



MYERS PARK
BAPTIST
CHURCH

A faith community
on a journey seeking
a welcoming, loving,
and just world.

“THE FIRST NON-JEWISH CHRISTIAN”

Sermon Delivered by Dr Reverend Tim Moore

Acts 8:26-40, August 16 2026

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

In one sense the story of the Ethiopian official is a simple tale. Riding in a chariot after visiting Jerusalem, he’s reading from the scroll of Isaiah. Philip, one of the seven deacons from the Church at Jerusalem and guided by the Holy Spirit, comes upon the Ethiopian and is invited into the man’s chariot. A moment later the Ethiopian asks him about the meaning of the passage he’s reading from Isaiah. Philip tells him about the prophet and about Jesus. And by the end of their conversation the Ethiopian says, “There’s a body of water; what’s to stop me from being baptized?”

Moments later Philip baptizes him into the Christian faith. Immediately afterwards Philip apparates thirty miles away to Azotus as if he’s a wizard in Harry Potter. The Ethiopian, left alone in the water, goes on his way rejoicing—as if people vanishing in thin air is normal. It’s a simple, happy tale.

Or is it? In another sense the story is quite complex. **Not because of what happened, but because to whom it happened.** The Ethiopian was the first non-Jewish person, the first Gentile, to be baptized as a Christian. This is significant; it is **the first step** to making Christianity a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, world religion. Maybe if he’d been a white person from Greece or Italy, the story would have gained more notice throughout the centuries as Christianity spread across Europe and into the United States. Instead, he’s a Black man from Ethiopia. Or was he a man? Eunuchs were sexually different, not seen as male or female. This simple baptism story becomes complex because of this person’s identity, **because in Western culture identity has been used to privilege some and to exclude others.** And the first Gentile Christian, which was an identity issue for 1st century Christianity, is a person that turns all that identity stuff upside down.

It makes you think God must have a sense of humor. Cause sometimes God is just messing with people’s assumptions.

Today, we are celebrating Pride Sunday and joining in with the festivities of Pride weekend in Charlotte, highlighted by the parade this afternoon. Pride is such an appropriate term to celebrate the lives of LGBTQ persons and their allies. **To have pride in yourself, your relationships, your sexuality, your gender, and to say it out loud in public is liberating,** especially when for so long this society pushed gay and queer and trans and lesbian persons to hide their identity. Even steps towards equality continued this theme of silence—remember “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”

To take pride in yourself is a sign of emotional and psychological health. To see yourself as a child of God, as you are—not as someone wants you to be, not as you hope to be, not after somebody fixes you—but as you are. . . . To see yourself as a child of God and to celebrate that is a healthy

perspective in our faith. **For people who have been privileged in society because of their identity, having pride in yourself is taken for granted.** And there's nothing wrong such persons having a healthy sense of pride, it's just that such self-pride is given by God to all persons, not just to those privileged by society. By participating in today's Pride parade, we as a congregation are affirming that theological truth. It's going beyond the phrase embedded in our covenant—open to all, closed to none. **Our participation in the parade today proclaims that we are open to all and in addition welcoming and affirming and integrating and fully embracing.** And like the Ethiopian after his baptism, we should be rejoicing this day.

The first time Christianity struggled with the question of whom should be allowed to be a part of the Church was when they began baptizing Gentiles, or non-Jewish persons. **Before the Ethiopian, every person that had been baptized into the faith as a follower of Jesus Christ was Jewish.** Christianity came out of Judaism, so the first Christians were Jewish Christians.

But Chapter 8 in Acts starts a shift. Interestingly, the two stories in this chapter are shrouded in mystery. Luke says at the beginning of both his books—The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles—that he had gathered all the stories about Jesus and the early Church that he could find and compiled them in the best way possible to tell the story.

I'd love to know where he found these two stories because they are unique in Acts. This chapter acts like an interlude between the main sections in Acts. In the first 7 chapters, the setting is in Jerusalem and Peter is the leading figure. From chapter 9 through the rest of the book, Paul is the leading figure, and the setting goes wherever Paul goes.

But in Chapter 8, this story and the one preceding it are the only ones where the deacon Philip is the star. Philip, after he vanishes to Azotus, is only mentioned once more in scripture. Though a small source in Luke's collection, the stories in Chapter 8 are important to Luke's narrative. In the opening chapter of Acts, Jesus speaks to his disciples just before his ascension into heaven, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

In the first story of Chapter 8, Philip baptizes many Samaritans into the Christian faith. In our story today, he baptizes an Ethiopian. That part of Africa was on the edge of the known world to the Roman Empire. So, in this chapter, so different from the rest of Acts, **Luke pictures the gospel of Jesus Christ spreading from Judea to Samaria and to the edges of the earth**—just as Jesus said before his ascension.

