

**May 2, 2021
Christ the Servant, Reston
Easter 5
Acts 8:26-40**

The very first gentile convert to Christianity was a non-gender-conforming person of color. Let that sink in. The very first gentile convert to Christianity was a non-gender-conforming person of color. To explain:

The convert was an Ethiopian on his way to Jerusalem to worship. He was a court official of Candace, the Queen of Ethiopia. It was the custom to castrate male court officials of Candace. Eunuchs did not fit conventional notions of gender in the Roman world. Such persons typically could experience loss of testosterone, loss of body hair, hot flashes, and breast enlargement. They were simultaneously men and no men, neither male nor female. It was thought that such persons would not present a sexual threat to the queen.

In the colorful scene our first lesson presents us the apostle, Philip, encounters this Ethiopian riding along in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah. Philip runs alongside the chariot and asks the eunuch if he understands what he is reading. The eunuch asks for interpretation and guidance. When Philip is done explaining how all this fits together with the recently departed and ascended Jesus of Nazareth, the eunuch asks to be baptized. Philip was glad to honor the request and, scripture tells us, the eunuch went on his way rejoicing. “On his way rejoicing.” I like that very much. Let’s sing that at the end of the service.

What is this story about and what does it mean to us? So much! So much! For one, it is about expanding horizons. Phillip certainly wasn’t expecting this. It was a chance encounter, one of those spur-of-the-moment opportunities which Philip grabbed before that chariot was too far down the road. Christ had told him to go into all the world, baptizing in the name of the one God. So, here is a person who isn’t of the same religion, isn’t of the same

nation, isn't of the same color, and isn't quite of the same gender identity. Philip didn't hesitate. He ran alongside the chariot and started up a conversation.

You and I may not be at the point where we can say to someone, "Let me explain scripture to you." We may not say, "Have you been baptized?" But we can start conversations with people. If you are a person who believes, as I do, that the racial and political gap seizing the nation is best solved from the bottom up – by person-to-person conversation and dialog – then *someone* needs to start the conversation. *Someone* need to be a bit forward. "Have we met?" "How long do you think we need to wear these darn masks?" "Finally have some nice weather, don't we." Christians are the ones called upon to start the conversation, to break the ice, to be a bit forward. Peace on earth is less likely to come about through international treaties than it is by people talking with one another and getting to know one another.

If you think Philip's horizons were expanded by this spur-of-the-moment incident, consider what it meant to the Ethiopian eunuch! He was reading something he didn't understand. So, he needed interpretation. Phillip explained the whole Jesus thing to him and how that fit with what he was reading. Immediately his horizons were opened and he gained a whole new understanding.

There are many people today who stick their nose in the Bible and don't understand what they are reading. Worse, there are many people who *don't* stick their nose in the Bible and imagine what's in it. They interpret it to be, or imagine it to be, a rule book which affirms judgments they have made already about people and issues. Because no one has explained to them how to interpret scripture in light of things Jesus said and taught, they imagine the Bible – and therefore, Christianity – to be against men marrying men, against multiculturalism, and against any law passed by congress which seeks to redistribute wealth or which gives rights to people they disapprove of.

23% of our population, when asked which religion they support, replied, "None." These are known as the "nones." When asked why they aren't

religious, the “nones” had four main reasons: They question churches’ teachings. They don’t like churches’ political positions. They don’t like religious organizations. And they don’t like religious leaders.

When asked to give examples, they mostly cited examples from evangelical preachers they saw on t.v. who espouse a “Love Jesus or go to hell” message and who are against many of the things they are for.

Well, maybe the “nones” are kind of like the Ethiopian eunuch who was hungry for someone to explain things. Who, for instance, might tell them that ELCA Lutherans are in sync with many of their own beliefs? Who, for instance, might run alongside the “nones” chariot and explain to them that ELCA Lutherans have made a statement on human sexuality with which they might resonate – or one on Race, ethnicity, and culture – or one on abortion – or one on sexism – or one on the environment?

Who is there to explain that? How about you and me. We encounter people who have wrong ideas about what religion is, about who Jesus was, and what the concept of loving grace is all about. It may be a fleeting encounter on the street, in a book club, waiting for your car to be repaired. It is a moment. If you don’t grab it, the chariot will be down the road beyond hearing distance. The conversation may not start unless you start it.

People so desperately need to hear about the Jesus who commanded us to love one another, who counseled us to turn the other cheek, to give even the shirt off our back, who said the measurement of things was how well we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and care for people behind bars.

We have new restroom signs here at CTS. The old ones had signs that said “men” over the men’s’ room and “women” over the women’s room. The women’s room still says “women.” The men’s room, however has been changed to a family restroom which men may still use. The change was to provide a private space for parents to change an infant or for an elderly person to help a spouse. It has an internal lock.

The change was also made to accommodate those who may not conform to a binary gender identity. That could include transgendered friends. It could include friends whose gender identity does not conform to their birth sex. Are there prospective members who fall under this category? Yes. Are there members of CTS who fall under this category? Yes. This is a move your church council felt compelled to make as part of our commitments as a Reconciling in Christ congregation. The signs are also in Spanish and Braille and indicate that the rooms are handicapped accessible.

The very first gentile convert to Christianity was a non-gender-conforming person of color. In Greek the word “Ethopian” literally means “burnt face.” We need to be reminded that there are twice as many members of the Lutheran Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus than the in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. As a matter of fact, the Ethiopian church is the largest body in the Lutheran World Federation.

Philip made a split-second decision to jog alongside a chariot. What would our own ELCA look like if we were more like Philip? Maybe we wouldn’t be the whitest denomination in America – a stat that makes me very sad to report.

After Philip baptized the eunuch, he was suddenly transported to Azotus where he began striking up conversations with people there. Do you know what you are reading? Have you heard of Jesus? Have you been baptized?

In the meantime, the eunuch went on his way rejoicing. And so should we that God has given us such Good news to proclaim!