

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER | MAY 2, 2021

ACTS 8:26-40 | PSALM 22:25-31 | 1 JOHN 4:7-21 | JOHN 15:1-8

We're spending some time this Easter in the book of Acts exploring the relationship between beliefs and practices. We've heard stories these past few weeks about the life of the early church. Of how they built communities, reread history, and invited people into a new way of being. And when we've tried to answer *What has Easter changed? What is possible now that wasn't possible before?*

At the very beginning of Acts, Jesus sent the disciples out to be witnesses in "Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." And they've been to Jerusalem. They've been in all Judea and Samaria. But they haven't been to the ends of the earth. Until now. Until the voice of God comes to Philip and says, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

And now the movement spirals out of its familiar confines and enters into a vastly different space. Different geographies. Different cultures. Different bodies. And we see that immediately in Phillip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. Peter is traveling down the road when suddenly the Spirit tells Phillip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." "Join" here is *kollaō*. Fasten, glue, or cleave together.

St. Luke is clear at the outset that this new chapter in the history of the church is going to be driven not by human imaginations but by the desire of God. A desire that goes beyond our vision, that outstrips our expectations. Phillip thinks he's going to meander down south, but now he is literally running down the road trying to keep up with God's desire. And if you believe Luke, that's when the church is most faithful to God's calling. Not when it is peaceful and calm and stable. Not when they lock themselves in a room and hide from the world. But when they are struggling to keep up with the relentless pull of God's desire.

And that desire brings us to new encounters and relationships. Nowhere is that clearer than the Ethiopian eunuch. There are stacks and stacks of books and articles about the Ethiopian eunuch. As soon as you get into the literature on this, you realize that there's little agreement on anything.¹ Is he a powerful figure?² Some people say yes. Some say no. Is he Jewish?³ Some people say yes. Some people say no. Some people say kind of. People can't agree on how he was gendered. People can't agree on what he looked like. People can't agree on how wealthy he was. Essentially, whenever you read anything about this character beyond the text, you're in contested space.

At first, that ambiguity is annoying. Why don't we know more about this person? But then you realize that it's actually sort of helpful in its own way. This person doesn't fit neatly into Phillip's view of the world. He probably doesn't fit neatly into ours either. And that's part of the point. Because it's not about Philip's plans. And it's not about our vision, either. It's about God's desire. And this is who God wants to be in relationship with.

And that's what makes his question to Phillip so interesting. "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" If we're judging by a strict interpretation of the law or the way they've traditionally

¹ The introduction of Sean D. Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch: Strategies of Ambiguity in Acts* (Fortress Press, 2013) has a good summary of this. Also Brittany E. Wilson, *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke-Acts* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

² The argument for him being powerful is that he's in the political court of the queen. The argument for him lacking power is that eunuchs were on the bottom of the gender hierarchy.

³ The argument for him being Jewish is that he's going to Jerusalem to worship and the conversion of Cornelius, which comes later in Acts, is the first Gentile conversion. The argument for him not being Jewish is that the whole point of the story is about the church encountering different types of people. Luther thought he was a Gentile. Wesley and Calvin both thought he was a proselyte, someone who converted to Judaism.

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done things, the answer is probably, “Well, a lot of things.” But if we’re judging by the desire of God, if we’re judging by the Holy Spirit that’s driving Phillip down the road, the answer, of course, is nothing. And so the story ends with the two going their separate ways, but not before they’ve been joined together.

So what does all this have to do with beliefs and practices? All I’ve really done so far is just recap the story. But what does Easter make possible in this story that wasn’t possible before? One answer is that Easter makes it possible for us to respond to God’s desire that we be joined together. The command that Phillip “join” the Ethiopian eunuch isn’t just about catching up to him on the road but about being brought into common purpose and common life. The way the good news spreads in Acts is not by God illuminating people one-by-one in the privacy of their own homes. It’s through relationships. Through engagement. Through encounter. Through joining together.

This might not seem like all that much. After all, you can join together with people without believing in the resurrection of Jesus. You can join Boy Scouts. You can join the garden club. You can join a book group. You don’t need Easter to be joined to other people.

But so often our joining together is based on our own desires. And if my joining together is only based on my own likes and affinities and hobbies and experiences, I’m going to join together with people who look and talk and love and live and eat and everything else pretty much the same way I do. And as soon as anyone shows up who doesn’t serve my needs or make me feel good or make my life better, I’m going to check out. And that is going to create communities that look and talk and live nothing like the kingdom of God.

No, the thing that holds us together, that joins us together, is not that we all have the same experience of life or that we have the same beliefs or that we have the same goals or even that we happen to like one another. The thing that holds us together, the thing that joins us as one, is our common baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ. It isn’t a coincidence that as soon as the church moves out from Jerusalem toward the ends of the earth, the very first story is about baptism. Because that’s what holds us together. That’s where our unity is.

So the question about joining together really isn’t *Who do I want to be in my community?* Or *What sort of people do I want to be around?* The question is *Who has been joined into the body of Christ through their baptisms?* And *Who does God desire to be in relationship with?*

I think you know this. Actually, I know you know this. At our annual meeting in 2020 you adopted a welcome statement. And I didn’t write it, so I can say that I think it’s pretty good. But it didn’t have to be good. It could have been bad. You could have written something that said, “It’s okay for people like you to be here.” But you didn’t. That would have been awful. You could have said, “All are welcome because we’re friendly.” That would have been pretty bad, too. You should always be wary of a church that describes itself as “friendly.” No, you wrote, “Through Christ, God calls us to love one another as God loves us.” *Through Christ.* That’s the key. That’s what Easter makes possible. Whenever we reflect God’s desire to be joined together, whenever we gather together around font, word, and table, we are always joined together through Christ. And in the body of Christ, there is no stranger, no other, no margin.

The body of the risen Christ is Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch. It is you and it’s me. And it’s all the people who have been joined together by the desire of God. A desire that never overlooks and a desire never ends.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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