

May 7, 2017 – Easter 4

“*Bearing Witness: What is Stopping You From Being Baptized?*” © - Rev. Seth Jones

Scripture: Acts 8:26-39

Now that the Resurrection has taken place, the disciples are called to ‘bear witness’ to the experience of the Risen Christ in the world, beyond their community, and into the future. The Book of Acts is an accounting of what it looks like to be guided by the Holy Spirit into bearing witness to the Risen Christ. I have a working definition of what it means to ‘bear witness’: *With the community of faith, **bearing witness** is the act of interpreting the world and our experience through our participation in the life of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit to and for others.* This is my own definition and it is an open definition. For now, though, notice that we are in the midst of this relationship with God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. We are a community that seeks to understand our relationship and experience with Christ in the world through a Resurrection mindset,

to see the world as always and everywhere carrying the potential encounter with the Risen Lord. We – meaning all of us together – are an ‘*interpretive*’ community.

How does an *interpretive community* work, though? The words are inspiring, but what do they *do*? One way to talk about this is what I call ***The Trinity of Illumination***. Illumination is the word the ancient church used, and the Orthodox church still uses, for what happens to our souls and being as we deepen our relationship with Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our story today of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch provides the perfect example for highlighting this Trinity of Illumination.

Before we get into the example, understand that the Book of Acts is this swirling, always changing, fluid dynamic of the Holy Spirit working out the Resurrection and its meaning for the world through the disciples, and therefore us. It is messy. The Book of Acts is not big on doctrine. Instead, Acts provides touchstones that confirm the

Resurrection of Jesus Christ and how that Resurrection empowers those who would follow Jesus.

I tell you this because this is how the Trinity of Illumination works. It is not a set of rules, and nor is it a checklist of doctrines. Rather, the Trinity of Illumination is a circulating experience of the community of faith that pulls people in from the world and sends people out into the world. The Trinity of Illumination is how we become that interpretive community of witnesses of the Resurrected Christ.

The Trinity of Illumination is made up of three points in a circle, or spiral, of community experience. The first point is called **Interest**. The second point is called **Deepening**. And the third point is called **Immersion**.

The first point, **Interest**, is seen in Acts 8:26-30. What draws Philip and the Eunuch together? Isn't it a mutual interest? The mutual interest is clearly inspired by the angel, the messenger of God. The angel is interested in the Ethiopian Eunuch, and calls Philip out of the new community of faith in Jerusalem to go find him on the dangerous road between Jerusalem and Gaza. The Ethiopian Eunuch is interested in Scripture. When Philip meets the Eunuch, they begin a conversation based on a mutual interest in Scripture.

There is a lot of talking in the Book of Acts, a lot of conversation. Here, there is also a conversation with and about Scripture. I believe it is useful to think of reading Scripture as a sort of conversation with God. In other words, we can only interpret Scripture when we read Scripture. In order to interpret, we must be in conversation with God and with others. This is why Philip asks the Eunuch, "*Do you understand what you are reading?*"

The Eunuch answers, "*How can I understand it, interpret it, if no one will help me and teach me?*" And this is where the mutual interest blossoms between Philip and the Eunuch.

Notice another thing about the interests of the angel, God's messenger. Philip isn't sent to just some person. He is sent to the Ethiopian Eunuch, who is also the

treasurer for the Candace, the Queen of Ethiopia. Eunuchs are interesting people in the ancient world.

They are boundary-crossers and inhabit unusual positions in kingdoms. Often, in the ancient world, royal sons who were considered to be a threat to the future of the kingdom were castrated so they could not reproduce and lay claim to the throne. These victims of the violence of empires were then given positions of partial power and control within the kingdom. They were set up as treasurers, like our Eunuch today, or guards of the throne, or as guardians of harems.

Jesus also gives us some insight to the different kinds of Eunuchs. In Matthew 19:12, Jesus says, *“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.”* In other words, there are eunuchs who are born that way – some birth defect or disease prevents them from having children. Then there are eunuchs who are made that way by others – they are victims of violence which prevents them from having children.

And then there are eunuchs who choose to be that way – those who choose celibacy, essentially, or are asexual. You can see some of the parallels in these ways of being a Eunuch that resonate with our discussions of gender and sexuality in our culture today.

So this is who the angel is interested in, and this is the person with whom Philip develops a mutual interest in Scripture. We don't know which category of Eunuch our Ethiopian is, but does it really matter? He is different, very different, an outsider no matter where he is.

Our Eunuch is also an Ethiopian. In Acts 1:8, the Resurrected Jesus says to the disciples, *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* When Jesus says ‘the ends of the earth’ he means a lot of things, but he also means places like Tarsus, which was at the edge of Spain, or places like Asia and

Mongolia, where the Wise Ones of Jesus' birth may have come from. The ends of the earth is 'the edges of the known world'. These were mystical, fantastic places in the ancient world.

