

NO PERFECT PEOPLE ALLOWED

Jesus People Are Authentic & Available

Jesus People (Part 5)

Text: Acts 8:4-40

Precious People

Last weekend I married my 25-year old brother and his new wife underneath an oak tree in the wine country of Northern California. I love this couple very much and it was a tremendous privilege to take part in their service. Attending the service was a fascinating assortment of people from the commune where my sister-in-law grew up. There were Indian and Asian and Jewish students from Stanford, Berkeley, and high school days. There was the daughter of a conservative Senator from Alaska, and several same-sex couples, and people with some very creative piercings. There was a man of honor and a canine ringbearer and a premarital pregnancy. There was, in effect, a vivid window into the stunningly pluralistic, post-modern world that is becoming America today and already is Europe.

Perhaps it is not surprising that there wasn't much desire to invite Jesus or the church to this gathering. I was politely asked if I could strip the service of references to Jesus and refrain from churchy language. And I willingly did, because I understood something of the problem they faced. It was difficult for my brother and sister-in-law to imagine that Jesus would fit into the middle of a circle of people with so many doubts about God and organized religion, so many divergent lifestyles and belief systems. There were going to be so many genuine human beings, imperfect people, at this wedding that it would be uncomfortable and hypocritical if they just pretended to be at home with Him or his church.

The Eunuch & the Magician

People today can feel, well, almost like "eunuchs" around church people. You know what a eunuch is, don't you? It's a person who doesn't have all the same parts that other people have. We meet an "**Ethiopian eunuch**" in Acts chapter 8. He is obviously very bright. He occupies an "**important official**" position in the world. He's the CFO for "**Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.**" The man is clearly driving a nice "**chariot.**" He's even got an interest in spirituality, as evidenced by the fact that he's thumbing through the religious "**book of Isaiah**" and has gone at least once "**to Jerusalem to worship.**" But this doesn't stop him from feeling that he's still operating at something of a loss.

There are many Ethiopians around the edges of Christianity. Now and then they stray in here or to some other church. They're not sure when to stand up or sit down. They don't know all the words to the songs, the creeds, or prayers. They don't know what

the “right” answers are to the spiritual questions, or even what all the questions are. They haven’t figured their way around the religious building. They aren’t sure of the dress code. They’re embarrassed when they say “trespasses” instead of “debtors.” They may well wish they had the kind of faith or conviction they feel church people do but it’s simply missing from them. They reach for it, but it’s just not there. They may have addictions or habits or history that they’re pretty sure would not fit in with church people. They know they’re not perfect and some of them don’t care to be.

What makes connecting with Jesus even more difficult for them is that these spiritual Ethiopians have sometimes run across a Magician or two. I’m talking about people like the character of Simon we meet in Acts chapter 8 as well. Verse 9 says that Simon **“amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention... They followed him because he had amazed them.”** **“Simon himself believed and was baptized,”** we hear in Acts 8:13. Simon appeared to be an earnest, charismatic, gifted, trustworthy leader. But the truth is, we read in verse 21, his **“heart [was] not right before God.”** He was **“full of bitterness and captive to sin.”** He was a fake Jesus Person, in it for the prosperity and power he thought God would give him.

As I stood up to do that wedding last weekend, I could see the eyes of some of the people there, click onto auto-glaze – “I’m not like that guy,” they instantly thought. “I don’t believe what he believes; I can’t live the way he lives. I’m an Ethiopian.” And I saw some people’s eyes hood in auto-mistrust. How many of those people had a Simon in their past, I wonder? How many people had put their trust in a parent who wasn’t there, because he or she was chasing personal ambition or addiction of some kind? How many put their trust in a priest, pastor or other authority figure, only to have them abuse them physically or spiritually? How many had been dumped, or felt the violence of divorce, or a loved one’s sudden death?

Sure some people rise up and prevail over these things. But, let’s not fool ourselves. The world in which people born since 1965 have grown up has been substantially faster, noisier, more fragmented, and less filled with dependable authority figures than any time in recent history. The epidemic bitterness, the captivity to sin and self-interest of the many Simons in our age, has taken a toll on people’s ability to put their trust in God. Some people need help believing that life can ever be truly secure again, love can ever be trustworthy again, a promise or a truth or God himself can ever bear their weight again.

