

*Absolutely Everyone*

I officiated a funeral, many years ago, where I had to rely on a *file*.

The man was on our rolls, but had been absent from church for so long that nobody knew him, and none of his family were involved in any church, and even our oldest members couldn't remember him.

I generally make it a policy not to talk about folks that congregations would recognize and certainly not to criticize ministers' actions after the fact, because I wouldn't want it done to me. So, before I proceed, I want to attach a caveat to what I'm going to say next: Y'all don't know who I'm talking about. Even if you think you do, trust me when I tell you, you don't: Different congregation, different city.

In his file were old carbon copies of type-written communication between the minister of the congregation and every member of the man's family. Much of it was the mindless stuff you and I would e-mail each other about today.

But there was one string of communication that I've never forgotten.

It was between the church's minister and the man's son about a sermon on desegregation.

His son, home from college, wrote a note to the minister thanking him for "His delicate treatment of a complex issue that didn't have an easy answer."

I know sometimes between the preaching and the hearing, things can get lost.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that I was looking at something the minister wouldn't be proud of now.

I suppose one could say a great many things regarding the deprivation of basic civil rights from people.

Sure, many hid in the murky shadows of complex emotions, and political expediency.

But in the end, unless one said segregation was wrong, one would have preached at odds with the Gospel.

As I read their correspondence, I couldn't help but think this pastor might feel shame over this correspondence today.

But at a deeper level, what struck me was the realization that someday, someone will read my old sermons and see plainly what I clearly missed.

"Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

For what it's worth, I don't believe *fear* what silences most preachers on hot issues. No, it is far more likely that we live in, and love, the congregations we lead, and we want peace in our valley.

I won't be addressing all the hot issues of world today, at least *not directly*.

But - don't breathe a sigh of relief yet. You are all astute enough to let the Gospel speak for itself, and I hope this passage will disquiet us.

That is probably what happened to Philip.

I don't know, I can't know, but it almost seems as though the Gospel jumped up and bit him.

He was preaching in Samaria, among the misfits, those who were a little "off," and the demon possessed. Unclean spirits were being driven out and lame folks were being cured.

There was great joy in the city.

There was JOY in the city.

Joy.

Is that the fundamental expression of Christian faith?

Perhaps it is if, suddenly, you are invited in where you had never before been welcome.

Luke, the author of Acts, is dead set that the Gentiles are going to be let into the church.

The thing is, though, *he's getting just a bit carried away*.

You can let the gentiles in without getting all up in Samaria.

You don't have to get out of hand; Samaritans and Jews didn't get along.

There are deep roots to this animosity. When the Israelites were overrun by the Babylonians, and all their best and brightest dragged off into captivity, some were left behind. They intermarried with their foreign oppressors and had children. That's who the Samaritans were. The hard feelings run *deep*.

Philip is proclaiming the messiah to them, telling them that there is good news, and they listened eagerly.

Preachers live for that, you know: listening *eagerly*.

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."

Yes, the same Gaza, and it wasn't any more prime real estate then than it is now.

On the way, Philip met an Ethiopian eunuch.

He was a respectable man, in charge of the treasury of the queen of Ethiopia. He probably didn't flaunt the fact that he was a eunuch; I imagine, one might not even know. If you are wondering what a eunuch was, google it. I give you permission to use your phones right now. I'm not connecting the dots any more than that.

Only a man with no sexual desire or guile could be trusted to work anywhere near women. Eunuchs worked with women and for women. (That alone sealed their second-class status in the economy of the first century.)

He was not seen as a *whole* man.

Presumably, it was not a choice, more likely determined from birth, or from when he was enslaved or taken as a prisoner of war, and it was of course, unchangeable.

The temple purity codes strictly prohibited him, and anyone like him, from anything other than peripheral involvement in the community of the faithful. He was relegated to permanent second-class citizenship in the kingdom of God.

The problem with those Levitical attitudes is that they *just wouldn't go away*.

As God revealed more and more to the Israelites because God is alive, as their understanding grew, and they adapted to changing times, perhaps those Levitical codes became much like archaic laws that are unconstitutional: ignored, but nonetheless, still in the statutes.

