

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

A sermon preached at Second Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fifth Sunday of Easter, April 27, 1997.
Scripture Lessons: Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

11⁰⁰ AM [It's been nearly 10 minutes since I read the first Scripture lesson about Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. You probably forgot what I read, so I'll retell the story.

The angel of the Lord directed Philip, the Deacon, to go to a road south of Jerusalem, the road to Gaza. Philip obeyed. There he met an Ethiopian, an African, a high official in the court of the Queen of Ethiopia, "in charge of her entire treasury." He had come to Jerusalem to worship. Even though he was a gentile, not a Jew, he had a desire for God. He wanted to worship the God of Israel. But when he got to Jerusalem he was prevented from entering the temple because he was a eunuch. Eunuchs were excluded from the household of God. The OT law was very clear, "No one who has been emasculated... may enter the assembly of the LORD." So he went all the way from Ethiopia to Jerusalem only to be prevented from entering the temple - because he was a eunuch. Now I wonder how anyone knew he was a eunuch? Did people ask? Did the Ethiopian tell? Did he wear distinctive clothing that indicated he was a eunuch? Did he have visible characteristics or mannerisms that advertised that he was a eunuch? I don't know. We do know he was a eunuch. And we know that eunuchs were excluded from the temple.

visited Have you ever gone to church and been turned away? Ever gone to worship where you aren't welcome? * Today we've learned to be more subtle. We don't physically exclude anybody from the

church. But we have ways of letting it be known who is and who isn't welcome in the church. People get the message. Very few eunuchs go to church today , or if they do they don't admit they're eunuchs.

Now - what is a eunuch? A eunuch is an emasculated man, a castrated man. *Some men are born eunuchs.* They're sexually dysfunctional. They don't experience sexual desires normal to the vast majority of humankind. They're born that way. *Some men become eunuchs through accident or illness.* A recent article in Newsweek magazine described how some men with advanced prostate cancer agree to castration in order to slow down the spread of the cancer. *Other men are made eunuchs.* In the ancient world prisoners of war were often humiliated by being castrated.

Sometimes poor families sold their sons into slavery where they were subjected to the humiliation of mutilation. In the modern world a man may become psychologically emasculated by failing to live up the what our culture says a he-man ought to be. *... Loses job... fails in marriage*

But whatever the causes, the consequences are the same: The eunuch experiences humiliation, shame, disgrace. Edward Gibbon, in his Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire speaks of "The aversion and contempt which mankind has so uniformly entertained for" eunuchs. He speaks of eunuchs as "abhorred" and "unhappy beings". The Ethiopian eunuch very likely felt the brunt of many crude jokes and cruel whispers. And worst of all he felt excluded: excluded from God's presence; excluded from family gatherings; excluded from that prestigious club called the

traditional family of a husband, wife and children - something he'd never experience.

The Ethiopian eunuch surely must have looked around at families and thought with regret, "I will never marry. I'll never have children." Scholars tell us that in the ancient world, the term "eunuch" applied not only to emasculated men, but also to fruits and plants which have no kernel or seed and were therefore unable to bear fruit. "I will never bear fruit," the Ethiopian eunuch must have realized. "I'll never have descendants. No one will carry on my name."

So - it was to this man - this eunuch - that the angel of the Lord directed Philip to go. I doubt that Philip would have sought him out on his own unless the angel of the Lord had made him go. Most Christians, and most churches don't reach out to sexually dysfunctional people like the Ethiopia eunuch. We tend to avoid them. We tend to abhor them. We tend to enact laws to insure that we don't have to interact with them.

How would the Ethiopian eunuch fit into our congregation? Would we invite him to a NOMAD dinner? The match makers in the congregation wouldn't know what to do with him. Even if he had outstanding gifts, would we ask him to serve as an elder or deacon or encourage him to enter the ministry?

And when Philip arrived he found the eunuch reading the Bible; reading a puzzling passage from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearers, so he does not open his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? (Who can speak of his descendants?)"

What memories of his personal humiliation those words must have evoked in the Ethiopian eunuch: "I know something about shearers," the Ethiopian eunuch painfully remembers. "I know all about humiliation and the denial of justice. Yes, and who can speak of my descendants? I have no descendants! I never will have any descendants."

So the Ethiopian eunuch turns to Philip and asks, "Who is the prophet talking about?"

Then Philip begins to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaims to him the good news about Jesus. "Jesus also experienced humiliation," Philip says. "He experienced the denial of justice. And he never had any children either, yet he's become the head of the largest family in the world."

And very likely Philip urged the Ethiopian eunuch to read further in the prophecy of Isaiah where he says: "Let not any eunuch complain, 'I am only a dry tree.' For this is what the LORD says: 'To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant - to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.'" *That day has arrived, Prophecy fulfilled*

"The Old Testament Law may exclude you", I imagine Philip says. "The Temple officials in Jerusalem may exclude you. But the Gospel of Jesus Christ doesn't exclude you. The Good News of Jesus Christ welcomes you into Christ's family. And even though

you're a eunuch you can still be fruitful. Abide in Christ as he abides in you and you will bear much fruit."

So the Ethiopian eunuch puts Philip on the spot, "Look, here's water! What's to prevent me from being baptized and joining Christ's family?"

And Philip says, "There's nothing to prevent you."

And right there, in the desert, Philip baptized the eunuch.

Ancient Ethiopian tradition claims him - eunuch - as the father of the Christian church in Ethiopia.

Let us pray:

Now - when you go home - Eunuchs

How Prebyterian