

sermon-5/10.09 Newport Presbyterian Church
“When the Spirit Trumps the Law”
Acts 8:26-40
By Jim Patten

I am a questioner. That has been true for most of my life. At times I have felt guilty for all my questions and not being able to just accept something as true without seeing all the exceptions or problems with a particular affirmation or article of faith.

Questions can be a copout. Some refuse to take a stand because all of their questions are not answered. Questions can foster doubts that can immobilize us because of the fear we might naively believe something that later turns out to be false.

On the other hand, good, honest questions can lead to very interesting places in our spiritual journey. I emphasize that with our lectionary class on Tuesday mornings. We try to ask questions of the text not worrying if we are being heretical, or disrespectful. Good questions, especially questions that are not easily answered, are gifts to serious Bible study.

Thus, I am drawn to this passage in Acts. It is a text with some great questions. Those questions are surprising, penetrating, and even controversial. Let's see where they lead us today as we enter into this amazing story.

First, we encounter an Ethiopian eunuch on a journey from Jerusalem to his homeland. He is far from home. One scholar said it could take him five months to get there. This journey image is a helpful one. Another commentator said that the eunuch was on a journey in more than one sense. He was on a physical journey to be sure. But he was also on a spiritual journey. He was a believer, maybe even a proselyte to Judaism, who was trying, in the wilderness of his own mind and heart, to make sense of his religion's scriptures. Many of us can relate to journeying in the wilderness of our hearts and minds trying to make sense of the scriptures, hoping they will help us live with integrity and hope.

So, here is this traveler, on what Acts calls a “wilderness road.” Then comes the first question. It is asked by Philip. It is a rather surprising, even odd question. Philip, led by the Spirit, comes alongside this traveler's chariot and asks, “Do you understand what you are reading?” That is not the first question that would jump to my mind if I were to encounter a stranger reading a book. I might, if I was bold, ask, “What are you reading? Is it any good?”

But Philip jumps right into a very personal question and it works. It ends up opening up a discussion and a relationship with this stranger. In order for that to happen, we must note, the stranger has to be open and even humble enough to admit he does not understand what he is reading.

Barbara Brown Taylor points to just how hospitable is this Ethiopian eunuch. He is a wealthy man with a position of power in his country. It would be like a modern day diplomat from a foreign country riding around Washington, D.C. in his late model Lexus deciding to pick up a street corner preacher in a bad part of town. We must not underestimate the hospitality and openness of this Ethiopian stranger.

He also asks good questions. We come now to the second question in this text. This is the penetrating one. The Ethiopian asks Philip to whom is the prophet Isaiah referring to when he writes, "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter. . .In his humiliation justice was denied him. . ." The commonly accepted interpretation of this text in that day was that Isaiah was referring to some prophet, or to the nation Israel personified.

The Ethiopian eunuch did not buy that common interpretation. These words of Isaiah were percolating in his mind and heart. Some scholars say he might be thinking that Isaiah was referring to people like him, the ostracized stranger because of his sexual situation as a eunuch. He had been shorn, in a manner of speaking, humiliated. Justice was denied him. He had no possibility of fathering any children, thus leaving him no possibility of living on through his descendants. This was one of the worst situations a person in that culture could imagine.

It was a great question. Because he did not just accept commonly accepted interpretations, he was able to hear a new interpretation of this text. Philip says, in essence, "Let me tell you about a man who fit the description Isaiah was writing about." Philip goes on to tell him about Jesus, another ostracized man, denied justice, and left to die without any children to live on after him. This Jesus showed us the depths of God's love and grace and offered us salvation, offered a way home in the wilderness we all travel.

The Ethiopian eunuch must have identified with Jesus. Here was a man who understood his situation. Here was a man who opened up new possibilities for living in this life and even in the life to come. He decides he wants to be a disciple of this man called Jesus.

Then comes the controversial question. "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" The obvious answer to that question was, "Are you kidding me? There is a whole lot to prevent you from being baptized, from being fully a part of any Jewish faith community. Remember, that is what Christianity was at first, a Jewish sect.

Scripture, God's Word, says very clearly a eunuch was to be excluded from the Temple. Listen to Deuteronomy 23:1, "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord." You can't get any more blunt or clearer than that. Leviticus, chapter 21, puts it even more bluntly. Go back and read verses 17-21 sometime. I'll spare you the details today.

Remember, this is holy scripture. This was considered God's Word, not only by Jews, but also by Christians. But scripture also had a counter message. In Isaiah 56, the prophet says when God's Kingdom is fully realized, even eunuchs will be accepted as

full participants in God's assembly. Apparently scripture did not agree with itself. Which perspective was true, was God's desire? Was the eunuch in or out?

At this point Philip makes a decision. Acts makes it clear Philip was being led by the Spirit in his interactions with the eunuch. As commentators remind us, Philip was a man who knew the scriptures, but he was also a man touched by God's Spirit. Philip says to this ostracized man, there is absolutely nothing to prevent you from being baptized, from being fully included in God's new community. Let's do it now.

Tom Long captures the significance of this moment. He writes, "Walls of prejudice and prohibition that had stood for generations came tumbling, blown down by the breath of God's Holy Spirit, and another man who felt lost and humiliated was found and restored in the wideness of God's grace in Jesus Christ."

This text is extremely important. It is telling us, as another commentator affirms, that God is not only a law-maker, God is also a law-bender or law-transcender. Sometimes grace, freedom, and a hospitable, welcoming Spirit trumps strict adherence to the law.

This is difficult because it is so much easier to have hard and fast rules to follow. It is hard because it puts a huge burden on faithful interpretation of the scriptures. In fact, as the New Interpreter's Bible commentary says, "Luke's emphasis is less on the authority of Scripture than on the authority of the interpreter of Scripture."

How would this affect discussions in the Presbyterian Church today on tough issues like homosexuality, or various other theological doctrines? Dare we trust where the Spirit is leading us today? What criteria would we use to give authority to one interpretation over another? Where is God's Spirit bending or transcending literal interpretations of the scriptures?

We do know that if we take the book of Acts seriously we will see that it moves from one great act of inclusion to another. We see the hated Samaritans being brought into the Church. We see a representative of the occupying power, a Roman centurion, being included. We see the Church's greatest enemy, Saul, being included as his name is changed to Paul. And, in this passage, we see sexual identity ceasing to be an issue for inclusion.

God's grace and hospitality are far larger than we can imagine. It is when we ask good questions that some of the depths of God's love become clear. May we all dare to ask surprising, penetrating and even controversial questions. Who knows where the Spirit might take us in trying to answer those questions? Amen