

Text: Acts 8: 26-40
Title: Coming Alongside
Date: 05.07.17
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Fred Rogers, of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, was invited to address the National Press Club in Washington D.C. This is a politically powerful, socially influential, and self-confident gathering. Given that they typically host leading thinkers on issues of national and international import some joked that with Mr. Rogers on the podium they were in for a "lite lunch."

However, when Fred Rogers began to speak he took out a pocket watch and announced that he was going to keep two minutes of silence. Then he invited everyone in the room to think of people in their past ~ parents, teachers, coaches, friends ~ who helped make their accomplishments possible.

Mr. Rogers stood there, barely glancing at his watch, letting the silence fill the room.

Two minutes of silence can tick by slowly. The room was quiet, still, breathless....

But, before Fred Rogers tucked away his watch, you could hear people sniffing.

You could see people blinking away the mist. As people remembered those who came alongside, sacrificed, loved, and shaped them many were moved to tears.

Tom Long (a preacher to preachers) reflects on that experience:

If those of us who find meaning and comfort in the Christian faith were to take two minutes to reflect on how our faith came to be, few of us would say that we got it from a book, and none of us would say that we thought it up on our own. Quickly or gradually, we would begin to remember the people who spoke to us about God.... The faith we have, whether large or small, whether born of struggle or comfort, whether richly textured or barely patched together, whether grasped firmly or held onto by our fingernails, (that faith) is a part of our lives because somebody along the way had the courage and the conviction to talk to us about God and about Jesus Christ.

(Story and quote from "Testimony" by Tom Long)

Who came alongside you?
Who helped nurture in you a longing for God?
Who walked with you through darkness and light?
Who wrestled with you in faith and fear?
Who pointed to the mystery of God in Christ?
Who came alongside and helped shape you?

Our text this morning is a peculiar story wherein Philip comes alongside an Ethiopian eunuch. It is one more image of the resurrection's creation-changing-reality pushing outward. It is a wonderfully detailed and delightful account of the reach of God's grace in Christ.

Consider....

There are three characters in this story.

Philip is either the disciple called by Jesus in the first chapter of John, or from our text last week, one of the seven selected to insure equitable distribution of resources to the widows.

Either way, the opening lines of Acts include instructions to carry the good news of the resurrection to all corners of creation. “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” And Acts chapter 8 opens with a Philip who went “down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there.” Character number one.

Character number two: The Spirit of God shows up and directs Philip’s travel plans.

The Spirit points him toward a wilderness road,
the Spirit prods him toward a chariot,
the Spirit takes him away after the baptism.

And the word here has the sense of being snatched up, or taken by force. The Spirit yanks Philip away and the eunuch doesn’t see him again.

Which gets us to character number three: The Ethiopian eunuch.

Ethiopia, serves as scriptural shorthand for the land south of Egypt; but it’s also a way of suggesting the end of the world, the far reaches of creation. Being driven in a chariot, reading aloud from Isaiah, and having been to Jerusalem to worship suggests that this Ethiopian was a wealthy-well-educated-world-traveling-African-Jew. There were “God-fearers” who were Gentile converts ~ uncircumcised but drawn to the ethic and worship of the God of Israel. He probably falls into that category.

Our text only mentions Ethiopia once, but it names that he was a eunuch five times. Eunuchs were usually servants, castrated before puberty, and therefore deemed safe to serve among the women of a royal household. However, according to the laws in Deuteronomy....

they weren’t to be admitted to “the assembly of the Lord.”

They weren’t allowed in the temple.

They were odd, outcasts, outsiders.

Their sexuality excluded them from full communion with God and God’s people.

And here is where all three characters come together.

The eunuch is riding and reading when the Spirit prompts Philip to hustle up and ask if he understands what he’s reading. In turn the eunuch invites him aboard. Barbara Brown Taylor likens it to a “diplomat in Washington, D.C. inviting a street preacher to join him in his late model Lexus for a little Bible study.” An unlikely juxtaposition.

Now. This is where it gets good.

