

WHO'S IN THE CHARIOT NOW?

The Fifth Sunday of Easter
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Mayer
May 2, 2021

As we continue our journey through the book of Acts during this Easter season, we arrive today at the wonderful story of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip is directed by an angel to "go toward the south" (Acts 8:26) – a clear directive to extend the ministry further afield. He quickly encounters a court official of the Candace, the Queen of "Ethiopia" – which in Luke's day could refer to anywhere within the far reaches of the known world to the south of Palestine. So, the sense is that this is someone from very far away – a true foreigner. He is also someone who has traveled widely on the queen's behalf, and has encountered and become a follower of Judaism, but who as a eunuch is forbidden by Jewish Law to convert (see Deut. 23:1). He would have been known as a "God-fearer" in the Jewish world – not a Gentile, but not a Jew, either. Today we might say he was "Jewish adjacent".

He is a wealthy, highly educated, and intelligent man, and he has paused on his journey home from Jerusalem, where he had been on pilgrimage, to read from scripture. He is reading aloud, as would have been typical in the ancient world, and Philip recognizes the words of the prophet Isaiah. Prompted by the Holy Spirit – who is the driving force behind everything that happens in the book of Acts – Philip approaches the chariot of the eunuch, who invites Philip to join him. The ensuing conversation leads quickly to a request by the eunuch for baptism, which Philip gladly offers. When the eunuch comes up out of the water, Philip is gone – he has been divinely transported away. The eunuch continues joyfully on his way.

So, in this remarkable and appealing story, the Jesus movement takes a giant step towards including gentiles as members of the community – the eunuch is kind of a halfway figure. Equally importantly, it welcomes someone who brings a great deal to the table already, acquired before he had any contact with the Jesus movement. And again, we see the power of God miraculously at work through the Holy Spirit, both in the fact that this meeting took place at all, and then in Philip's being transported away. (And notice – the eunuch seems to take this occurrence completely in stride! Miracles are a part of the package once one is baptized!).

So – who do you think might play the role of the Ethiopian eunuch in our context today? I'd like to offer as candidates the twenty- and thirty-somethings of the world who were either raised in the church but are no longer involved, or who had no real religious formation to begin with. One place where I encounter this group is in my psychotherapy practice, and I'd like to offer a composite example of what I am hearing from them about religion, along with some statistics from the Pew Research Center that back up what I'm hearing.

With respect to my composite example, the idea that there is simply no longer any interest in God, or prayer, or spirituality, or service is simply wrong. My composite example is usually reading something that concerns spirituality in some way, has very strong ideas about what is wrong with the church, and has passionately held views about social injustice. She cites her church upbringing as the source of many of these views. But she is very ready with strong criticism of what she sees as the primarily negative influence of the church in the world today.

Pew says that 64% of millennials still identify as Christian, Jewish, or Muslim; fully 50% say with "absolute certainty" that they believe in God (and another 30% with "varying amounts of certainty"); only 6% consider themselves atheists; and 39% pray daily. This is hardly the profile of a lost generation. Like the Ethiopian eunuch, they are engaged, but they stand outside the organized,

gathered community of faith. In fact, they often feel actively excluded: just like the eunuch, who was excluded from becoming a Jew even though he was devoted to the faith, my composite example believes that the church is more focused on its own survival than it is interested in her.

Today's story speaks precisely and compellingly to this state of affairs. Look at what the Holy Spirit did with respect to the eunuch: She told Philip to head south in his direction, and when he met the eunuch, to "go over to this chariot and join it." (Acts 8:29) "*Seek out* this man who feels excluded," says the Spirit. "*Listen* to what he is reading and thinking." And when he asks if he may be a part of the community, "*say yes.*" Philip obeys, and a gifted man becomes a part of the new Jesus movement: one who had previously been excluded from the community to which he felt deeply drawn. Luke tells us that after the Spirit "snatches Philip away...the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing." (Acts 8:39)

We hear no more about the eunuch; but imagine the gifts he brought as he continued on in his new life in Christ. Who knows what his impact was when he returned to the court of his Queen. One can only imagine that it was profound. What this story calls us to imagine today, though, is what the impact would be if an entire generation of people who hunger for spiritual community but feel excluded were reached out to and welcomed and *learned from*. For this is the deep truth: the generation of twenty- and thirty-somethings has answers for us about what the Church needs to look like in the 2020s if it is to grow and thrive.

So, what are they saying? Here are a few highlights (from *ReachRight: Important Statistics About Millennials Your Church Needs to Know*):

- They want to be asked about their needs and opinions
- They want less focus on "religious-speak" and more action and "plain-speak gospel"
- They want more time focused on service and less meetings (!)
- They want more teaching and less "blaming the culture"
- They want a more welcoming church, often saying that churches can be closed and "clique-ish"

What an opportunity we have, right now, at this juncture in our journey as Sister Parishes, to listen to these voices as we become one family. The good news is that we are already oriented in a way that lines up well with what our young neighbors are saying. Let's just be sure that this part of the Easter message is fully embraced in our Ossining Episcopal Family: that we should take the detours the Holy Spirit leads us to take and climb up into the chariots of those we meet along the way. The encounters we have will surprise and amaze us, and we are sure to go on our way rejoicing.