By Chapter 15 so many Gentiles had been baptized that there was push back. The Church calls a council of its leading figures to Jerusalem to discuss the issue. The council decided that since Gentiles were professing faith in Jesus, being baptized, and receiving the Holy Spirit, who were they to stop what God was doing.

The first time the Christian Church ever had to face identity issues, they decided they should welcome all, which makes our story today all the more important.

Who was this person that Philip baptized along the road from Jerusalem to Gaza?

Luke calls him an Ethiopian, meaning that he was from sub-Saharan Africa. **The first Gentile Christian was a Black man. How many of you realized that?** Why is this not common knowledge?

Could the terrible story of slavery in this country have been different if Christianity for centuries had emphasized that Black Africans were baptized into the faith before white Europeans? Maybe you're thinking that's just one story, what difference would that make. Ah, yes, it's just a story, but if you change the narrative, you change everything. Instead of making up the awful idea that Blacks carried the mark of Cain, white Christians could have been applauding their Black brothers and sisters for being first in the faith. Furthermore, Luke describes this Black Ethiopian as an official with power and money. He worked directly for the Candace, which was a leadership term for the Queen of the Ethiopians, and the whole treasury of the Queen was in his charge.

Luke also calls the Ethiopian a eunuch, which usually meant a castrated man, though this was not true with all eunuchs. Sometimes a eunuch was a gay man. Sometimes this was an enslaved person castrated as a boy impacting how he would develop through puberty. Other eunuchs were, as Jesus said in Matthew's gospel, born that way. Did that mean they were intersexed, or non-binary? In some societies, eunuchs were considered neither male nor female. They were a gender all to their own—the first transgender persons. The Galli were a cult of eunuchs that were considered to be half-male, half-female in Roman society.

There's no way to know which was the case with this person, but that's largely irrelevant. **It's enough to know that the first Gentile Christian was either trans, or gay, or queer, or non-binary. How many of you realized that?** Why is this not common knowledge? I mean seriously. Somebody didn't sneak it into the Bible 50 years ago; it's been there for 2,000 years.

Willie Jennings, the great Black liberation theologian, writes this about the man: "His difference is marked by his origin in Ethiopia, the outer limits of the known world, and is even signified by his blackness. His difference is also marked by his sexuality, neither unambiguously male nor female" [Jennings, *Acts*, 83]. Marked by his Black skin, stigmatized by his sexuality, the Ethiopian is the consummate outsider.

Yet, he would not let others define him, nor dampen the song in his heart. "Look," he says to Philip, "There is a body of water. What's to prevent me was being baptized?" Which is a curious way to ask the question and I think provides a window into his life's story. Because of his identity he'd been prevented from many things, now he wants to know will he be prevented from the Church as well? According to the Bible, the answer was no. There was no good reason why he shouldn't be baptized. Philip baptizes him on the spot. He doesn't even have to attend a new members class! **This story proclaims that in the Church there are no outsiders.**

When people use the Bible to talk about LGBTQ persons, why do they not tell this story?

I think it is significant that before any white Europeans were baptized into the Christian faith, a gay Black person or a non-binary Black person was baptized in the Church. What if for centuries the Church had talked about this story? Maybe LGBTQ persons would not have been

stigmatized by the Church, excluded from the Church. Maybe the welcome would have come much sooner. Maybe it could spread even wider, now.

Willie Jennings asks, “Can one who has lived at the margins of community or in its liminal spaces because of their identity live free in Christ, or will social forces constrict that freedom and strangle redemptive joy?” [Jennings, 87]. In some sense, Jennings’s question rests on churches like this one.

We cannot by ourselves end prejudice against gay, lesbian, or transgender persons, but we can celebrate and tell the story that God loves them as they are and tell it with pride. We should be rejoicing when they find faith in God and join the community of the Church.

If we start from the idea that God inspired scripture, then we should be asking why did God inspire Luke to include this story from this mysterious, brief, unknown source? The first baptized Gentile believer could have been anyone, why did God want Luke to say it was a Black African who was sexually or gendered differently from most? We should be asking why God wanted this story to be told.

There can be only one answer: **the gospel is a story of radical inclusion and hospitality.** Like the baptized Ethiopian, let us go with pride on our way rejoicing. AMEN.