

“Roadtrip Buddies”

Acts 8:26-40

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There are times in worship and in private study, when we take the Bible and we pull it apart, unpack it, isolate verses from what comes before and after so that we can understand the language, the context, the history, and the implications of what has been written and passed down. It's an important part of our practice of studying scripture. But, there are times when it is most important to immerse ourselves in listening to and learning the story. There are some pretty powerful stories in the Bible and it is important that we tell them and learn them as much as it is important to know the academic background of it. That is what the Bible tries to do - tell the story of God and God's people, tell stories that will inspire us and draw us closer to our Creator, and tell stories that will help us find meaning in our lives.

Today's story that Amanda read us is one of the most powerful stories in the Bible and it is one most of are unfamiliar with. I wish it made it's way into picture books and cartoons and our cultural knowledge the way Adam and Eve and Noah's Ark and the Feeding of the 5000 all have, because this story from Acts holds the power to give us clarity about who is included in God's loving care, what kinds of relationships we are called to, and what it means to live joyfully.

This story from acts is about two men who are brought together in unlikely circumstances. The first is Philip, who is an evangelist, a follower of Jesus, who brings in new believers into the church and is specifically called to care for the believers in Jerusalem.

The second man does not have a name but is identified as an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians. Even without a name these identifiers tell us a lot about this man. He is known as Ethiopian not because of the nationality, but because that was an identity that would have told early listeners of this story that he was a Black man.

Likewise, eunuch would have identified this Black man as someone who is not cis-gendered, that is someone whose genitalia differs from biological male. We don't know how or the specifics - there were traditions of this being from birth and being done to someone - but we know that because he was a eunuch, he would have been considered religiously defiled and unclean. His identity as a eunuch would have allowed him the high ranking servant position to the queen, but it still rendered him to a life of servitude and outside the boundaries of what was considered proper or good.

In normal circumstances Philip and the eunuch would have nothing to do with one another - their paths would never have crossed. But God sends Philip on a journey down a wilderness road, and as we know from this past year, surprising things happen when you travel through the wilderness or when you find yourself on a road that is unfamiliar and new. Philip is walking down this wilderness road when along comes the eunuch in a chariot.

The Holy Spirit nudges Philip and says, "go over to that chariot! See if you can join it!" This nudge from the Holy Spirit begins an epic road trip journey. Have you ever been on a road trip with someone you didn't know at all or someone you didn't know well? I have a few times, and coincidentally they have almost all been with the church.

I've piled into cars and minivans for long drives to mission trip destinations as a teen and an adult, to drive to church camp, and most recently for a Civil Rights road trip to Alabama. Something happens on road trips that doesn't happen anywhere else. The vehicle becomes a type

of incubator where the process of getting to know one another seems to speed up. When you're driving with someone, you tell stories, you ask questions, you open up to each other. You quickly learn about each other's needs and preferences as you make decisions together about where to stop and what to eat and I know we just stopped an hour ago but I really need a bathroom again. Things get real on road trips. You are in close physical proximity and that practice of sharing space opens up to sharing other parts of ourselves. And, when you're on a road trip, you realize pretty quickly that you need each other. You need to help drive or you need to help keep the driver entertained and awake. You aren't allowed to leave someone on the side of the road, or you might be afraid of being left behind, so you find your way to mutual care and respect for one another. When we talk about the journey being as important as the destination, we're talking about road trips.

So thanks to the Holy Spirit, Philip and the eunuch find themselves on a road trip together down a wilderness road. Philip notices the eunuch reading from the prophet Isaiah and instead of telling him he has no business reading scripture or one upping him with all that he knows, he leans in with curiosity and asks a question. "Do you understand what you are reading?" The man says, "How can I unless someone guides me?" This becomes an invitation into conversation, of asking questions, teaching, and listening. Asking a question instead of making an assumption or pushing an agenda opens them up for a mutual exchange and the potential for a transformative conversation.

As their journey continues, they come to some water. The eunuch stops the chariot and says, "Look! Water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" There were a lot of things that could have prevented him from being baptized that day or any day. His identity as a eunuch. His status as a foreigner. Philip had been called to minister to a certain group of people, and this man

was not one of them, so he could have said, “Sorry I really must be on my way, I don’t have time for this.” But a relationship has been formed between these two men. A Holy Spirit connection has been created. They know each other now. That relationship, despite their different backgrounds and identities, allows them to look past the barriers and perform the sacrament of baptism. Their mutual relationship becomes more important than what could have kept them apart.

Baptism is a sacrament that reminds us that we are loved and beloved by God, and that nothing can keep us separate from that love. Philip’s willingness to baptize the eunuch is affirmation that he sees God’s love in this man. The eunuch’s desire to be baptized is affirmation that he KNOWS he is loved by God and deserving of that love. In this act, they become kindred in Christ, no longer defined by what separates them but by what they share in common.

After the baptism, they go their separate ways, Philip to continue his work of sharing the message of Jesus’s life and resurrection, and the eunuch goes home rejoicing. This is a story of joy. A story of what can happen when we follow God into the wilderness, when we meet people who are different than us and instead of judging or fearing them we lean in with curiosity, when we share our stories and learn from each other.

We know from the history books that the early Christian church spreads to Ethiopia and that it was one of the strongest, richest embodiments of the church. This was long before Christianity was colonized. Long before the church reached Germany or England. The early church in Ethiopia was born in part out of this story of a transformative relationship. This is not just a story of personal transformation and affirmation, but a reminder of the belovedness of our global siblings in Christ, of the different manifestations of church and faith, of the way the Holy Spirit is asking us to draw near to those with skin that is different than yours, to draw near to

those whose sexuality or gender is different than yours, to remind everyone, everyone, everyone that they are beloved and worthy of God's love.

The next time you set out on a road trip, or the next time you find yourself in the wilderness with someone you don't know, pause and see if you can feel the presence of the Holy Spirit, nudging you closer, nudging you into mutual conversation. And I would suggest that in those moments when you feel a little uncomfortable, perhaps because someone looks different than most of the people you spend your time with, or someone has a different background or identity than you, that discomfort might be the Holy Spirit, asking you to move beyond whatever you've been told before, move beyond the barriers and the boundaries into a space where you can truly know someone, see their gifts, their beauty, their story, and all the ways they are a beloved child of God. May it be so. Amen.