The eunuch is reading in Isaiah about one who is oppressed, afflicted, shorn like a sheep, humiliated, deprived of justice, and unable to speak for his descendants. In reading he asks, “Who is this passage about? The prophet? Someone else? Me?”

He has a copy of the scripture. What he needs is someone to come alongside and help him hear the good news. So, Philip begins with that text and tells the story of God's long pursuit of *shalom* through Jesus Christ. He tells of a Messiah who would not be a conquering king but a suffering servant. He tells of a kingdom where all are welcome....

Dear friends, it seems entirely plausible that this eunuch, having been to Jerusalem and heading back to Ethiopia, is wondering if there is a place for him.

Was his ethnicity or his sexuality a barrier?

Was he included or excluded?

Was he welcomed or cast out?

Was he accepted or was he condemned?

His sexuality was assigned to him. His otherness was not a matter of will or weakness. He was simply who he was. But, who among us gets to choose our ethnicity, gender, orientation, genetic material, or family of origin? Who among us gets to choose?

I hope the Spirit led Philip to turn a few chapters forward in Isaiah, for there is a beautiful passage where the captives, the poor, the sick, the outcasts are welcomed and the house of God is called "a house of prayer for all nations." Listen to just a few lines:

This what the Lord says: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant ~ to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever.

On a stretch of road in the middle of nowhere, Philip comes alongside this eunuch to tell him that he belongs to God in Christ....

He is loved and accepted exactly as he is.

He is welcomed within the household of God.

He is a child of God.

The resurrection ripples out past Hebrews and Hellenists to an exotic Ethiopian eunuch.

Thanks be to God!

Does that read too much into this story?

Deb was a dear friend in college and a singer-songwriter. There was nothing pretentious or put on; her voice was clear, seemingly effortless, human, beautiful. She loved Jesus, loved college, loved life. The college couldn't have been prouder. She was sent out to be the face and voice of the institution. From coast to coast she was sent to churches, to meet parents, to connect with alumni, and to recruit new students. She was our very own Amy Grant.

A couple years after graduation, while working for the college, after years of praying and pleading, after years of turmoil, Deb told the truth. She went to the trusted college chaplain and said, "I'm a lesbian. For as long as I've known myself, I've known that I was uniquely and wonderfully made. I need to tell the truth about who I am."

He responded that she needed to resign immediately, or repent, change, and tell the college president. He gave her 24 hours or he would go to the administration. She went with trying conversion therapy; and little by little lost more of her self. Beat down by depression she eventually left the college.

As Deb came out, friends shunned her, argued with her, bludgeoned her with the Bible (that she knew and loved), and promised that they would pray for her healing. Guys thought that she just needed the right guy. Girls wondered about the nature of their relationship. She was fully alive in her own skin and her heart was broken.

I wonder what would have happened if someone else would have come alongside, opened up scripture, and said, “You belong to God in Christ. You are loved and accepted exactly as you are. You are welcome within the household of God. You are a child of God. The resurrection ripples out to you. Thanks be to God.”

Dear friends, I am not trying to stir up trouble; the trouble is in the text. I am trying to point out that Acts seems to insist that no one is excluded from God’s welcome.

One more thing...

As the Spirit, and Philip, and the eunuch traveled that dusty-deserted-desert-highway they came upon some water and the eunuch asked,

Look, here is some water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?

There were plenty of barriers. The eunuch, “... belonged to the wrong nation, worked for the wrong sovereign, and possessed the wrong sexuality.” But, listen to how Tom Long describes what happens next:

*“What is to prevent me from being baptized?” asked the eunuch.
“Absolutely nothing,” whispered the Spirit. “Absolutely nothing.”
So, the eunuch commanded the chariot to stop, and he was baptized right on the spot.
Walls of prejudice and prohibition that had stood for generations came tumbling down,
blown down by the breath of God’s Holy Spirit, and another man who felt lost and
humiliated was found and restored by the wideness of God’s grace.*

(“Feasting on the Word”)

Thanks be to God.

May it be so for all people.

And, even as Christ has come alongside us, may we come alongside others.

Amen.