

050221 - "Someone to Guide Me"

This morning, we hear Jesus say to the disciples that a vine and its branches require a lot of attention. Part of that attention is pruning. *"I am the vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that does not bear fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit."*

Even though I grew up surrounded by gardens and have pruned many a bush and tree, I don't know much about pruning. But I do know about my Wild White Rose bush outside my living room window. It is a raging thicket of intertwined thorn-bearing tendrils. I didn't prune it last year, and so I had to wait until this past week to prune it. The chickadees like to build their winter nests in it, so I have to leave it alone until they leave. And so last week, I savagely pruned the thing.

It turns out that the wild rose bush is considered a pernicious weed in Maine and most web entries about it tell you how best to get rid of the entire bush. But when I have pruned it in the past, it produces a beautiful cloud of white flowers for a few weeks that feed bird and bee alike. So I keep it for them.

What is being pruned in our story from Acts today?

The story begins with Philip being told by an angel to leave Jerusalem by way of the wilderness road. Philip's encounter with the angel leads him away and into the wilderness. For any good Jew, Jerusalem is always the center of the world. Philip is being led away from the center of the world. And in the ancient world, the wilderness road, no matter out of what town, is always an invitation to the unknown, the dangerous, and the chaotic. That is what wilderness means in the ancient world.

Very quickly on the road, Philip comes upon a chariot. The angel tells him to go to the chariot, which carries *"an Ethiopian Eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Eithiopians, in charge of her entire treasury."*

When he reaches the chariot, Philip sees he is reading the Scriptures. Philip asks, *"Do you know the meaning of what you are reading?"* The Eunuch says, *"How can I know if I do not have someone to guide me?"*

What guides us? Who guides us? We think we know the answer, but so many situations cloud the answer to that question, and the answer isn't always what we think.

What guides Philip?

What do we know about Philip?

We know Philip is from Bethsaida. Bethsaida is like the Bible Belt of Israel. And we know that Philip is friends with Nathaniel. Nathaniel is very likely a well-learned and well-read rabbi of the day. It is Philip who introduced Jesus to Nathaniel. When Nathaniel and Philip were children, one of the ways children were trained into the Scriptures was by memorizing all five books of the Torah - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. By age 12, a young boy from Bethsaida should have been able to recite all those books. Both Philip and Nathaniel knew their Scriptures very well.

So when Philip comes upon the Eunuch, it is like a pastor sitting next to someone on an airplane who is reading theology. Philip has no choice but to find out what the Eunuch is reading. How much more fortunate that Philip gets to teach someone who is just learning the Scriptures. Pastors wait for moments like this. Even better if an angel has told you to do it.

Philip and the Eunuch have a conversation about Isaiah 53. Philip is guided by two things in his life now - his training in the Torah and his experience with the Risen Christ. Philip teaches the Eunuch all about how the Torah and the Prophets lead to Jesus Christ and the Way, as it was called in this time.

The Eunuch is so excited that he asks, *“What is to prevent me from being baptized right now?”* This is such a great question, because for Philip, there is a lot that prevents the Eunuch from being baptized.

For one, the Torah prevents Eunuchs from participating in temple worship. Deuteronomy 23:1 says, *“No one whose testicles are crushed and whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.”* Let’s all just take a deep breath here. I bet you didn’t know that was in here.

This is the primary meaning of a Eunuch, though. A man who cannot reproduce or who does not have the capacity, either by injury or by birth or by will, to bear children. Eunuchs in the ancient world made for excellent guardians of the empire, since there was no threat of heirs challenging the throne, no threat of marrying into the family, and no threat of all the outcomes of sexual liaisons. Being a Eunuch often meant loyalty, and they were considered to be ‘boundary-crossers’ - existing in a liminal space between man and woman, or neither. Leviticus and Deuteronomy do not like creatures or actions that cross boundaries.

Philip faces his first big Jesus test in this moment, then. What will he rely on? Scripture? The Bible? Because if he answers, Yes to Deuteronomy 23:1, then that is precisely what keeps the Ethiopian Eunuch from being baptized.

Let's see what happens, shall we?

