

So, one of the things about our church that always makes me smile is when I'm driving somewhere that I've never been and I see that familiar road sign... "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You!" Maybe you all get that warm fuzzy feeling when you see those signs too... I immediately think, "yep those are my people... Someone could drop us in a room together and we would have a ton of things to talk about, usually beginning with figuring out who we know in common."

It is that radical welcome that so many of us here today have experienced, that has kept us coming back... It is that radical welcome that has put so many of us on the path to leadership positions in the church... And it is that radical welcome that has created opportunities for people to have so many deep and meaningful relationships that last lifetimes... If you're visiting today, or if you happen to be checking our church out on YouTube thinking you may visit someday, I hope and pray that you will experience and find the same joy, inclusion, and love of Jesus Christ in the Episcopal Church that we all have...

We see that same radical inclusion today in the Book of Acts... Phillip, led by the spirit, hops on down the road to the end of the known world, and ends up baptizing a complete stranger on the spot... It's a beautiful act of the embodied hospitality acceptance, and love of God... However, that may not be how we would have read this 100 years ago... Because up until fairly recently, right after the Ethiopian says, Here's some water, what is to prevent me from being baptized??? There was another verse... In fact, if you've got your bible handy, you see that Acts 8:37 is missing... Why would that be you might ask? Well, right after the eunuch asks his question about baptism, Verse 37 reads, *And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God..."*

Well, what's wrong with that you might ask? It sounds like something out of the Nicene creed... And while Creedal affirmations are definitely a hot-button issue in the Episcopal church, we'll leave that topic for another day... Concerning verse 37 I think it is prudent for us to know that it wasn't included in any of our earliest manuscripts... In fact, it isn't found in any of our manuscripts until the sixth or seventh century... Mind blowing right?

So why would someone add that verse??? Well, the way that Acts 8 is written, would mean that there are no requirements for baptism... No signing off on doctrine, or dogma, or a creedal statement to become a Christian and join the church... Instant baptism... Just add water... (Come on... that was funny) But you see the addition of verse 37 means that it wasn't until Christianity had been around for a centuries that people started asking the question of whether or not a person could or should be baptized if they haven't signed off on all the right beliefs or said the right prayers, or affirmed the right creed, or joined the right church, or given the right amount of money...

All of which is the exact opposite of the lesson that Luke is trying to teach us in Acts chapter 8... Let me explain... The Eunuch is going down the road of life and recognizes himself in scripture... So, when he asks Phillip his question: "Is this about the author or is this about someone else?" What he is really asking is, is this about someone like me??? Is this about someone like me??? Someone in pain... Someone who was led like a lamb led to the slaughter... Someone who has been humiliated and denied justice... You see, despite his wealth, despite his high position in society... Despite rubbing elbows with royalty and despite his education, the Ethiopian eunuch was robbed of his dignity and was given a forced identity... And it is through his pain, that he identifies with Christ.

This is how many of us come to know God more intimately, this is why we say that scripture is God breathed... Maybe you've had a moment like that yourself... A moment when you relate so much to one of the characters in the bible that you could swear that the spiritual truth found within was meant just for you... Maybe you've heard a sermon where you're positive that God for a brief moment or two was speaking to you directly... Maybe you saw that sign on the side of the road and wondered... "Will they really welcome me?"

It is I think necessary for us to know, that at the time Acts was written, the church was very young, and there had been quite a lot of back and forth on whether or not non-Jewish people, otherwise known as gentiles were allowed to join. Further, there were arguments about whether or not gentiles would have to take up Jewish cultural habits. These would include; eating kosher, observing the Sabbath, and something that could have easily stopped church growth in its tracks... circumcision. There was also the question of people leading lifestyles that weren't considered acceptable to the Jews, take just about any Roman for instance, or, for today lesson, an Ethiopian Eunuch...

Now there are a lot of ways people can be othered today. Whether it be ethnic background, country of origin, sexual or gender identity, the list goes on... Well, if people are still being uninvited to the table today because of those things, think about what it must have been like two thousand years ago... Phillip's new friend the Ethiopian Eunuch didn't have a ton going for him... I mean sure, He was rich, (The trip to Jerusalem alone would have cost a small fortune, not to mention the cost of the scroll he was reading... Sure he served in the court of the queen and likely had status and power, however, according to Fran Barber and Robin Whitaker, Eunuch's were really people who were looked

down on... You see, Eunuchs were seen as neither male or female... People would say things like “they aren’t normal” They aren’t natural... You see, Eunuchs were non-binary, nongender conforming people. Eunuch’s were not people usually invited to join any community other than in a service role...

So, here we have Phillip out in the middle of nowhere and he runs into a person of color who was from a foreign land at the end of the known world, the kind of place you might hear stories about as a kid, but would likely never get to visit yourself... And to boot, he’s a slave and a person who is non-binary which was a sexual identity that would have been considered unclean according to the law... All of these were traits that could have prohibited our new friend from being welcomed into the church with open arms... And all of these are traits that not only still keep people from being welcomed into the church with open arms, but they are traits that people in the church use as excuses to other and condemn their neighbors and even members of their own families...

But God, you see... God doesn’t have a category of people who are exceptions... God is all inclusive... And we don’t even need to make some kind of creedal statement for that to be true... If we’ve learned anything from the Phillip and the Ethiopian, it’s that, it doesn’t matter who you are, or where you came from, or what color your skin is, or even what your sexual or gender identity is... God loves you and accepts you and includes you just as you are... And as followers of Jesus, we are called to act in the exact same way... We are not gate keepers... We are not gatekeepers to the spiritual food and drink found at God’s table... We are not gatekeepers to acceptance and full inclusion into God’s family through baptism... As Christians, we are called to love everyone, no exceptions... We are called to love and affirm everyone... period... “And the eunuch said, “Look, here is

water! What is to prevent me from being baptized???”
Nothing... Nothing...

Like Phillip and the Eunuch, we are all journeying down the road of life. And it is our job to abide in Christ while Christ abides in us, consistently looking out for who God is leading us to love... It doesn't matter the color of their skin... It doesn't matter how they identify... Or where they are from, or what they believe, or who they love... It doesn't matter... What matters is we invite and welcome them into this community of God's love... Then, and only then, together, with one heart and one voice will we bear witness to the world of the power and hope of Jesus Christ... Then, and only then will we bear witness to the world that there is no reason to live in fear of each other... Then, and only then will we bear witness to the world that in the name of Jesus, it is high-time for all people to see others for who they truly are: Our siblings in Christ... All of us children of the most-high God. All of us people who are worthy of grace and mercy, and forgiveness and dignity and respect and love and life..... And community... Then, and only then will we bear witness to the world that **Jesus... changes... lives... that Jesus. Changes. Hearts.**

And that, dear people of St. Barnabas is our reason to get to work, inviting and welcoming others into the community of this church, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit... May we all be changed by Christ, and may we in turn, change the world for Christ; building the Kingdom of God on here on earth as it is in heaven... Brick by brick... Life by life... Changed heart by changed heart... One... Person... At a time...

Amen
Fr. Kenn