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Text: Acts 8:26-40
Sermon: Crossroads (Beyond the Scope)
April 28, 2024

Acts 8:26-40

²⁶ Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south^[a] to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹ He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³² 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.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.”

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ 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?”^[b] ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip^[c] baptized him. ³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ 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.

Several years ago a colleague and friend in ministry Ron Byars, wrote a book entitled *Believer on Sunday, Atheist by Thursday*, based on a sermon he heard preached by a pastor friend who declared to his congregation in a sermon ‘I’m a believer on Sunday, but nearly an atheist by Thursday.’ Byars notes that maybe that sounds like a shocking statement to some, but also notes that ‘most of the listening congregation understood him without any requirement of an explanation.’ He continues: ‘This is, for a fact, the experience of many of us. We gather with the congregation on Sunday, and faith feels relatively secure. However subtly, God makes the divine presence known, sufficiently at least to strengthen our trust, our confidence, and reenergize our hope. But when we leave the assembly, we are likely to be on our own.’¹ In order to get the most views, cable news gives us the most sensational and anger inducing stories to keep us watching. And even without the help of for profit media, whatever stability there is in our world feels threatened and coming undone. We may believe on Sunday but by Thursday or even earlier our faith is barely treading water. On top of that, we live in a world where God-talk is reserved for church and the privacy of our religious practice, but the rest of our lives are a mix and muddle of

¹ Ron Byars, *Believer on Sunday, Atheist by Thursday*, 11.

routines, activities, and work in which faith seems absent or irrelevant. Believer on Sunday, atheist or agnostic by Monday and perhaps all the way to Saturday.

Our passage today is in the 8th chapter of Acts, but I want to set the context of Acts by pointing to something that happens in the very first chapter where the risen Christ appears to the disciples before ascending to God and says something that must have come across as very odd. The disciples are raring for the establishment of the new kingdom, they think they have finally reached the culmination, and now Jesus is going to plant his flag and secure a new kingdom, raise an army, and whatever it takes. But instead= Jesus replies that is not for them to know the time or period that Christ's kingdom will come and then says to them look for the Holy Spirit to come upon you and you will be my witnesses, in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:7-8). You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem (why of course, that is the center of faith and the people of Israel), but also farther afield in all Judea, and to Samaria, okay that is our sworn enemy territory, why do they need the gospel, and then to the ends of the earth, that includes people who are not like us at all, people of other nations, ethnicities, cultures, you are telling me that we are witnesses to them, too, and they are worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ and included in God's beloved community and this promised kingdom...and before Jesus can give any further commentary or rebuttal he is lifted out of their sight. These same disciples had heard Jesus tell the 'good Samaritan,' story which means already that good and Samaritan compounded together was some kind of oxymoron because everyone assumed that if you were going to have a Samaritan in your story, they would be the butt of the joke, the evil enemy, the easiest to demonize, but instead, the outsider, the outcast, the impure is the one who does the will of God and acts as a neighbor while the religious folk are too busy wrapped up in their liturgies or temple duties.

Well here we are in Acts chapter 8...beginning with Saul/Paul's persecution of the early Christian community, and then while that is happening, Philip going to Samaria, unclean territory, mixed race people, a lower social caste, and miraculously they want to be part of this community of Jesus followers, and the disciples in Jerusalem come to see for themselves and what they find is the power of God is already at work among these people helping them to see that they are included and as worthy of following Christ and becoming part of the beloved community as anyone. It's like the risen Christ is already one step ahead of Philip and Peter and John and the disciples. Which reminds me of something said by theologian of mission Lesslie Newbigin who observed that when the risen Christ appears to the disciples they are not believers, it is not until after he moves on do they receive the miracle of faith and follow and believe. Faith is not a prerequisite or even something they have in the encounter with Christ, but something that comes later. And so it is for those in every land from Samaria to Gaza (where our passage takes place today), to the very ends of the earth. The people

we thought were outsiders, unchurched, nonbelievers are not only worthy of Christ's life and love, but also become the very people who reflect back to us and help us to believe once again, not only in the power of God, but in community where in NT scholar Richard Hays' words, 'old barriers and conventions fall as the Spirit gathers and shapes a new people.' Two conversions are simultaneously taking place, the inclusion and conversion of Samaritans and others into the Christian community, and the conversion of the existing community to make room for people they were not sure about, but that they could see that the Spirit had already called and given the gift of faith. Philip, Peter, and John are atheists in terms of their default beliefs that the Samaritans are not part of the deal, and the Spirit has to work on them too. Faith would be simpler if it was kind of a one of thing. You see the resurrected Christ on Sunday and that carries you to Thursday and beyond to the finish line...you don't need another thing to guide you...no more conversions, encounters, or transformations later on down the line. But the disciples are not that far away from Easter and already their understanding of who gets to be in the circle of faith is widened. Already they need conversion again. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is far from a one time thing. It keeps happening to them again and again and again as a new community of faith, hope, and love is being built with people they would never picked out of a lineup, people their tribe had taught them to reject, people who they assumed were outside the circle of God's love. But Jesus keeps widening the circle.