Philip is pushed into a conundrum here. The very Bible that points directly to Jesus, which Philip has just explained to the Ethiopian Eunuch, is the same Bible that prevents the Eunuch from being baptized, of being allowed into the fellowship of the Lord. At some point, Philip would have also heard Jesus directly contradict Deuteronomy 23:1. Check out what Jesus says in Matthew 19:11-12: *"Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can."*

How long does it take for a culture to accept what Jesus had to say? My teacher, Dr. Len Sweet, says that the timeline for some of Jesus' teachings has a very long arc before they are understood. Take for instance slavery. As a cultural practice, it took at least until the year 400, when St. Patrick ended slavery in Ireland, for Jesus' anti-slavery message to take hold. It took another 1300 years for England to understand the Biblical vision of freedom from slavery. It took another 150 years and a civil war for America to take it seriously. We are still working it out in many ways.

But here, I think, Jesus gives us another long-term teaching to think about. Eunuchs, as I said, are boundary-crossers. Most were either born that way, or were made that way by circumstance. They shared many characteristics with what we call today transgender or non-binary people. Let those who can accept this, do so. Maybe now is the time to hear Jesus' teaching on this one, too.

I hope at this point, you are hearing some parallels to some of our challenges in the church and society today, especially surrounding LGBTQI concerns. I hope you are hearing parallels to the concerns surrounding transgender people in our society. I think it is of exceptional importance that Jesus points out that some Eunuchs are, as Lady Gaga says, *born this way*. Some are made to be that way by other ways as well. To Jesus, it doesn't really matter. All of them are for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Who they are, who they, as we say today, identify as, has no bearing whatsoever on their participation in the Kingdom of God. I am the wrong person to ask why gender and

LGBTQI issues are so high on the list of concerns for Christians today, because it has never been a concern in my mind. I am convinced that if Jesus were with us today, he would be surrounded by a cloud of rainbow flags. Jesus is always surrounded by the most excluded in the culture. While there isn't a direct one-to-one correlation between Eunuchs and transgender people, there are large areas of cross-over in how Eunuchs were perceived by the people of the day and the perceptions out there today of transgender and non-binary people.

The question for our reading today was, "What or who guides us?" The question is as important today as it was for Philip and the Eunuch so many years ago. For the Ethiopian Eunuch, Philip is the guide.

What or who will guide Philip?

What or who will guide us?

Maybe Philip will remember conversations with the disciple who wrote the Gospel of John. (Remember, Scripture for Philip would have been the Torah and the Prophets). What did John say about God? In John's first letter, he said, "*So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.*"

What guides Philip and John and all the disciples? The answer can't be Scripture, at least it can't be for Philip, because Philip does exactly the opposite of Scripture by baptizing the Ethiopian Eunuch. Perhaps, then, Scripture isn't a guide book. Maybe, and this seems much more inspired to me, maybe Scripture is the story of who guides us and how people throughout history were guided by God.

Philip, in this moment, is faced with a difficult situation. Does he use his past training as a guide, his deep knowledge of Torah, or does he use Jesus as a guide?

While I was pruning the wild rose bush, I would have to look at a long branch and find out where it joined one of the many other branches and then decide how far back I wanted to go to cut it off. This is easy with a plum tree or a lilac bush or a weigela. But with a wild rose bush, it is a maze of tangled branches. Our theologies, our experiences, our ideologies, our need for community are all like this maze of tangled branches. Sometimes, pruning back those branches can seem to be an assault on our identity, just as the judgments laid against Eunuchs in the past and our transgendered kindred is an assault upon their identity.

Philip is being pruned of his prior theology, his prior training, his understanding of what he thought guided him in and to this moment. It is a deciding moment, because once he decides that Jesus is his guide, he is choosing to allow the person of Jesus to guide him in what is meaningful rather than anything he reads in the Torah.

Philip does indeed choose Jesus as his guide, and he used Scripture to do it. Philip chooses love, chooses people, chooses, if you will, human rights against what the text that defined his identity to this point said. Can you see how this is a story of Philip being changed as much as it is a story about a boundary-crossing outsider being baptized into the fellowship of Christ?

The question the Ethiopian Eunuch asks, "*What is to keep me from being baptized?*" is more easily answered with "*Us*", rather than who someone is, or what they have done. Only Philip would have kept the Eunuch from being baptized, and Philip would have had all the justifications he needed from his tradition, from his Holy Book, from his training. He could have come back to Jerusalem with his head held high.

And all the disciples would know what guided him.

Who will guide us? What will guide us?

Let those who can accept this, do so.

Amen!