

Sermon Transcript

Breaking Down Barriers

Luke 24:48-49 and Acts 8:26-40 | Fourth Sunday After Pentecost | June 16, 2024 | John Klawiter, preaching

Grace and peace to you my friends in Christ,

It was my dad who first opened up scripture to me. Probably not from listening to his sermons, but in how he talked about grace while we were in the backyard playing catch or spending time with family.

Grace was his favorite word and grace was the lens he'd use to evaluate the theology of others.

As he would teach it, grace is not about deciding to be saved. If grace requires my action, it's not grace. Grace is knowing God loves me and forgives me and there's nothing I can do to change that.

Serving God is a response to that grace. Not to show off. Not to hedge our bets—better do good things, just in case! Service, as I was taught, was about being in relationship with my neighbor.

That meant trips to the Rosebud Indian Reservation and having a meal with elders while delivering Christmas presents that our congregation provided. Or sitting down after serving a meal at a place called the Banquet, where free meals were offered to anyone in need in Sioux Falls.

After my first year of college, I found a unique place to grow in my faith by working at a Bible camp.

Ross, the Camp Vermilion program director, helped open up the scriptures to me. He spoke of his understanding of God and his call.

Ross had every reason to question whether to trust God after a church organization kicked him off of a missionary team because he was gay.

Yet Ross knew that God's love was greater than the fear and discrimination he faced. Ross lived grace—instead of turning his back on the church, he embraced his role as a leader. He cared so much for the campers and staff.

Ross became an amazing advocate for other Christians trying to find their place in the church and helping them see that God's love extends beyond human limitations.

I believe that my friendship with Ross planted a seed that I needed to continue to find a place in the church to advocate.

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I found that calling became louder when Taryn and I returned home from the Peace Corps to join a church in Edina that had a strong focus on social justice.

Pastor Dan opened up the scripture to help me see beyond the words printed on the pages of the Bible. It felt like Pastor Dan always had another opportunity or idea that inspired me—it made me see that the church can do special things when we work together.

When I acted on the call to go to seminary, Pastor Dan had me do homebound ministry visits with members.

One of them was Donna, who opened up the scripture to me by saying her favorite passage is that one with the three things.

Which one, Donna? I'm not familiar with it.

Like the Ethiopian eunuch unfurling the Old Testament scrolls in today's story, Donna grabbed her Bible, which wasn't very far off.

She turned to Micah 6. And what does the LORD require you but to... here's the three things:

1. Do justice
2. Love kindness
3. Walk humbly with God

I wear that reminder on my wrist.

Once I started seminary, people were opening up scripture to me left and right. Professors, classmates, and church members.

I love to read the Bible, I learned how valuable it was to read the Bible with someone helping me to interpret what I was learning.

Commentaries or conversation partners deepen the work of the scripture on my heart. How about you?

Does the story of Philip the deacon and an unnamed Ethiopian eunuch seem like an easy story to understand without a bit more detail on what's going on?

Let's start with Philip.

Philip is chosen to serve as a deacon in Acts 6.

As part of Philip's ministry, besides watching over food distribution and waiting on tables, he was also sent out to share the good news.

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One of the places Philip is sent to is Samaria where he is well received and his word of Jesus the Messiah brought great joy.

Now, what do we remember about Samaria? Let's open the scriptures and remember why that place matters.

When Luke writes about Jesus in his gospel, he shares the lesson of the Good Samaritan. If we remember one of the details about that story—it's that the man left for dead is helped by someone that would have been despised, seen as the "other". The Samaritan man as the hero of the story is more than an unexpected twist—it's unheard of!

The disciples know that Samaria has a bad reputation, yet Philip has gone there and the people believe! If Samaritans can be converted, Philip could sell sand in a desert.

In fact, Philip's trust and confidence in the Spirit is growing. When he's called to head south on the wilderness road—that sounds dangerous!—he obeys.

When a chariot comes passing by, the wheels are in motion. The Spirit urges him forward.

Who's in that chariot? The Ethiopian eunuch.

According to Luther Seminary professor Matt Skinner, that's a big deal. Not only would there be a difference in race, the way that people outside of Jerusalem had a different perception.

"The appearance of an Ethiopian in Acts might well elicit thoughts of the ends of the earth from a Roman's limited outlook of the world." My guess is that there would be racism and xenophobia involved.

Also, eunuchs were castrated. Whatever his backstory is, he would not fit conventional notions of gender in the Roman world. Skinner suggests that he's neither male or female, simultaneously man and non-man.

Yet, the eunuch has a position of status with the Queen. He is in a chariot and possesses a scroll from Isaiah. He's also leaving Jerusalem.

While in Jerusalem, would the eunuch have been welcomed into the temple? Would he be considered an insider?

No way.

When he asks "what is to prevent me from being baptized?" this is a legitimate question.

As Justo Gonzalez writes, "the basis of the law that has ruled in Israel for centuries is clear: his condition as a eunuch would prevent him from being welcomed into the temple". He was unclean.

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But the answer from Philip is much different. Being baptized into Christ is a game changer. There is NOTHING to prevent it!

Skinner: “As the passage ends, a conversion occurs. Readers should take from that event a clear and gripping statement that the good news is for everyone; there are no barriers nor advantages arising from national identity, sexual identity, social standing, or public honor. Even if there were, good luck trying to figure out where this character fits into those categories. He doesn’t need to.”

“[I discovered] how important this passage is for people who have been denied power, dignity, and a place at the table in Christian history.”

Skinner taught a Bible study for Sudanese immigrants. They were thrilled to discover how much Skinner was a scholar on the book of Acts.

“The room lit up and they wanted to talk to me about this passage and nothing else. The court official was for them as close as one could get to a patron saint. Almost twenty centuries later, he remained a direct link to the Bible for a roomful of Sudanese believers. Through him, they experienced inclusion within the stories scripture tells.

Grace is knowing that God’s love isn’t just for you and me. It’s for our neighbor. It’s for our co-worker. It’s for that stranger we see at the store who looks and dresses differently. It’s for the person next door who puts up a yard sign for the candidate we don’t like. It’s for the person, in our hearts, we can’t forgive.

God’s grace extended to an Ethiopian eunuch that day as Philip opened scripture to him. He knew, without a doubt, that the barriers to belonging placed upon him in the synagogue were gone. God’s love knew no boundaries.

You would think that inclusivity would be an obvious characteristic for everyone in the church today. It’s literally RIGHT there in the Bible.

But it’s not, is it?

May we be mindful not to take God’s grace for granted. We don’t own it, but we know it’s ours to share.

What is to prevent us from treating others with grace? Nothing.

What a great way to see scripture opened up before our eyes. May our expressions of faith help others see the scripture opened up to them. Amen.