



Sermon by: Rev. Robert W. Ater on April 28, 2024

Text: Acts 8:26-40

All In?

“All right people, let’s find out if you are in or if you are out!”

For pop-culture fans this line was made famous by supermodel Heidi Klum as the host of BravoTV’s hit show Project Runway for sixteen years. Center stage at the top of the runway, with her signature German-American accent and a mischievous grin on her face and twinkle in her eye, Klum would declare for the viewing audience at home and the clothing designers competing in the studio, that it was time to find out who’d made the proverbial cut, who would continue on in the competition show, those who were in and those who’d pack up their scissors and go, those who were out. Although these words understandably make for great television, they’ve also been used in too many other settings in life, treating life like some sort of competition, too. I’ve long struggled with the declaration made by many throughout humanity’s long story that some would be “in,” loved, accepted, and included, and others who could be, would be, and even should be left out.

Today’s text from one of humanity’s earliest stories, the story of that fledging New Testament Church, described by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, engages this problematic human binary, too, that of the insider and the outsider. And the story told here is truly fascinating as it offers a wonderful example of the struggle of an insider who is also an outsider. The central character, an Ethiopian eunuch, described by some as the chief treasury secretary for the Queen¹, has wealth and power in the royal court AND was also seen because of his bodily mutilation, as an outsider in society, “an oddity, a source of scorn from the perspective of Greco-Roman masculinity, almost non-human from the perspective of some.”² Ironically enough, the stories of eunuchs in antiquity remind us that it was only because of this bodily mutilation, that made the eunuch an outsider, that he was likely able to be an insider, to serve in this advisory position close to the Queen, seen then not as a threat to her but as one who could be trusted with not only her safety, but with power and money. And in this unusual context, as a sort of inside outsider – we are told by Luke, that the eunuch is also a spiritual seeker, looking for a connection with God in his life. It’s just then that God meets him where he is, through Philip, Luke’s first Christian evangelist in the burgeoning church. The eunuch, who has no name and is identified only by his occupation in the Ethiopian royal court, has just been in Jerusalem where he likely acquired, with his wealth, a scroll of Isaiah. And so, Philip finds the eunuch traveling in his chariot, reading aloud from Isaiah about - - - of all things, an outsider, a sheep being led to slaughter, who is saved by the welcoming love of God. And Philip, as an evangelist, faithfully steps up and literally steps in to help the eunuch understand this

great good news. I love the description of the scene offered by preacher, teacher, and theologian Barbara Brown Taylor:

“The text presents the Ethiopian,” Taylor writes, “as someone wealthy enough to ride a chariot, educated enough to study the prophet Isaiah, and humble enough to know that he cannot understand what he is reading without help. He is also hospitable. When Philip speaks to him, the Ethiopian invites the talkative pedestrian to join him in his chariot. For a modern parallel, imagine a diplomat in Washington D.C., inviting a street preacher to join him in his late model Lexus for a little Bible study. The inclusion in this story runs both ways.” Taylor affirms.³

And so these two characters, unlikely to have met one another without the intervention of the Holy Spirit, uncover the Good News of the Gospel together.

The faithfulness of the outsider, the eunuch is notable in this story. Philip, in his faithfulness, does what is expected of an evangelist, he follows the guiding of the Spirit, shares the Good News and baptizes. The eunuch shows a little more gumption, perhaps taking a little more risk – as one already accustomed to being considered physically broken and mutilated – by asking for help from Philip, to not only understand the holy words of Isaiah, but to have the faithful audacity to ask, “who is God saying this about, who is that sheep that God loves, could it be me? Could God love me, too, what is to prevent me then, from being baptized?” And we all know the answer, right? Nothing! Nothing should exclude anyone, eunuch or not, from being baptized and experiencing the radical inclusion of God’s love in Jesus Christ.

But that may not have always been the case, and that gracious and welcoming answer, reflected in Philip’s order to immediately stop the chariot and bound down into the water with the eunuch, with water and grace and love splashing all around, was and may still be uncomfortable for some! For one of the fascinating dimensions of this text was the previously included and now excluded verse 37. If you opened your pew Bibles and followed along in today’s reading, perhaps like me, you didn’t even notice at first glance, that verse 37 is missing – between the Eunuch’s request to be baptized and Philip stopping the chariot to baptize him. Present in early versions of the Bible, recent translations have removed it making it a footnote at the bottom of the page that reads, “And Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may [be baptized].’ And [the eunuch] replied, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’” Theologian Matthew Skinner advises, that although it was there in the King James version, this laying out of the rules by Philip for the eunuch, ‘you have to believe in the Lord,’ is something that scholars now think was added by scribes to Luke’s original text. That it wasn’t even in there, to begin with! Skinner affirms, that “in the history of the transmission of this passage, it has [likely] made people nervous that there appears to be no criteria for this man’s salvation that he has to be instructed in, so they added one.” For me, this is part of the challenge of understanding this text today as it points to our human foibles

