

Sermon for April 29, 2018 (Easter5B) “Sweet Chariot”
(Based on Acts 8:26-40 and John 15:1-8)

Have you ever tried to blend in with the in crowd, and found it a bigger challenge than you expected? I was one year out of high school, terrible at volleyball, nervous at parties, and not remotely cool on the dance floor. But there was going to be this big conference, of Christian college students from several traditions and several states, and I really wanted to go—to see how other people my age were growing into their faith in all kinds of other communities, to listen and learn from them and the conference leaders, to sing and pray and worship together.

But how do you start up conversations at a thing like that? I wanted a cool gimmick, something to break the ice. Perhaps the topic of favorite Bible verses might come up. I had one ready that was unusual, to say the least, and it might be good for a laugh: a bit from Leviticus 21 that included the lines, “neither a hunchback nor a dwarf nor a man with crushed...umm, reproductive bits...shall approach the altar of the Lord.” To my 20-year-old self, this seemed very amusing indeed, and the inclusion of hunchbacks and dwarves in the same Bible verse really increased the comic effect. Fortunately for everyone at the conference, though, the topic of favorite Bible verses never came up...and the best part was, in that gathering, nobody cared that I couldn't play volleyball or dance well. We were there to explore grace, forgiveness, our experience of faith, and the power of God's love.

The verse was no laughing matter to the man in the chariot, travelling in style between Jerusalem and Gaza. He was good at volleyball, brilliant at parties, and familiar with all the latest dances. Better than that, he could read, and in more than one language. When you work for the Can-da-kee, the Queen of Ethiopia, you'd better have some pretty serious skills—especially when you're in charge of her entire treasury. And he'd paid dearly for the privilege. He'd likely been groomed for the job since childhood, and one of the requirements of working in the Queen's court was castration—so that there'd be no risk of court workers messing with the royal family line. A court worker was the only thing, from then on, this damaged person could be.

So this eunuch had a lot of resources at his disposal—enough so that he could plan the occasional trip from Ethiopia to Jerusalem, a distance of at least a thousand miles, to worship with other people who followed the ways of the Jews. (He followed Jewish ways, and embraced the teachings of the tradition, even though he was kept from the altar—or even

from entering the temple. That Bible verse my younger self thought was so funny? It was part of a whole set of laws that made eunuchs unclean.) Because he was missing the equipment that proved his full Jewishness, he fell outside all the recognized categories of folks who could participate in the full life of the Jewish community. Instead, he was considered a “God-fearer,” a person who believed the teachings and followed Jewish rules as best he could, knowing he'd never be accepted or let in.

Now he's travelling home, making the miles pass by reading scripture in his chariot. He's got a scroll of the prophet Isaiah with him—only the most wealthy owned scrolls. Maybe it's a dog-eared personal copy, worn from loving use. Maybe it's a cherished souvenir of his trip to Jerusalem. And he's reading it the way people did—out loud—just as he rolls past Philip, a lowly pedestrian. Philip is an apostle, and he has his own reasons for leaving Jerusalem—because the authorities are cracking down on Jesus' followers. He knows Jesus said to spread the Good News to the ends of the earth, and now seems like a pretty good time to head out.

If this was just a story about two people, the chariot might have kept rolling. But when the Spirit of God shows up, when the Holy Power of Love steps into the middle of your road, it tends to mess with the simple storylines. And so Philip, scared, hunted, exhausted, utterly traumatized by the powers of the Empire, sees a chariot coming towards him, and God says, “go up to it.” In fact, the Spirit of God says, “go over to that chariot and JOIN it.” And you know what Philip does? He doesn't deliberate. He doesn't hesitate. He runs. He runs right up to the chariot, to the elegant, powerful man sitting in it, and hears him reading aloud from the prophet Isaiah. And Philip asks him, “do you understand what you're reading?” And the eunuch says, “how can I, unless someone guides me?” Because it was the same then as it is now-- the Bible is complicated. It's full of symbols and metaphors that made total sense to the people who first told the stories and wrote them down, but the meaning can get lost outside that community of shared culture and experience. It has never been meant to be read in isolation.

The Eunuch had been kept out of that community. He couldn't enter the temple to hear the rabbis debate and explain the meanings. So when Philip showed up, hand offered to share that Bible study, the eunuch said, “hop in, sit beside me.” Philip was like the best hitchhiker ever. And the passage they read—Isaiah 53—was about one led like sheep led to the slaughter, humiliated, denied justice, denied the joy of future generations. Sit yourself in

that chariot with them. Imagine being that mutilated man, in charge of so much, but chained to his job, denied a family, denied a community of faith that accepts him, with no hope of ever being welcomed in. What did that passage of scripture stir up in him?

“The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 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?” ”

They were only a community of two—well, if you count God's Spirit, three—but it was a start—a powerful one. Because, after all those years of pain and torment, of suffering the effects of others' violence, after leaving Jerusalem behind and wondering how he could ever be a part of something wonderful and welcoming and full of grace, Philip saw the light. (I'll get to the eunuch in a minute.) Philip saw that Jesus could live in him, that this Good News of his life and teaching and resurrection really was death-defying, and that he could carry the banner of that message out onto every dusty road, in every direction, unafraid and unshamed.

Some people call this story, “the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch,” but Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber suggests it was bigger than that:

...It was perhaps even a mutual conversion. Maybe because they simply asked each other questions in the desert. The only imperatives came from the Holy Spirit. Phillip and the Eunuch only asked each other questions. The only commands came from God and the command was go and join. Go and join the other. What we don't know is if the Spirit also gave the Eunuch a command to invite. Invite this nice Jewish boy – representative of all that clings to the law and rejects you from God's house. Invite him to sit by you. Go...join... invite...ask questions.

(<https://queermergent.wordpress.com/2009/06/08/sermon-on-phillip-and-the-ethiopian-eunuch/>)

“What is to prevent me from being baptized?” The eunuch asks Philip. And they both knew—there was plenty. This foreigner, neither man nor woman but outside every acceptable category, who served the wrong ruler and travelled home in the wrong direction, stopped his chariot and asked Philip a hard and heartbreaking question. And Philip's heart broke wide open, open wide enough for the love of Jesus to burst all the bonds of culture and race and sexuality and politics and even religion that restrained him. And—through this

Ethiopian Eunuch—the Good News of extravagant welcome rolled on into the wider world.

*--Preached by Rev. Holly Morrison, pastor
Phippsburg Congregational Church, UCC
Phippsburg, Maine*