

Teacher and Student

John 15:3-5 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

Acts 8:26-38 ²⁶ Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it."

³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. ³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." ³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" ³⁷ ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

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When we look at a passage of scripture, we need to understand as much as we can regarding the context in which it was written. In the story of the Ethiopian and Philip, only two people are mentioned. There is Philip, who was told to go to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Apparently, this is the same Philip who was one of the seven deacons appointed in the early church in Jerusalem. (Acts 6:1-6) There must have been at least one more person involved, the driver of the chariot, as we are told that the Ethiopian was sitting and reading. Reading while driving would have been risky then, although many seem to forget that today.

But what do we know about the Ethiopian? He was almost certainly black. He was over 600 miles from home, an enormous distance to travel by land in those times. Ethiopia was ruled by queens and he was the treasurer for the queen, so we know he was a man of high standing in his homeland. His high status is also reflected by the fact that he's riding in a chariot. He's wealthy enough to own a handwritten scroll of Isaiah, and educated enough to read the Greek written in the scroll. A downside of being an important court official in Ethiopia was that most of them were emasculated. I think that would certainly prevent a lot of ambition to be part of the Queen's court.

The text says that the Ethiopian had been up in Jerusalem to worship. We don't know if he was a convert to the Jewish faith or a "God-fearer," a person who had great respect for Jewish law and the God of Israel, but who had not made a complete conversion to the faith. In any event, he was devout enough to travel a great distance to worship and devout enough to study the scriptures.

Often sermons on this text will focus on the fact that the Ethiopian is a eunuch. In Deuteronomy 23:1 we find that the law of Moses forbids a eunuch to be "admitted to the assembly of the Lord." The same rule is taught in Leviticus 24:10-16.¹ Those sermons will emphasize that while Judaism rejected men who were mutilated in this manner, Christianity accepted them. However, the prophet Isaiah, in chapter 56, tells us how eunuchs who are devout will be welcome in God's house and honored.² Sometime before

New Testament times the rules regarding eunuchs seem to have evolved. This text isn't about Jewish faith versus Christian faith.

It seems odd that the Ethiopian was reading aloud. I discovered in my studies this week that reading aloud was the norm in those days. This was the usual pattern of reading. Silent reading didn't come into fashion until around 400 AD, perhaps because of the silence imposed in monasteries. Knowing this means that it wasn't at all strange that he was riding along, reading out loud to himself.

This high ranking official of the Queen's court asked Philip an important question regarding the passage he was reading in Isaiah. "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" And we can ask that same question. This passage about Philip and a foreign court official is a wonderful story of the early days of our faith. But is it in any way about us? Is it instructive for our times? In the 1950s, I heard many a sermon about how this passage told us that total immersion was the only form of acceptable baptism. After all, the passage says that they went down into the water. However, it is reading too much into the scripture to say that it makes baptism by immersion an absolute requirement.

In the next decade, in the 1960s, as our country wrestled with civil rights, sermons often focused on how a **black** man was welcomed into the faith. The needs of the times can influence the message that we find in the scriptures.

Today, we can see that the Ethiopian, despite being ethnically different and sexually different from the prevailing norms, was nonetheless accepted and affirmed as a welcome member of the faith. There is no partiality. Not matter what, he is acceptable. The good news of the gospel is for everyone. No wonder, the Ethiopian went on his way, rejoicing!

We generally don't deal with the issue that he's a foreigner. His culture isn't Jewish but Ethiopian. Perhaps we should ask ourselves how we relate to foreigners. In the context of our lives today, it might be valuable to ask ourselves if we're more willing to visit Latin America as a mission group than we are to associate with Hispanics across town?

The issue of inclusiveness and acceptance cuts both ways. Philip accepts this man who is so very different from himself. He's a government bureaucrat, he's rich, he's a foreigner, he's black, and he's a eunuch. But the Ethiopian is also inclusive. He's humble enough to seek help in understanding the text, inviting a complete stranger, who is obviously poor and of a lower social class, to ride in his chariot.

Just as the Ethiopian asked if the passage in Isaiah applied to the present, we can ask if the story about the Ethiopian has meaning for us today? Well, it's certainly a story that gives us great examples of how we're to be accepting of those who are richer or poorer than ourselves, those who are lighter or darker skinned, those who are sexually different, and those who are strangers or foreigners. The Ethiopian asked, "What prevents me from being baptized?" Over the years the answer has been, "you serve the wrong government, you're the wrong color, or your sexuality isn't acceptable." But Philip sees no hindrance and baptizes the man. We're still learning those lessons.

The man in the chariot is obviously educated and smart, and yet he said, "How can I understand, unless someone guides me?" The treasurer of Ethiopia needs not only someone who knows scripture, but who also knows the God of scripture. He can read for himself, but he understands that isn't enough. He's both bright enough and humble enough to know what he doesn't know. The man knows how to be a student! And he knows that just reading the scriptures isn't enough. If that's all that it took, the church would wait for you to show up to be baptized. Then, while you were drying your hair you'd be asked if you wanted to be issued a Bible bound in red, blue, or black. Then you'd be handed a Bible in the color of your choice, given a set of offering envelopes, and told to mail in your tithe.

The eunuch needed a teacher. We all do. We are all on a journey to learn more - and then live what we've learned. And we can all learn from each other. The rich and educated passenger in the chariot learned from the hitchhiker that he picked up. I try to learn more each week so that I have some insight to share with others on Sunday morning. I learn from scholars who have devoted their lives to intense study of the scriptures. Their writings are a great gift because there is so much wisdom in

scripture that none of us can master it all. But the learning doesn't just come from books. It comes from you. It comes from other Christians in our lives. Some of the most important lessons I've had in how to live a Christian life - came from a retired hotel porter. We are all teachers and students. We can never learn it all. There will always be fresh insights to learn from ancient scripture. Sometimes you're the student in the chariot. Sometimes you're the stranger by the side of the road who has good news to share with someone else. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, "Luke's emphasis is less on the authority of scripture than on the authority of the interpreter of scripture."³

What prevents us from living as baptized children of God?

¹ NRS **Deuteronomy 23:1** No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD.

Leviticus 21:17-21 NRS ¹⁷ Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of 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.

²¹ No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the LORD's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God.

² Isaiah 56:3-5 NRS 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.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2008) p 459