness road. When he got there, he came across a chariot, carrying a man who was "a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians," and we are told that he was a eunuch.

And when we hear the word "eunuch," most of us would assume that that meant a "castrated male." And that would be true, but only in the narrowest understanding of the word. It is clear from ancient literature that eunuchs as a class had a reputation for being sexually attracted to men, rather than women.

Like the eunuch in our story, men like him were mainly employed by royal palaces, or very wealthy households. The name eunuch literally means "guardian or keeper of the couch." They were put in such positions because they could be counted on not to "mess with" the women, thus ensuring the purity of the family line.

Because of their intimate access to the royal courts, eunuchs often rose to senior government positions. In our story today, the Ethiopian eunuch was Treasurer to the Queen of Ethiopia.

But it was Jesus himself who helped us to realize that there is more than one kind of eunuch. In Matthew 19, verse 12, Jesus says, "...there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can."

"Eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others" would certainly be those who have been castrated. But "those who have been so from birth"? I have never heard of a case of someone being castrated while still in their mother's womb. So, in talking about "born eunuchs," Jesus is clearly talking about something else.

In the Jewish Talmud, which was written several hundred years after the time of Christ, but is based on an oral tradition that goes back much further, Rabbi Eliezer refers to "eunuchs by nature" and contrasts them with man-made eunuchs. He asserts that natural eunuchs can be "cured," a statement that would make no sense if he were referring to a person who has been castrated.

Instead, eunuchs were commonly associated in ancient culture with sexual interest in men; in other words, they were gay men, as we would refer to them today. The *Kama Sutra* (an ancient Eastern sacred text) has an entire chapter on eunuchs seducing men.

The other thing we need to know is that eunuchs were not allowed, by law, to enter into the Jewish Temple. Deuteronomy, chapter 23, lays out this law very clearly.

But if we turn to today's reading from the book of the Prophet Isaiah, we find a message from God, spoken through Isaiah, that says, "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.'" For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me, and hold fast to my covenant, 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."

With this historical background, we can now return to the story in Acts chapter 8 about the Ethiopian eunuch. When the Ethiopian eunuch introduced himself to Philip as a eunuch, Philip would have

immediately known he was dealing with a man who was part of a class of men commonly associated with homosexual desire.

Our story from Acts tells us the Ethiopian eunuch was reading from Isaiah 53. The whole chapter tells about the suffering of God's anointed one, a passage regarded by the early Christians as a prophecy about Jesus.

Verse 3 says, "He was despised and rejected by others." Verse 7 says, "He was oppressed and he was afflicted." The Ethiopian eunuch was returning home from having been to Jerusalem to worship, but he would not have been allowed into the Temple simply because he was a eunuch. In other words, he would have known all too well what it is like to be "despised and rejected."

Just like Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered people of today, eunuchs were the sexual outcasts of religious society. It was at this point that Philip, guided by the Holy Spirit, happened along and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

The Ethiopian eunuch answered, "How can I unless someone guides me?", and we are told that Philip "proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus." Then, in the middle of the desert, they came upon a pool of water, and the eunuch said, "Look, here is some water!" And the next question the eunuch asks is the most important one. "What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

And we are told that the eunuch commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

And here we have the answer to the eunuch's question. There was nothing to prevent him from being baptized and welcomed into the family of God's people. In the very same way today, we, as an Affirming Congregation, proclaim the good news of God's love for ALL people, and the message that ALL of us, in the great diversity of who we are, are welcomed into the family of God's beloved people, with no conditions attached.

Scripture points out to us, yet again, that even though we try to separate people into categories of "us" and "them", with God, there is only US. All of us. All of us loved by God, and affirmed as the people we really are. Thanks be to God for this good news of Jesus Christ. Amen.