

A Reflection by Fr. Jon

Fifth Sunday in Easter

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.) 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 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 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.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 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?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Acts 8:26-40

This story from Acts is one of several that show us how, in the wake of Jesus' resurrection, the circle of God's love is growing. In this story, Philip the deacon, one of the seven men ordained by the disciples to manage the needs and welfare of the growing Jesus movement, finds himself encountering a eunuch who is also an important official in Ethiopia studying the scriptures.

In the first century, Judaism was growing in attractiveness to many. It offered a disciplined way of life, a coherent worldview, and a sense of communal belonging that many found appealing as Roman society could be quite brutal and unforgiving. But the truth is, a eunuch could never have been fully welcomed into that community since the disfigurement of his sexual organs means that by the Mosaic Law, he was forever unclean.

This story, like the story of Cornelius the centurion, is a story about how the early Christian community was moved by the Holy Spirit to open their hearts and minds to more expansive view of

who, exactly, were God's people. Of course, the answer is everyone. But that answer has never been obvious or always accepted by God's people. But here we see how someone, someone singled out by the law as unworthy, is revealed by the Holy Spirit to actually be among God's beloved. God's own spirit, reaches out with love and compassion to Philip to open the eyes of this foreign and disfigured man, and to bring him into the visible circle of grace through baptism.

And in our day, there are many who preach against those who feel different or who may make us uncomfortable because their bodies and ways of being generate strong feelings within us. But just as God loved the eunuch, so God also loves these who may seem odd or unfamiliar to us. In truth, the circle of God's care and concern includes all of us, there are no exceptions. And now as always, the Holy Spirit nudges us to reach out in companionship and love to those whose hearts could be healed by Christ's touch.