

Message for June 6, 2021

Acts 8:26-40

For some people it is one of the most painful memories of school and perhaps even childhood itself. Whether it was for a game, a spelling bee or some other activity, the teacher would pick two students to be the team leaders. Those two students would then take turns calling out the names of the classmates whom they wanted to be on their team. What this really was of course was a popularity contest. The number of the unchosen would steadily shrink until the last two students were left; one of their names would be called out and the last child faced utter humiliation. He or she was now on a team by default and not by anyone's choice.

As I said a moment ago, this was essentially a popularity contest that made the pecking order, who was 'in' and who was 'out', clear to everyone. The fear of not being included however isn't just restricted to children as the same fear also troubles many adults. Do I really belong or not? Am I an insider or an outsider? While it may not be obvious at first, that issue is addressed in today's scripture passage.

It was during the early days of the church and the church was wracked by debate and controversy. The first Christians were of course Jewish and they, quite understandably, kept the laws and traditions that they were used to. They never gave this any real thought but then when some non-Jews began converting to Christianity, the great debate began; did these Gentiles have to become Jewish and keep the Jewish laws and traditions before they could become Christians?

This was the situation when one day an angel told Philip, who was one of the original twelve disciples, to go to the great road that went across the desert from Israel to Egypt. On that road he met an Ethiopian eunuch. We don't know what his name was, but he was a very important official in the royal Ethiopian court and was on his way home from Jerusalem. He was riding in his chariot and reading a scroll of the prophet Isaiah out loud. Philip heard him and asked him if he understood what he was reading. The answer was an honest 'no' and so Philip offered to explain it to him. The Ethiopian invited Philip to ride along with him and then Philip explained the meaning of the passage, saying that it was really about Jesus. The Ethiopian was so inspired by what Phillip had to say that

when they came to a small pool of water, he asked if he could be baptized right then and there. “Look” he said, “here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?”

Well, there was a lot standing in the way. For starters, this man most certainly was not Jewish and remember, at this point most of the Christians by far were Jews. Above all though, the man was a eunuch. Now this may not seem significant to us but this would have been a big factor in Philip’s decision, simply because the Book of Deuteronomy is very specific; eunuchs were not and could not be a part of the Kingdom of God. As stated in Deuteronomy 23:1: “No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord”. The Bible was explicit: since this man was a eunuch, he was expressly forbidden to be a part of the community of faith. And yet, here was this man wanting to be baptized! What was Philip to do?

We of course know the answer. Philip baptized him and after this the Ethiopian continued his journey home where, it is claimed, he established the Christian Church of Ethiopia which still exists today. And as for Philip? While the Bible doesn’t say so, I don’t doubt that his actions sent shockwaves through the fledgling church. Just who did Philip think he was anyways, baptizing a Gentile. And to make matters even worse, he had baptized a eunuch and so defied God’s law!

Who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’? Who is included and who isn’t? What is core to the gospel and being a Christian, and what is not? There is nothing new in these questions, and over the years the church has wrestled with them many times. Not surprisingly, that debate is still going on today.

During the past few years our denomination, like many other Protestant denominations, has been wrestling with issues surrounding sexuality. On one side of the debate are those who, based on their interpretation of scripture, believe that a marriage should only be between a male and a female. On the other side of the debate are those who, based on their interpretation and understanding of scripture, believe that a marriage can be between two consenting adults regardless of their gender. Both sides grant the importance of scripture but differ on how it should be interpreted and where the Holy Spirit is leading the church.

This debate has been going on for several years and after years of study and reflection, the General Assembly held two years ago (which like all assemblies, was composed of one sixth of the ministers of our denomination and an elder for each minister) decided that there are two equally valid ways of defining marriage. A marriage can be defined as a covenant relationship between a man and woman or, it can equally be understood as a covenant relationship between two adults. That same Assembly also decided that presbyteries and congregations may call and ordain LGBTQ1 persons whether they are married or single, the provision being that everyone has a liberty of conscience; no one whether they be ministers, sessions, or congregations, will be forced to approve of or participate in something that they believe is wrong. These proposals of course mark a major change in our denomination's beliefs and practices and so they, like any other major changes, were referred to the presbyteries for consideration under what is called the Barrier Act.

The Barrier Act is a part of our denomination's church law and is designed to prevent any assembly from making a major decision that may not be supported by the church at large. The presbyteries, which are composed of all of the active ministers and an elder for each minister in a geographical area, vote on the proposed changes. If, and only if a majority of the presbyteries, making up a majority of the ministers and the elders, agree to the changes, can the process of approving the proposed changes continue. This was done last year, and by a solid majority, the proposed changes were approved. Since this approval was granted, the proposed changes have now been returned to this year's General Assembly for final consideration. If, and only if this year's Assembly approves, will the changes take effect.

All of this has been a very painful and divisive experience for the larger church of which we are a part as both sides in this debate sincerely believe that their interpretation of both scripture and the leading of the Holy Spirit is the right one. Indeed, determining the will of God is not always easy. I remember something I said years ago when I was the interim moderator of a vacant congregation that was struggling to determine who God was calling to be their next minister: "wouldn't it be a lot easier if God simply posted the name of their next minister on a flashing neon sign in the sky?" But of course this isn't how God has chosen to work. He leaves it up to us to work things out, and that includes the

issue before this year's Assembly. Truly the commissioners have an awesome responsibility, but it is not just theirs alone.

At last month's presbytery meeting the ministers and elders who will be attending this year's Assembly on behalf of our presbytery were formally commissioned. Normally this is done by the Moderator of Presbytery, but I was asked to do it this year since I am the convenor of the presbytery's Nominating Committee which is responsible for lining up the commissioners to attend. The commissioning included this question asked of the presbytery members: "Do you, the members of the Presbytery, promise to pray for the commissioners attending the 146th meeting of the General Assembly?"

The answer was "we do", but what goes for the members of the presbytery also goes for the rest of us as well. The Assembly will be meeting from this afternoon until next Wednesday and as a part of our own ministry during the coming week, we should be offering up our own prayers on behalf of the Rev. Dr. Daniel Scott who is this year's Moderator, the Clerks of Assembly, and all of the Commissioners, as they strive to determine where the Holy Spirit is leading our denomination and what He is calling us to do.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, on this General Assembly Sunday, we give you thanks for all of the men and women, ministers and elders alike, who have willingly agreed to attend this year's Assembly even when it means making difficult and challenging decisions on behalf of the rest of us. We pray for your blessing upon them, the Moderator, and the Clerks of Assembly as well, that through your Spirit you will guide and lead them so that all may be in accordance with your will.

As our country still tries to come to grips with the discovery of the children's remains in Kamloops, and the dread of what may be discovered at other residential schools, we pray for those devastated by the discovery and those who are still haunted by their own experiences in these institutions. We pray as well for our very society itself as we confront the uncomfortable truth that even as we like to think of ourselves as being so caring, we permitted these things to happen. Help us we pray, to make things right and to make sure that nothing like this will

ever happen again. We ask this especially of your church, your Son's body here on earth, that operated so many of the schools and under whose watch so much of this happened.

We pray this day for all who are ill, all who mourn, and all who are feeling worn down as the pandemic continues, even as we hope for things to be better sooner rather than later.

We pray for your blessing, and that your compassion will be over all that you have made.

We ask these things in your Son's name.

Amen