

The Ethiopian Innovation

Acts 8:26-40

04/26/15 SOH

Theme: Thirsting for the Word

Our usual practice in baptism is sprinkling perhaps brought about through tradition and from a time in the desert when water was so precious that you wouldn't sacrifice so much for an immersion baptism. In front of the Garden tomb in Jerusalem is evidence of a baptistery in which the water was recycled into a cistern. I wonder how many times they recycled it? I remember my baptism at First Baptist Church in Flagstaff. The baptistery was a fiberglass tub with steps on each side, and a foot high glass window across the top front so people could actually witness you going under and make sure the top of your head got wet. (See, we just go straight for the top and bypass the other parts!)

When you came back up out of the water it was expected that you were changed, a new person, washed clean inside and out and ready to be God's disciple and witness to all the world. Well, it sometimes takes a while to see the change and learn what it means to be a disciple. For most of us, it's a lifetime process only finished when we are greeted by Jesus himself clothed in our new imperishable bodies.

What I know about baptism, whether full immersion or sprinkled, is that it is a lot more about what God is doing through the power of the Holy Spirit

than it is about our following Jesus into the water. The act of obeying opens the gates for the Spirit's presence in you.

Today's account in acts has always intrigued me. It is unusual in several ways. Let's clear up Philip's identity. There is a disciple Philip and there is a deacon, or servant, Phillip also known as "Philip the evangelist." The Philip here is that one, chosen as one of the seven by the apostles to tend to the needs of the community in Acts 6. Like Stephen, Philip went far beyond serving the needs of the immediate community in Jerusalem.

Philip spent time north of Jerusalem in Samaria as an evangelist. You might recall, Jesus had an encounter with a woman at a well in Samaria which resulted in the entire community choosing to follow Jesus and probably opening the door to other evangelists. Meanwhile, the Jews continued to loath the Samaritans as half-breeds and less than deserving of God's favor.

The text tells us in verse 26 that an Angel told Philip to leave Samaria and travel south toward Gaza through the wilderness which was a road through the desert west of the Jordan and right through Hebron. While walking along a chariot comes along side with an Ethiopian eunuch driving.

Two important pieces of information come to us in verse 27. It might seem a bit strange to consider a eunuch driving a chariot because the common image

is they were slaves and servants. But like Joseph in the Old Testament, slaves often gain the confidence and respect of their masters and were given important jobs. Though unnamed, he is evidently highly trusted because we're told he was an official trusted with the "entire treasury" of Candace, Queen of Ethiopia.

One more textual note before we move on will help our understanding just a bit. The name Candace in Ethiopian history was as much a name as a title, like "Caesar" or "Pharaoh." Ethiopia in the first century was an important trading partner between Africa and Asia. Judaism had spread into Ethiopia and likely the unnamed eunuch had been in Jerusalem both on business and to keep a feast there.

Now, on to the important part. The Holy Spirit told Philip to go up to the chariot. Perhaps this came as a nudge, like we often get, "Go talk to that guest over there" or, maybe, "Go ahead and volunteer to help with Spring Fest, it'll be fun." We can ignore the nudge or answer it. Philip answered.

He found the eunuch reading scripture. Having a copy is another testimony to his access to wealth. Philip asks a simple question, "Do you understand what you are reading?" and the eunuch answers, "Well, no I don't, I need someone to help me understand." He invites Philip in to sit beside him. It's a simple, ordinary invitation of hospitality to a fellow traveler. Having some company and conversation

would make the time pass and the stranger seemed to share an interest in the scripture he was reading.

He had been reading from Isaiah 53, a prophesy about the Messiah and so Philip explained what the scripture was talking about and he shared the good news of Jesus with him. Philip clearly explained about salvation and baptism because they come along some water and the eunuch asks if there is any reason he should not be baptized and so Philip baptized him on the spot.

This man had it all, power, money, access to the powerful yet his hunger was for something he did not understand; something that seemed beyond his reach. He sought a spirituality, some kind of connection to God that perhaps he understood from Judaism, but had not fully grasped.

Like the eunuch, we really have it all. No one here is homeless (as far as I know), we have food in the refrigerator, clean water from a tap, a car in the parking lot, and a bank account. That makes us wealthier than many in the world. Many are ignorantly comfortable. What I mean is, we have the essentials for comfortable life; food, shelter, safety. So we think we have all we need but we're never satisfied. We thirst for something we can't explain and we chase after it through diversions of adult toys, adult drinks, drugs, mind-altering TV, excessive exercise, lack of exercise, and in general, obsessive/compulsive

behaviors bouncing from one interest today to another tomorrow never completely satisfied.

The reason Philip is a good evangelist is because he is sensitive to the eunuch. He gives the man respect and dignity by listening to him. He first becomes a friend. Then he tells him about Jesus. He feeds the hunger the man has to understand and he honors his belief by baptizing him.

We might call this the Ethiopian Innovation in Evangelism. When the eunuch asks, "What does this mean?" Philip doesn't go into a theological or historical discussion like I did at the beginning. He gives a simple answer, "It's about Jesus." "It's about God's love for you." "It's about God's desire for all to know him like this."

Friendship. Simple answers. Honesty. It quenches the thirst in our spirit when we discover God's deep grace and forgiveness. It is at once satisfying yet draws you further wanting more, wanting to feel that grace throughout every fiber of your being. The waters of baptism testify to that desire – need to be immersed and covered by the Spirit.

Ethiopian tradition speaks of the eunuch taking Christianity to the queen, to all of Ethiopia, on to Abyssia to the east and Ceylon the island where modern Sri Lanka, and Arabia where he was reported to have been martyred. The eunuch left his meeting with Philip of his own volition driven to share this news. Philip left driven by the Spirit of God.

Do you have a thirst for the Word? Are you curious about what the Bible has to say? Do you want to know what it means for you today? The Old Testament scriptures were written for the Israelites who became the Jewish people yet they changed an Ethiopian eunuch's life and he changed a nation, maybe several.

Are you thirsty for the Word of God? Do you desire to change something in your life? Maybe give up some things that you know are destructive to you? I know that most if not all of you here believe in God and believe in Jesus but many of you don't thirst for the Word. It's in the discovery on your own that God can speak deeply into your heart and life. If you don't have a thirst, ask for it! Ask God to give you a thirst for him. I want to be dry and thirsty so he can quench it until I thirst again.

It's the Ethiopian Innovation; thirsting for God, sharing God, drinking deeply of his grace in the well of Jesus Christ.