Which brings us finally to our scripture lesson today. It is chock full of explosiveness no matter where we turn. I mean, every contentious issue in our world seems to be packed into this passage. Jerusalem and Gaza. Ethiopian Eunuch. The Spirit seems to almost be prodding a resistant Philip to go and build a bridge and form a relationship and connection with this other. A little over a year ago, the American novelist Jonathan Franzen published the first of a trilogy of novels entitled 'Crossroads,' about the breakdown and travails of an American religious family in the 1960s and 1970s with children coming of age during the Vietnam War, the counter culture movement, and the spiritual dryness of a lot of modern life. At times it is a tough read with small moments of grace and goodness scattered here and there. The title of the book is called Crossroads because the patriarch figure in the story is a lover of blues and has a special affinity for Robert Johnson who allegedly sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads in order to play blues the way he did. And every character in the story faces a crossroads that they must navigate in order to move forward in the world.

Well, I imagine this scene in Acts as a crossroads, too. It is one of the first movements of the gospel beyond the boundaries of what was understood to be home territory and comfortably inside the circle. Philip encounters an Ethiopian, who in the world of the author Luke, can be anyone with dark skin, but with usually referred to peoples from regions south of Egypt. And on top of that the crossroads is the location of this story on the road to Gaza from Jerusalem...a crossroads of international conflict that is threatening to divide our country today. Philip encounters a

person of color, in a place of international crisis. And then there is the fact that the Ethiopian is a eunuch, a person who has been castrated so that they can work in the royal court sterilized with no possibility for sexual activity or procreation. In other words, someone of lesser value because they cannot pass on their DNA, they cannot procreate, they cannot contribute any descendants. They won't have children to bring to Vacation Bible School. And at this crossroads, Philip goes up to the eunuch, hears him reading from the prophet Isaiah about the suffering servant, and Philip proclaims to him the gospel of Jesus. And at the crossroads, they came to some water, and the first Gentile convert to Christianity is baptized and marked as Christ's own forever and this crossroads person in a crossroads place in a crossroads event embodies the boundary-crossing nature and circle-widening movement of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Is it ironic that all the issues in our world that threaten to undo us and unravel us all seemed to be packed into this passage, beginning with the specific setting at the crossroads of Israel and Gaza. But that is not all, also here is the crossroads of race and skin color and ethnicity and a clear boundary crossing event that shows no partiality to any of these categories and prioritizes the first Gentile convert to be a person of dark skin. And if that is not enough, here in this passage we also encounter the crossroads of sex and gender identity too, wrapped up into the complicated nature of this eunuch whose identity has been rendered ambiguous. Oh man, I just thought we would jazz up worship with a few musical pieces and a jazz fest atmosphere, I didn't mean for us to have to deal with all this, I just thought we would be spicing worship up a little. Why does Jesus seem to want us to deal with a little more? What responsibilities are we Christians asked to carry at the crossroads? At the crossroads of Israel and Gaza, at the crossroads of race and ethnicity and its caste-like past in our country, at the crossroads of gender and identity questions and transgender care? Do we have to go to such a crossroads or live in such a crossroads? Can't we just pass laws and pick sides and demonize those on the other side of the crossroads and let that be the end of it?

In his theological magnum opus, the 20th century theologian Karl Barth refers to the power of the Holy Spirit as the power within God 'to bring and hold together that which is different,' to hold together disparate elements that would otherwise seem to be irresistibly disruptive and destructive, but the Holy Spirit can bring them into some form of unity in service to Jesus Christ.² You know, we are living in a time where our Jewish siblings have to pass by security personnel and pass through metal detectors in order enter their neighborhood place of worship each week. We live in a world short on empathy for those at the bottom of the social or ethnic heap, including Palestinians. We live in a world where we are called to take responsibility for our racial past, and also acknowledge that gains have been made, but there is still work to

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.2, 761.

do and that we are here to build bridges and work for repair, justice, and reconciliation for our neighbors and for the future of our children. We are living in a time of complex social trends and lots of issues related to gender and sexuality that we do not fully understand, but in David Brooks words in at article on transgender care last week, there is a need for ‘empathy for people on all sides of this issue,’ and an imperative to hold each other together and resist the toxicity of the noise and discussion around these issues.³ I don’t think Philip wanted to live at the crossroads any more than we might, but that is where I think the same Spirit that told Philip to go is also calling the church to go. To go to the crossroads...to take responsibility for every child we baptize and to whom we all made promises to love and support; to go to the crossroads and stand with our Jewish siblings, especially those in our community and beyond, while also hearing the cries of Palestinians for humane treatment and a better future. To go to the crossroads in our community with siblings of color and to focus on ways we can knock down barriers that prevent them from thriving fully as God created them. Church is what happens at the crossroads, holding together that which is disparate and different and risking its own life trying. May we have courage to go to the crossroads and live in the crossroads of our world and serve Jesus Christ there, until his kingdom comes.

³ David Brooks, ‘The Courage to Follow the Evidence on Transgender Care,’ *New York Times* (April 18, 2024).