

## Acts 8: 26-39

<sup>26</sup> 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.” (This is a wilderness road.) <sup>27</sup> So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship <sup>28</sup> and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. <sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” <sup>30</sup> So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” <sup>31</sup> He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. <sup>32</sup> Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.

<sup>33</sup> In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation [for he is childless]?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

<sup>34</sup> The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” <sup>35</sup> Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. <sup>36</sup> As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” <sup>38</sup> He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. <sup>39</sup> When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing.

### Trinity Presbyterian Church April 30, 2018 Radical Welcome and Inclusion Sunday

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#### “Faithful Resistance #4: Living Welcome”

The sign on the church’s lawn read, “All Are Welcome.” Inside the church the gathering community sang, “All are welcome in this place...” On the bulletin was a word in big **bold** letters saying, “**WELCOME.**” Welcome comes from an old English word which literally means, “One whose coming fulfills another’s desire.” You being here. All of us being together fulfills our desire. So welcome. Your life story—all of the heartaches and complexities—are welcome. All your faith, doubts, questions, longings, prayers, problems, giggles, tears, even your allergies are welcome. Why? Because you are one whose coming here fulfills our desire.

Of course, we know the words can be empty too. Many of us have experienced the opposite of feeling welcome. Churches, of all places, send messages—some intentional, some subliminal—that speak louder than what is on the marquee sign or in the bulletin. For some “welcome” means that you can belong here if you believe A, B, C. For others you are welcome as long as your child is well behaved during the worship service. For some, you are welcome to a point: you can come into the building and sit in the pews, but if you were born a certain gender or your love is

oriented a certain way, you cannot preach from the pulpit or administer the sacred communion. Sometimes the message is blatant, but other times it gets sent subliminally. There was a blended family. One side's mother died when the three children were young. Dad remarried, and they had a child together—a son. But the maternal grandfather of the other three never accepted this new child as one of his grandchildren. The young man wasn't of his flesh and blood, so when he would introduce the family the grandfather said, "These are my three grandchildren...and this is *their* brother." Eventually, the child figured out what he was saying: he wasn't thought of as a grandchild. Sometimes it is what is said, other times it is what is not said. In the blended family that is the church, the sign might say, "ALL ARE WELCOME," but it ends up being a conditional statement—up to a point. We don't have to look far to hear a story about someone who was made to feel the opposite of welcome.

I imagine it is how the eunuch felt. Trotting home after taking some vacation time to pilgrimage to Jerusalem's holy temple to worship. At the gate stood a temple guard who ran down the checklist of questions:

"Are you a Jew or a foreigner?"

"A foreigner."

"So where do you come from?"

"Ethiopia."

"What do you do there?"

"I'm a servant of the Ethiopian queen. Actually, I'm the treasurer"

"So you serve the queen, do you? Interesting. Are you male or female?"

"Male."

"I see. Since you serve the queen I have to ask this question: What about your genitalia?"

"My what?"

"You heard me. Are you 'dismembered'?"

"Well, I'm a eunuch. All of us men who serve the queen are. It's protocol and how I was made."

"So sorry then. The bible says, 'No eunuchs.' Next!"

"Now hold on, where does it say that?"

"Look it up for yourself: 'No one who has been emasculated shall be admitted into the assembly of the Lord.' Next!"

And just like that the eunuch is turned away. So he climbs back into the chariot and heads home. On the way he opens up his bible. I imagine he is looking for that passage that says he isn't welcome. But instead he opens up to Isaiah 53 where it talks about a man who is cut before a shearer; a man who is publically humiliated; who is childless, and whose life doesn't matter to the religious institution.

It is then when he runs into a disciple of Jesus: Philip. Philip's hiding out in Samaria, preaching to the half-breed Samaritans. He's there because he's on the run from persecution and he knows the religious Sanhedrin won't defile themselves by stepping a foot in the ghettos of dirty Samaria. Then the Holy Spirit tells Philip, "See that chariot headed your way. Go to him. Go to the eunuch."

"Do you know what you're reading?" Philip wonders.

“How can I unless someone guides me.”

Isn't it just beautiful? A eunuch is rejected because of the bible, but then returns to the bible to find a different passage and a close disciple of Jesus is there to ask if he understands what he is reading. And the eunuch's answer is so true: “How can I unless someone guides me? Who is the prophet speaking about? Himself or someone else?” What the eunuch really wants to know is, “Is he talking about me? Could the bible be talking about my life?” Isn't it what we all want to know: is there room for my life in the story?

So Philip tells him about Jesus. About how, in Christ there is nobody at the gate asking questions about his gender identification. About how with Jesus he doesn't have to circle “Other” when it comes to the question about male/female on the application, because in Christ there is no such thing as “other.” It is just breathtakingly beautiful.

“Well then,” the eunuch says, “If this is all true, there is some water right over there! What is to *hinder* me from being baptized?” What is to hinder? Hinder is a favorite word of Luke's. He uses it all the time. It is the Greek word *koleo*. Luke uses it in his gospel when the disciples come across a man who was casting out demons in Jesus' name. The disciples tried to *koleo* him because he didn't belong to their circle. But Jesus said, “Don't *koleo* him, for whoever isn't against us is for us.” Luke uses it when mothers brought their children to Jesus, some of them fussing and creating a racket. The disciples tried to *koleo* them. Again, Jesus says, “Don't *koleo* them, for the kingdom belongs to them.” When Peter stood before the high council explaining how he baptized a bunch of gentiles, he said, “The Holy Spirit fell on them just as the Spirit fell on us. Who am I to *koleo* God?” The eunuch wants to know: “What is to *koleo* me from being part of this family.” And what's the answer? Absolutely nothing. Why? Because he is one whose coming fulfills God's desire. All are welcome.

Can you see what the Holy Spirit is doing here? She is creating a wonderful, wide-open mess for the church, still is! You see, eventually, Philip is going to have to return home and tell the church council that he's baptized a eunuch and you better believe it is going to change the church. We can hear the deliberations all the way from here: “Does this mean we will be known as the eunuch church?” “What if people we love start to leave because they disagree?” “Does this mean we are going to put up a Eunuch Lives Matter banner as public witness?” And in response, I imagine Philip standing there, remembering those brave words the eunuch said to him when they came upon a patch of water in a pothole on the side of the road: What is to *hinder*? What is to *koleo* us?

I guess that is our question too: What is to *koleo* us? Perhaps it is fear? It is understandable if it is. Maybe it is a gut reaction to not wanting things to change? It could be that too. Or maybe it's simply what happens when a welcoming church opens their arms wide-open and says, “You are one whose being here fulfills our desire. Because your being here fulfills God's desire.” I believe Trinity is a church that believes all are welcome. But I also pray that we grow deeper into the words each and every time we say them: All are welcome. Amen.