making sense of God's "no-strings-attached" sort of love. What did it mean, to the presumed insider outsider in this story, the eunuch, to not only take the theological step to understand and believe that the good news of the Gospel was, just as Isaiah claimed too, good news for him as much as for anyone else? And what does it mean for us, not only to see that love and grace and welcome to be so lavishly poured over the eunuch, but also to come to terms with this interesting verse 37, and what it might say about us today, that some of our forebears in the faith needed to put some boundaries and some rules around who would be in and who would be out! For despite our human interventions, our efforts to re-cast, control, and mold the good news to make it comfortable sometimes for us, God's love through Jesus Christ, truly does abide in ALL of us!

On Thursday, the Milwaukee Film Festival concluded with a documentary film entitled "Your Fat Friend," highlighting the journey of self-acceptance and love for Aubrey Gordon. A self-described "fat person," Gordon's journey began several years ago when she wrote a letter to a friend about how she'd like to be treated as a fat person. Her friends encouraged her to post it online and her anonymous social media handle "Your Fat Friend" gained traction, followers, and praise almost overnight. The documentary film highlights her experience navigating sharing her story online that eventually led to the publishing of her first book in 2020 entitled, "What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat," described as an "explosive indictment of the systemic and cultural bias facing plus-size people."⁴ Her story not only shines a light on the experience of "plus-size" Americans from bias at the doctor's office, to dismissive and disgusted looks on the sidewalk to the awful experience of flying on an airplane - when she describes holding onto her arm across her chest so she wouldn't inadvertently touch the person next to her for fear of upsetting them. She also debunks many of the diet fads out there, advocating for a renewed, embodied sense of self recognizing that for many people in our society embracing our bodies just the way they are can be difficult. And while at the same time, it can also be way too easy to say something like, "she just needs to go on a diet," when looking at someone else. What perhaps was most troubling about Gordon's story was the anonymous and threatening attention she received online with people saying all manner of violent and degrading things including death threats, that culminated in being "doxed" with her name, home address and other private information being shared publicly online. She was afraid for her life all because she had the courage to question the status quo, to push back on a society that had put boundaries around its love and acceptance for her and other people like her. "Who is that sheep that God loves, she might have wondered? What's to prevent me from being loved by God and God's people?" And we all know the answer, right? Nothing!

At the heart of today's text, where it begins and where it ends is the presence and love of God, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, that angel of the Lord, that guides and pushes Philip around, inspires the faith of the eunuch, and I believe, is somewhere at the heart of Aubrey Gordon's courageous story, too. In Acts, it's only God, who could

have brought Philip and the eunuch together in such unusual circumstances on a desert road in the middle of a hot day with a miraculous pool of water appearing, remember it's the desert. And in all of today's stories from the ancient Biblical one to the contemporary story of Aubrey Gordon, the characters, each one of them rise to the occasion, to speak up and speak out for love.

What amazing and miraculous things is God doing in our lives, I wonder? Perhaps there's a pool of water appearing somewhere on our horizon. For despite our desire to sometimes add a verse to the text of our lives, to put some rules or boundaries around God's love, God and the Spirit will keep crashing through, for if anything, these stories show us, that God is determined to love us, despite ourselves, to push us to expand the human borders and boundaries that we create, to consider who we might be more comfortable simply leaving on the outside of our lives, perhaps someone or some thing, of which we're not even aware.

So how will we respond to this great good news? How will we show up for God and for one another? In this season of new beginnings in our life together, as we continue to ask questions about who we are and with whom we are called to share Philip's good news, my hope is that we'll aspire anew to be "all in" on welcoming all, in. For as John so eloquently said, "there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

Described as "a celebration of mutuality and diversity as well as a challenge to the Christian community to live out a ministry of reconciliation and inclusion," today's closing hymn is a contemporary text written by Jane Parker Huber to a classic tune. These words from the third and fourth verses of the hymn, are a beautiful articulation of the challenge of this Biblical story for us today in the context of our changing lives and our changing life together:

Thus new patterns for Christ's mission, in a small and global sense,
help us bear each others' burdens breaking down each wall or fence.
Make us partners in our living, our compassion to increase,
messengers of faith, thus giving hope and confidence and peace.

May it be so! AMEN.

¹ F. Scott Spencer. Commentary on Acts 8:26-40. workingpreacher.org

² Matthew Skinner. Sermon Brainwave #962: Fifth Sunday of Easter – April 28, 2024. workingpreacher.org

³ Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, Homiletical Perspective, p. 457.

⁴ Aubrey Gordon. aubreygordon.net