

Acts 8: 26-40

Delivered on May 10, 2009

I must be having really good karma or something, because last Saturday night I was at a dinner party and I happened to be sitting next to an Ethiopian. For real. Then last Sunday, late afternoon, I was looking at the lectionary passages for this Sunday, and lo and behold I discovered one of them was the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch. Once in a great while, the planets are aligned just right to my benefit—or the needle on that great roulette wheel in the sky lands on my number. Before last Saturday night I knew next to nothing about Ethiopia. Oh, I knew that it is somewhere near Egypt, but I am pretty sure that if a geography teacher had given me a map of the world and asked me to circle Ethiopia, I couldn't have done it. But because of last weekend's dinner party, I now know at least a smattering about that country and I want to share that new knowledge with you by way of telling you about my conversation.

When the subject of Ethiopia came up at the dinner table, I said, something like, "Well, all I know about Ethiopia is what I've read in the bible. Philip taught an Ethiopian eunuch about Jesus." Now that doesn't really sound like a conversation starter—particularly at a dinner party—usually at dinner parties religion is a conversation **stopper, right?** But this Ethiopian gentleman actually knew that to which I was referring. He answered back, "Yes, that Ethiopian eunuch is the one who proselytized Ethiopia." Isn't that cool? Then, this man went on to say that because of the eunuch, Ethiopia, which is surrounded by Muslim countries, is a mostly Christian nation. In fact, he said, "My mother is a nun in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. She lives in a convent in Egypt." I certainly didn't expect to hear that from the man sitting next to me. I mean, how many people do YOU know whose mothers are nuns living in Egypt? But that is only the tip of the iceberg of the amazing things I heard that night.

It turns out that Ethiopia has had a long association with the Bible. Remember King Solomon, David's son? King Solomon expanded King David's Jewish empire. One of the ways he did that was by marrying a whole slew of women with international pedigrees. The Bible recounts that King Solomon had 700 wives. That's about the size of a small women's college, isn't it? Can you imagine 700 wives? I'm sure the men here are coming up with all sorts of remarks right about now about what it would be like to have 700 wives, but let me remind you that it is Mother's Day. Be nice.

According to my dinner companion, one of those 700 wives was the Queen of Sheba, also mentioned in the Bible, who apparently was actually the Queen of Ethiopia. After their marriage, the pregnant Queen of Sheba returns to Ethiopia and has a son, whom she names Menelik. When this son grows up he is curious about his daddy so he makes a visit to Jerusalem. King Solomon plies Menelik with gifts and gives him lots of attention too. Because of that, the king's courtiers are jealous of him. It is such an inhospitable climate, that finally, Menelik returns to Ethiopia. Accompanying him on this return trip is the son of the Jewish priest Zadok. This son of the Jewish priest Zadok has packed away among all of his many possessions, the Ark of the Covenant. You heard

me right—the Ark of the Covenant--which is how the Ark of the Covenant ends up in Ethiopia. Someone should have told Indiana Jones, right? Now my dinner companion believes that all of this last part, about the Ark is pure legend. However, there is in fact a real building in Ethiopia, in the city of Axum to be exact, called **The Treasury of the Ark of the Covenant**. That is where the Ark of the Covenant is supposedly housed. It is under guard and no one is allowed to see it, darn it! You might want to look on the insert in your bulletin for a picture of the Treasury of the Ark of the Covenant and also a map of Africa—WITH Ethiopia circled. You see I know now where Ethiopia is on the map. My dinner companion told me this, too: For centuries there has been a strong Jewish presence in Ethiopia, compliments of Prince Menilek. Only recently, and we're talking the last 70 years or so have most of the Jews left Ethiopia and resettled in Israel.

Now about this time, the conversation moved on to other things, like dessert, which was chocolate raspberry cake. So, sorry, I don't have any more to report to you. I've got to tell you, though, that this one conversation made my work preparing for this week's sermon infinitely easier. I didn't have to do so much research. More importantly, I got the nugget I needed for our message for today as it relates to our text. I'll give you a hint. That message has to do with how we do evangelism.

So, thus prepared, let us now turn to our text. One of the characters in it, as I've already mentioned, is the Ethiopian Eunuch, a person the Bible refers to as “a court official, in charge of the queen's treasury.” The other character in our story for today is Philip. Philip was a gentile in the early church in Jerusalem. Actually, Philip appears several times in the book of Acts. He was a missionary to the gentiles in Samaria and CeasarEa.