Everybody knew that if you were a eunuch, you didn't get to be a full part of the community. You weren't quite *whole*; you weren't quite *welcome*.

Philip met this eunuch.

Luke, has a theological axe to grind: He wanted folks outside the temple to know that God had thrown the gates open and welcomed them. And, once might say he did a *fine* job in his Gospel account of assuring that things could be heard in a certain way, given that he wrote for a Gentile audience. If the Romans-in-charge were willing to use a minimum of imagination, they could hear the Gospel in such a way that it didn't upset their apple-carts.

Philip could have stopped there.

I might have stopped there. When a Roman centurion is breathing down your neck, the words you say could have consequences. The smart money makes its point and gets out clean. Say the barest minimum and let God be God to sort out the rest.

But an angel of the Lord told him to go toward the south.

The Ethiopian eunuch was reading the Prophet Isaiah, wondering what it all meant. Perhaps he was waiting for someone to make it *real*, to give it teeth, and feet, and substance.

Philip proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

That's all it says.

*He proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.*

Then the eunuch asks the hard question,

“Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

What prevents anyone from being a part of God’s family?

In the Ethiopian eunuch’s case the answer is simple: Leviticus.

You can read it yourself: Leviticus 21 or Deuteronomy 23 will make the point nicely. Not to be indelicate, but parts have to be intact.

It is in the Bible. You can read it yourself.

I’m not setting up a straw man to knock down. This was Philip’s *Bible*.

“Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

The Bible says things about eunuchs!

“Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

Do you think Philip really have a choice? Was there really a choice whether to baptize, and therefore include, that eunuch?

Or did Philip face a *test*, whether the Gospel means what it says or not?

Jesus never addressed this topic, and the scriptures say what they say. What to do?

This required Philip to exercise *applied Christianity*.

He had to look at his bible through the lens of Jesus Christ.

So do we all.

I love in the announcements when I get to tell our visitors that when we say *welcome*, there are no qualifiers attached, and importantly, that *we don’t say it in spite of scripture, we say so because of Jesus Christ*.

Jesus is who he is, and said what he said, so really, the ultimate question is whether the Gospel can withstand the possibility of human frailty and failings and prejudice and bad attitudes?

Can the gospel make us re-look at even our own scriptures?

The first time I preached on this text, it was in the middle of the Alphabet Soup debates of the Presbyterian Church. Maybe you remember amendment B, O, A, F, - You’d think we’d have a little more imagination.

It forced me to make my beliefs clear about the ordination of LGBTQIA people, a topic I had scrupulously avoided for many reasons, but chiefly for the harmony of the church.

My knees were knocking as I climbed into the pulpit, but the steeple didn't blow off and nobody poured sugar in my gas tank like happened to my friend Charlie MacDonald when he preached on desegregation in the sixties. But as I think of it even now, after our denomination has come around right on ordination, there has always been an outsider.

Before we spent forty years wandering around in the wilderness on questions of sexuality, it was the ordination of women.

We got that one wrong until 1959. Then women were ordained, and again, the steeples didn't blow off.

Before that, there was a controversy around just what, exactly, does "Born of the virgin Mary," mean? And Presbyterians decided that we didn't have to have to a doctrinal litmus test to be a Presbyterian and, yes, again the steeples remained intact.

Before that, it was whether or not white folks and black folks could worship together. Can you believe that was ever a question?

But we got that one wrong for a while also. It split the church clean in two, and it took us a hundred years to get it back together again.

We could dance around all kinds of topics today, and there will *still* be something we won't anticipate.

That's almost enough to scare anyone out of the pulpit, let alone the pew. God knows I don't want someone to read correspondence of mine in fifty years and wonder how I handled any such delicate matters with finesse.

I was asked once to lead a seminar on creating cultures of inclusion in the local congregation. For it, I tried to come up with one profound thing that I, and the congregations I have served, have done through the years to be welcoming, and here's what I came up with:

*Someone has to say it.*

Here in the announcements, to be sure, but also in your homes, also in your offices, also in your schools. We have to say it!

And someone has to ask the question, "Who's not here?"

And what thing can we do that will show them the good news of Jesus Christ?

So, when it comes to the good news of Jesus Christ, *no finesse*.

The only opinion that matters is that of the one who died for us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.