Be a Philip

Buckner Fanning tells the story of a woman who came to a church-sponsored shelter for alcoholic women. The pastor meets her and encourages her to dare to “lean on God.” To his utter shock, the woman absolutely explodes with rage and shouts that she has had enough of Christians preaching at her, judging her, laying burdens on her.

The pastor is completely floored and silenced. At this point, a laywoman named Jane simply reaches over and pats the woman's hand. "That's all right, honey. You don't have to believe that stuff. You don't have to come to church. You don't have to lean on God. You just lean on me, and I'll lean on God." Eight years later, the alcoholic woman, finally surrenders her life to Jesus Christ.

Who could you invite to lean on you, while you leaned on Jesus until, one day, they found themselves in the arms of Jesus too? In other words, to whom could you be a figure like Philip? Philip, if you did not know, was one of the twelve original Jesus People and the Master's way had rubbed off on him. Let me touch quickly on six specific things we see Philip doing in Acts 8:26 and following, worth our noting and trying ourselves.

FIRST, Philip dares to respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit that tells him **"go to that chariot and stay near it."** Who is God going to prompt you to come alongside in this week ahead? Will you respond to that? I thank and praise God that once, years ago, when I was just 18, somebody came alongside me.

SECONDLY, Philip was willing to carefully listen to what the Ethiopian's life was saying. He was running alongside a noisy chariot. He had to listen very carefully to pick up what was being said amidst the clatter of wheels and horses on gravel. The Bible says, **"He heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet."** What's the story someone else's life is speaking? What are the passions, the questions, the hungers, being spoken out there? Listen carefully and God will help you hear.

THIRDLY, notice that Philip didn't preach a sermon or spout a lesson. Instead, as Jesus himself so often did, Philip simply dared to ask a probing question: **"Do you understand what you are reading?"** You could do likewise with someone. "What do you wonder about God? What do you make of Jesus? Where has religion disappointed you? What do you wish you understood better about spirituality?"

FOURTHLY, Philip was willing to wait to be asked to explain what he himself knew. **"How can I understand unless someone explains it to me."** the Ethiopian said. And verse 31 goes on to say: **"So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him."** Come alongside, listen carefully, ask probing questions, and eventually the person you are companioning will invite you to tell your story.

FIFTH, Philip would say, begin with the other person's interest and then bridge from there to say what you knew about Jesus. **"The eunuch asked Philip, 'Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?' Then Philip began with that very passage and told him the good news about Jesus."**

SIXTH and finally, help people take the next step of response. For Philip it was to baptize the Ethiopian into the community of believers. For you it may be to simply meet to talk again. It may be to furnish that person with an additional resource. It may be to invite him or her to your home or small group. It may be to pray with them. I remember meeting with a distraught man once when I was a young pastor. We had a spiritual conversation like the one described here. I wasn't sure what the next step of response should be and so asked, "What do you think Conrad? What's the next step for you?" "I think it's time I asked Jesus into my life." So I helped him pray.

Authenticity & Availability

I can't tell you how many significant spiritual conversations God opened up during the wedding reception that followed my brother's service last weekend. All I can tell you is that most of the time God works most powerfully not when pastors are talking, but when Jesus People like Philip are listening. John Burke, pastor of the Gateway Community Church in Austin Texas says: "Our generation longs for something authentic. They are searching for 'the real thing,' though they don't know what the 'real thing' is. Because this generation has endured so much 'me-ism' and letdown from those they were supposed to follow and trust, they want to see a genuine faith that works for less-than-perfect people before they are willing to trust. They want to know this God-thing is more than talk... They desperately want permission to be who they are with the hope of becoming more."

They will respond to a community of people who have an authentic understanding of how hard and complicated life can be and an authentic experience of how Christ meets them in the middle of it. They will respond to an authentic, available people who say God loves you more than enough to welcome you just as you are and so much that he'll help you become who you can be.

Let's be Jesus People like that.