Now as to the meaning of our text. Because the Ethiopian eunuch is a foreigner and a Eunuch, ta boot, many people have concluded that this man lived on the fringes of Jewish society. The poor man had been marginalized. Their stance is that big hearted Philip demonstrates his goodness and open mindedness by bringing this lonely, pathetic, snubbed man into the Christian fold. As one commentator says, “The Ethiopian eunuch is a double outcast within Israel, twice rejected by those in control of religious sentiment.” Bad, bad Jews, good, good Christians. And that, my friends is not only incorrect, given the information we now have about the history of Ethiopia—my goodness, Ethiopia was a center of Judasim-- it is also very bad theology. Proclamation of the gospel certainly doesn't require insulting, or slurring another faith tradition. But there is something else terribly wrong with this interpretation of our story. Do you really think that Philip went to the Ethiopian Eunuch with pity in his eyes, wanting to lift this man up and out of his lowly position in life as a marginalized victim? Is that what evangelism is all about?

Preacher and story teller Fred Craddock tells about going to a big preacher's ecumenical, Protestant convention in a big city. After getting settled in his hotel room, he went out to the front of the hotel and hailed a taxi to take him to the convention center. He climbed in the cab and told the driver where he needed to go and the driver said, “Is that where all those preachers and folks are gathering?”

“Yeah,” said Fred.

The Cab driver said, “I want to tell you, don’t try to convert me. I’m Roman Catholic; I go to Mass. My wife goes to Mass; our kids go to Mass. We’re a Catholic family, we’re Christians, so if you want to convert someone, get another cab.” Fred said, “I just want a ride out to the convention center.” And the cab driver said, “I’ve had four people try to convert me this morning, I’m tired of it!”

It is my thought that the Ethiopian Eunuch did not consider himself a second class Jew—any more than that cab driver thought of himself as a second class Christian. Indeed, in all aspects, both religious and social, the Ethiopian Eunuch is a first class citizen. My goodness, he comes from Ethiopia, land of the Ark of the Covenant. And, in his position of honor in the queen’s court, he was well respected enough to have control of all the country’s treasury.

Let us consider the story we have before us in a modern day setting. Imagine a modern day Presidential appointee—say Timothy Geitner or Ben Bernanke sitting in his Mercedes which is parked in front of the Treasury Department in Washington D.C. Probably he’s sitting in the back seat, his chauffeur is sitting in the front seat. This Timothy Geitner or Ben Bernanke type is dressed in his everyday work wear—a shirt, tie, and a dark, sleek Armani suit. He’s got some time before he’s off to his next meeting, so he’s reading from the book of Isaiah. A street preacher named Philip, dressed in jeans and a T Shirt that says Jesus Saves, who hasn’t had a bath in a few days, because he is on the missionary circuit, sees the car, comes up close to see what VIP might be inside, peers in and sees Geitner or Bernanke with his Bible open. Moved by the spirit, Philip dares to speak, and a conversation is struck. One thing leads to another and before long, Philip the street preacher is invited to come into the car. Now, I ask you who is being inclusive to whom in this scenario? You would have to say that in this story, inclusivity at the very minimum runs both ways. In fact it may be that Bernanke or Geitner who are really just stand-ins for the Ethiopian Eunuch, is the one practicing inclusivity.

And that brings us to what I think is a better message for today—than the one about Christian vs. Jewish inclusivity or about missionary work as a way to save people from their wrongheadedness. At least an alternative message is worth considering. That is, in our missionary work, in the personal evangelism we try to practice, it may be wrong to presume that the people to whom we bring our faith should count themselves lucky if we choose to stoop to their level. Where’s the respect in that?! Far better to come as equals to the conversation, or even to come in a position of humility—ready to learn from the other.

It just might be that that day in the chariot, after Philip had told the Ethiopian all he knew about Jesus, the Ethiopian Eunuch told Philip all he knew about Judaism. If that is the case, then they both learned a thing or two. I guess what I am saying is, if our words ring true, which they will with the Holy Spirit’s help, then, in our evangelism, we may change a life for the better; and in the process, our own lives may be changed for the better, too. I like to think that is what happened to the Ethiopian Eunuch and to Philip.

The one was baptized, the other grew in faith. Both were converted. May it be so for us as well when we share our faith with others. For you and for me. Amen