We can't really conceive of places like this anymore. In Jesus' time, though, Ethiopia was one of those 'ends of the earth' places – a world of mysterious, beautiful, black people of glittering kingdoms, strange music and stories, and unusual creatures of land and sea.

I have spent so much time with this first point in our Trinity of Illumination because I want us to see that the Holy Spirit is interested in that which is *not like us*. Interest is easy when the people are like us; but that is not where we are sent. We are sent, like Philip, to long, lonely, sometimes dangerous roads to meet unusual, strange people so we can share a mutual interest with one another.

In verses 31-35, we see an example of the second point in our Trinity of Illumination – **deepening**. Now that a mutual interest has been established, we gain understanding and wisdom through discussion and conversation about those interests. We deepen the relationship by figuring out how to interpret what we have read in Scripture, what we have experienced in the world, together. We try to answer, *What does this mean?* by way of this deepening.

Notice that for Philip there is no concern about who this man is. Our interest is motivated by a Spirit-driven curiosity. "*What are you reading? How do you understand what you are reading?*" And the Eunuch is open to learning, to understanding, to being taught. Both Philip and the Eunuch will come away from this deepened relationship changed.

There is no doctrinal expectation here, no list of requirements, no threat of damnation, no 12 steps, no '40 days to becoming a better you' here. There is only a deepening relationship that builds on a mutual interest.

A community of mutual interest and deepening relationship can be a daunting thing to face. People are weird and they act strange when they become long-standing

groups. This is natural to think this way. But once Jesus has gotten hold of us, our minds and hearts become illuminated by greater possibilities and more glorious outlooks than the common behavior we attribute to groups of people who do weird things together.

Jesus sends us into a stream of followers who are all walking upstream, against the current, pushed into a higher regard for friend and enemy, earth and spirit, alike.

When the flame ignites, we want to be involved. We want to immerse ourselves in this swirling, dynamic, flowing faith thing. And that brings us to the third point in our Trinity of Illumination – **immersion**. This is expressed in verse 36, when the Eunuch says to Philip, “*Look! Here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?*” What, indeed, prevents us from immersing ourselves in the great work of bearing witness to the Resurrected Christ?

When we think of our baptism as a single event that has reverberations, echoes, and resonances throughout our lives, we see that whenever we are brought together as followers of Jesus, we are immersing ourselves in the continually deepening relationships of our shared mutual interests. We reenact our baptism whenever we are engaging in the Trinity of Illumination. And so, the Ethiopian Eunuch allows himself to be baptized in the waters of Christ.

In doing so, the Eunuch becomes like Philip and like us. He becomes with us, as 2 Peter 1:4 says, “*participants in the Divine nature*”. In other words, the Eunuch becomes, like us, a participant in the Trinity, the great, spiraling dance of love between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Or to put it even more simply, the Eunuch, like Philip and like us, becomes like Christ.

This Trinity of Illumination – interest, deepening, and immersion - creates a powerful field, an empowered community. By inspiring interest, this Trinity draws in people of all sorts – different colors, backgrounds, understandings, ages, preferences. I think of it a little like a great, spiral galaxy that draws, by its gravity of love and hope, stars and unusual objects of deep space into its field. The spiraling field of interest

allows for us to deepen those relationships of mutual interest through deep conversation and deep interpretation of our shared experience. This deep interpretation and shared community experience then immerses us into the greater and deeper wisdom of the life of the community.

We do this with sacraments – baptism, which is the entrance into the Trinitarian community, and communion, which is the defining practice of the Trinitarian community where we partake in the divine nature, as Peter says.

Like the waves of a great sea, or the currents of the wind across a globe, this cycle of *interest, deepening, and immersion* goes on and on. This is the dynamic of the faith. In the same way Philip is drawn from the immersed community to follow an interest and deepen a relationship, the Ethiopian Eunuch, after his crash course in the Trinity of Illumination, does the same thing. The Holy Spirit calls the Eunuch out of the immersed, baptized community of faith to return to his home in Ethiopia. There, he brings thousands into the faith, which is the start of the Ethiopian Church, one of the very oldest expressions of the faith in the world. The disciple creates a new disciple from the very ends of the earth and that disciple is sent to the ends of the earth to create interest, deepen relationships, and immerse himself and them in a continually renewing relationship with the Resurrected Lord.

This cycle, this Trinity of Illumination, is how we bear witness to God even now. And it all begins with questions.

Questions of interest: *Do you understand this?* Questions of deepening: *Can you teach me?*

Questions of immersion: *What stops me from being baptized?*

It is at once ancient, millennia old, and at the same time very present, today, here.

What is stopping us?

Amen.