

## Acts 8:26-40 The Ethiopian

Very often, Christians are rather centric in their understanding of their faith's and of its history. That is, they think of it in terms that are familiar. Sometimes they are found unaware of histories in other places.

Our lesson for this week gives an opportunity for a correction, because it speaks to us of the spread of gospel faith into the African interior, and even before it spread into Europe, the history of which is better known to us.

Bear with me for a few minutes while I relate some of what I learned about the history of Christianity in Africa. I learned a little Coptic Christianity, which turns out simply to be "Egyptian." The early Christians who spoke the Egyptian language developed their own unique brand of the faith.

They managed to maintain continuity for the last 2000 years, and estimates are of about 10 to 20 million Coptic Christians in Egypt and the Sudan presently. It was a Coptic church in Egypt that fell victim to a terrorist attack on Easter in 2017. Some of you may remember.

Christianity further south in Ethiopia developed along more Orthodox lines, but its history there still goes back to very early time.

I must admit that I am unfamiliar with east African geography and had to look it up. It turns out that most historians regard the use of the word "Ethiopia" as a Greek way of saying Africa, and that our story today should be thought of as referring to the Sudan, rather than the modern country of Ethiopia.

What makes all this very interesting is the story about the finance minister in the court of the "Ethiopian" queen called "Candace." We know him as the Ethiopian Eunuch. The implication is that this man went back home and proclaimed his newly accepted faith and thus was the first evangelist to the east-african peoples.

### Different

What cannot be escaped in the account is that this man was different. He was one of the "others" the bible teaches us to love. His African heritage as well as his role as a eunuch places him outside the norms of early Christian culture and practice.

He was African. This identity undoubtedly means that he was a person of color. I am not sure the Jewish people of Jesus' day had the same negative racial history as we do, there was certainly no hesitance on Philip's part to accept him by baptizing him, but there was certainly a different ethnic and racial background.

He was also a eunuch, a status that forbade him from entrance to the Temple court. The practice of castrating young men who served the Queen was common in some cultures, but not well-received in Judaism. The instructions in the Torah (5 Books) forbade eunuchs from entering the Temple because they were “blemished” (Deut. 23:1-3, Lev. 21:18-20). His admittance into the faith is important.

And if he was Jewish, he was not ethnically Jewish in the ordinary sense for his times. Some consider him the first Gentile convert because his story is told before the encounter between Peter and Cornelius, the Roman soldier.

No matter the case, the story sets itself up as a challenge to us and to all Christians, because we tend to gather among those similar in heritage to ourselves, and have historically been less willing to associate with those of a different racial or cultural or ecclesiastical background.

Let me also suggest that this passage is significant because some of us identify as “other,” outside the main group. Anyone who has ever experienced being excluded, even on a small scale, knows how disorienting it feels. Here we find one example among several, of outsiders accepted.

## The Spirit

One must also pay close attention in this text to the activity of the Holy Spirit. A prominent theme in Acts, and one to which almost all Christians ascribe, is that in remarkable ways God directs our lives, sometimes to places and endeavors that are extraordinary. Philip was led by an angel, it seems almost as if on a whim, to head to Egypt on the road to Gaza.

One can neither explain this event in an ordinary sense nor the presence of this African official riding in a chariot and trying to comprehend the mysteries of the Book of Isaiah.

What is even more remarkable is the excitement and willingness of this official to accept Christ by faith and be baptized. He certainly would not have been in Philip’s target audience.

Perhaps we, in our attempts at evangelism, could learn *not* to target: the young, the millennials or the baby-boomers, the secular humanists, Muslims, Jews, etc. We often think like modern retailers who target advertising to their customer base. That is the human way, not the way of the Spirit.

What Can We Learn?

Once again we must speak of the meaning of this story for us in *our* circumstances. It would seem that a couple of things become clear upon reflection.

The first is that we can learn the value of an open mind. One can hardly be led by the spirit without it. In this openness, we may find ourselves in circumstances and relationships we wouldn't have chosen, and yet that are rewarding and meaningful.

And in our attempts to explain, we may end up left only with the language of miracle, being able only to say what happened and what it meant to us, without being able to prove our conviction that it was of God.

The only way I know how to help people who want to follow the Spirit's lead is to "pay attention." Pay attention to the accounts of other believers who share their experiences, and be willing to share yours.

Pay attention to the scriptures, which are God's word to us, but also come to us largely in the form of other people sharing their experience of God, and of Jesus, and of the Spirit.

And pay attention to your life; be slow to question your circumstances, rather seek to understand them. Believe that you have been accepted and the direction your life has taken is a part of that acceptance.

Pray, keep a journal, look to be helpful to anyone with whom you come in contact just as Philip was helpful to the African treasurer. Live in the moment, one day at a time, even when things are going well. Pay attention, keep an open mind, that is one lesson. Do not be too surprised by the Spirit.

Another lesson is to be ready to accept people, all people. Set aside stereotypes and pre-conceived notions. One never knows about angels unawares; about meaningful life-changing encounters.

This kind of willingness can be risky. Our experience of "other" people is often adversarial and can lead to painful confrontations, the is the human way, but it is not the way of the Spirit. Keep an openness anyway. Otherwise, one may miss the miracle.

And finally, as always, remember to love, as God has loved us. The Bible, which is God's word, can't be correctly understood if we fail to apprehend the primary significance of the rule of love, the highest of all rules.

To listen to some evangelists, one might conclude there would never be a baptism without first begging people to submit to it. With a little attention, and openness, and love, we may find people begging us to baptize them, as this the Ethiopian did with Philip; we may find ourselves asking to be drawn deeper in by the Spirit, into the life of God.

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