

## **THE UNLIKELY RECRUIT**

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Feb. 6, 2019  
based on Acts 8:26–40***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “The Way Forward—What God Says to the Church on Human Sexuality.” The series is leading up to a special General Conference at the end of this month when the United Methodist Church will consider and possibly change the church’s current stance on human sexuality. At the heart of the lively debate that is currently taking place in our denomination there is the question as to what place LGBT people find in the United Methodist Church. With the present church rules, that place is somewhat restricted. There are no gay weddings allowed in a United Methodist Church. There cannot be a pastor who is, in the words of our Discipline, a “self-avowed practicing homosexual.” LGBT people are welcome in the United Methodist Church, but the practice of their sexuality is not, at least according to our official rules. Those rules are all on the table for the Conference that starts in twenty days. The question is just how welcoming and affirming the church should be. We will pursue that question this morning by examining one of the most intriguing stories from the book of Acts. {prayer}

Our Scripture story this morning was about the Ethiopian eunuch, and to understand the story, you have to understand something about eunuchs.

In the ancient near east, kings were in the pattern of having large harems. They also had many servants and government officials who spent a good deal of time in the palace. This created a potential problem—that the king’s officers might start messing around with the king’s harem. The solution to this was the eunuch.

A eunuch was a male who was castrated as a boy and thus destined to serve in a palace in the vicinity of the king’s harem. The surgical procedure eliminated (or very sharply reduced) the sex drive and also eliminated hormones which resulted in multiple other consequences as the boys matured. Eunuchs tended to have a more slender frame, no beard, and a voice that never got low; they were considered in the ancient world to be a kind of mix of male and female traits. But because eunuchs were then placed in the royal court, they often became quite powerful and influential, since they had the ear of the king or queen.

Eunuchs were broadly used in ancient near eastern kingdoms. We have records of eunuchs going all the way back to ancient Sumer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century B.C. But among the people of Israel, the whole practice was considered detestable, and there was a religious law against it. Deuteronomy 23:1 states, “No one whose testicles have been crushed shall enter the assembly of the Lord.” This verse does not find its way into many sermons. (Now you know that I will preach about anything.) But you have to know about this in order to understand what is happening in the story in Acts.

The book of Acts tells us, “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.” (Acts 8:27–28) The queen of the Ethiopians was not named Candace. Candace is a rendering of the Greek word, Κανδάκη *Kandake*, which was the official title of the queen of Ethiopia. This eunuch was obviously quite powerful, as he was in charge of her entire treasury.

At the same time, he was a man of faith. The passage says that he had come to Jerusalem to worship. He was obviously a Gentile, since there were no Jewish eunuchs; but he was clearly attracted to the faith of Israel. He was thus part of a number of people at the time who were known as God-fearers. These were people of the Gentile world who were attracted by Biblical faith and who often participated in synagogue worship but had not officially become Jews. This man, however, would have been uniquely unwelcome in Jerusalem. Because he was a eunuch, he was forever banned from the temple. If he came to worship, it was to participate in festivals outside the temple or to visit other holy sites. It is notable that he persisted in his faith and his spiritual quest even in the face of that lack of welcome. His spiritual interest is illustrated in the fact that he was reading the book of Isaiah while he was traveling in his chariot.

Meanwhile, the book of Acts tells us that an angel instructed Philip to go intercept this chariot on the road. [*Then 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 . . . go over to that chariot and join it. Acts 8:26, 29*] This Philip is not the Philip who was a disciple but an early church member who became very involved in church leadership and is now known as Philip the Evangelist. What he was asked to do here was extraordinary.

Just picture for a moment the guy in the chariot. He is African, so if you are a typical Jew in Galilee or Judea, he is of a different race. He is a Gentile, so he is not your religion. He works for a foreign government, so he is not a fellow citizen. And he is a eunuch. He is the closest thing in the New Testament to a transgendered person. His sexuality has been surgically altered. If you were a pious Jew from ancient Palestine, you would likely stay as far away from that chariot as you possibly could.

Philip is told to run the chariot down. He literally runs to catch the chariot [*Philip ran to the chariot Acts 8:30*] Presumably the horse was going at a walk at this point or at most a slow trot. Then, upon invitation, he gets in the chariot. [*The eunuch invited Philip to get in and sit beside him Acts 8:31*] Keep in mind that chariots were not very big. To get in means that he’s going to be snuggled right up next to this eunuch. Philip does not hesitate; he gets in and begins to explain to the man, who had questions about what he had been reading from Isaiah, what it all meant; it was a passage about the suffering servant which was fulfilled when Jesus offered his life on the cross. So, the book of Acts says, “Philip proclaimed to the eunuch the good news about Jesus.” (Acts 8:35)

The eunuch comes to faith in Christ, and as they pass some water he says, “Look! Here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:37) Well, let me point out what would keep him from being baptized. There is a law in the Old Testament in the book of Deuteronomy which says that eunuchs are now allowed in the assembly of the faithful. Baptism is initiation into the church; it is welcome into the assembly of the faithful. So based on the Bible, it appears that this eunuch should not be baptized and welcomed into the church.

But he is baptized with full welcome by Philip, under God’s instruction. [*Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, then Philip baptized him. Acts 8:38*] There may have been a law in the Old Testament saying to keep such a man out; but the Holy Spirit told Philip—bring this man in. Indeed this was not only a case of welcoming the man in; it was a case of seeking him out, chasing after him, leaping into his chariot, teaching and preaching in what is one of the most aggressive instances of evangelism in the entire New Testament, which is why Philip has subsequently been called, Philip the Evangelist.

This story brings us an enormous message for today. If we think that the Bible is telling us that certain people are not to be fully welcomed into the church, this story tells us to think anew. Every possible barrier—race, religious background, nationality, and sexuality—is overcome in this encounter. As Philip reaches to this man, it is clear that God wants us to reach to everyone with the grace of Jesus Christ.

Laws in the Bible which appear to restrict God’s welcome always have a particular historical context and an understandable function in that context. The law in Deuteronomy 23 was designed to keep the people of Israel from engaging in the practice of making people into eunuchs in the first place. The kings of Israel did have harems. King Solomon was said to have had 700 wives and 300 concubines; obviously he was at a point where they just used round numbers. But there were no eunuchs in his court. Clearly, the law in Deuteronomy was successful. In other cultures, the many boys who were made into eunuchs had no choice in the matter. They were painfully forced into that destiny. But the Deuteronomy law prevented that injustice from unfolding in Israel.

In the book of Acts, however, there is an entirely different question. There was not a question of whether or not people ought to be eunuchs. There were people who were eunuchs all over the ancient world; their particular sexuality was a given. The question for the church was how these people should be treated. The Spirit of God gave the answer early in the book of Acts. The law from Deuteronomy did not apply. In Christ all barriers are overcome, and there is no longer any placing of people into different categories. As Paul would later put it, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28)

This is something that we powerfully declare in Communion. All are invited to the table; there is no distinction, as we all share together in the same body and blood of Christ.

And we are all invited, like Philip, to reach to the world with good news and boundless love of Jesus Christ.