

Last Sunday, I ended the message with this slide, a quote from Rachel Held Evan's book *Inspired*: "The Church is not a group of people who believe all the same things: The Church is a group of people caught up in the same story, with Jesus at the center." I like this quote, but it raises a question or two. After all, are there not some essential beliefs that tie us together as The Church? This was certainly the function of creeds in early Christianity; to provide a framework of essential beliefs: The Apostles Creed, The Nicene Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed, etc.

And yet, I think the point of Evans' quote is that the Church must also include people who are not yet "all in" as far as the essentials identified in the creeds. After all, evangelism is not about bringing people into intellectual adherence with a formula or creed! No! Our hope is that people – all of us included– will get swept up into a lifegiving relationship with Jesus; that his story will become ours, and not just partially, but completely! Jesus' story is the one we want to enter into and indwell; the story we want to give shape and meaning to our lives.

That's one thing I take from Evans' quote. But more than that, I think Evans is pointing out that its' a mistake when we presume that Christians will all believe the same things about non-creedal issues; things like creation vs. evolution, abortion, homosexuality, the proper way to be baptized, etc., This approach often produces a litmus test Christianity that seems to be more and more the norm these days, as if Jesus commanded us to love and fellowship with those who think the same way we already do. Is that *the gospel*? (If so, the gospel is very different than what Jesus actually said and taught!)

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This question brings us to week 5 in our current series, *A More Christlike Christianity*. Each week, we've been building some scaffolding, where what we've said in prior weeks is foundational for successive Sundays. Today our theme is *A More Christlike Gospel*, and it is important to keep in mind everything we've already explored as our goal is to be a more Christlike church, where all of us are caught up in the story of Jesus regardless if others within our same church have differing beliefs on creedal and non-creedal matters. (The video I showed in last week's sermon is helpful to keep in mind as we move into this week, so if you missed last week, take time to watch that!)

I've asked Kriselle Crane to read our scripture for this morning [Acts 8:26-38].

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So what was 'the gospel' Philip shared with the Ethiopian eunuch? Well, first of all, since none of the

gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John – none of them had been written when the events described in Acts 8 took place, Philip did not have any of what we call 'the gospels' to share with this eunuch. Nor could Philip have referred the eunuch to that much beloved passage, John 3:16, which Martin Luther called 'the gospel in miniature.' (A quick and important footnote, Martin Luther did not intend to reduce 'the gospel' to just John 3:16 such that we'd ignore 'the gospel' as it comes to us through other scriptural texts.)

The events described in Acts 8 also came before the conversion of the apostle Paul. This means Philip did not have Paul's letter to the Romans as he rode in the chariot with the Ethiopian eunuch. So Philip could not take the eunuch down the "Romans Road" to salvation. Some of us are more familiar with the Romans Road than others, but basically it cites anywhere from 4 to 10 verses from Paul's letter to the Romans as a summary of the Gospel, usually accompanied by an invitation to say 'The Sinners Prayer.' The image on the screen is the "Romans Road" on a refrigerator magnet!

1. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Rm. 3:23)
2. God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Rm. 5:8)
3. The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rm. 6:23)
4. (So) If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Rm. 10:9)
5. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. (Rm. 10:13)

For some, this is what it means to share the gospel. But again, Philip could not point to Romans as Paul had not been converted and would not write Romans for a few more years. And just as Martin Luther did not intend to reduce 'the gospel' to John 3:16, I suspect Paul would bristle that his testimony has been reduced to something that fits on a refrigerator magnet.

Finally, Philip also did not have anything like the Apostles Creed to share with the eunuch. Both the Nicene and the Apostles creeds came to be about 300 years after the events described in Acts 8. Still, long before the Romans Road, it was assent to the Apostles Creed that was considered essential for saving faith.

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I lift this up to point out that whenever we talk about 'the gospel' there's a tendency to think of 'the gospel' as a formula whereby we can obtain some sort of certainty (and security) regarding our eternal standing before God. But as we've said from the beginning of this series, Jesus himself declares, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of



heaven, but *only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven...*" (Matthew 7:21) And so, in spite of what Paul writes in Romans 10:13, that "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved," Jesus' words reflect a real possibility that we can say 'Lord, Lord' and still miss out on being recognized by Jesus if we fail to do the will of his Father.

To muddy things a little more, we also remember that in John 10:16, Jesus says, "Other sheep I have who are not of this fold," indicating that some who we'd suspect will miss out on being known by Jesus, may actually be enfolded into his flock.

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I don't say this to stir up confusion or controversy, but simply to point out that our tidy summations of 'the gospel' cannot actually contain the fullness of the gospel. And we should not be surprised by this! Even the apostle Paul describes the gospel as a 'mystery.' To the church in Ephesus, Paul writes, "Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains." (Ephesians 6:19-20) So it might be better to think of John 3:16, the Romans Road, and even the creeds, as possible entry points into the immeasurable mystery of the gospel, even as we know that these were not the starting points for Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch.

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This leads to the first of a few things I think we need to notice about Acts 8. First, according to the story, the starting point of 'the gospel' was a passage from Isaiah. (And though we know that eunuch is reading from Isaiah 53:7-8, remember that at that time there were no chapters and verses like we use now.) So, though Acts provides no other details about the 'gospel' Philip shared, we know that starting with Isaiah, Philip proclaimed the good news.

But that is not really the starting point, is it? Notice that the story tells us that it's God, through Philip, who is chasing after the Ethiopian eunuch! We know this because both v. 26 and v. 29 reveal that it's the Holy Spirit that drives Philip into this encounter on a desert road outside Judea. So the actual starting point is God's heart pursuing after this Ethiopian eunuch.

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But what makes his sharing of the gospel Christlike is precisely that Philip ends up alongside a person who is so outside 'the norm.' And this is another thing we really need to pay attention to. This individual is not just non-Jewish, and therefore Gentile; but of Ethiopia, which biblically speaking was the outer limits of the known world. And this differentness not only includes skin color, right? Blackness? It also includes the fact that, as a eunuch (and though the text repeatedly refers

to 'him' and 'he') a eunuch's gender and sexuality is neither male nor female. That is what eunuch means.

Though the text doesn't tell us how this person became a eunuch, Jesus describes, without a hint of negative judgment, at least three varieties of eunuchs in Matthew 19:12, "There are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made so by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." Today we'd call a eunuch from birth 'intersex' or maybe 'transgender.' A eunuch for the sake of the kingdom might be what we call celibate, but might also include those who identify as asexual.

So just as Jesus transgressed societal and religious boundaries by associating with gentiles, tax collectors, lepers, sex-workers, Samaritans, etc., Philip is Christlike in crossing boundaries to share the gospel with someone who doesn't fit into societal norms. (Just like the video I showed on the second week of this series, this is something I'd not seen before, even though it's right there in the text!)

I think this helps us understand the magnitude of the eunuch's question as they come upon some water: "Look, here is water! *What is to prevent me from being baptized?*" The phrasing interesting. Why is it not simply, "Here's some water! Will you baptize me?" I think the question implies something the eunuch suspects based on prior experience, that there must be a catch. As someone who doesn't fit into the typical categories, there must be something to prevent the eunuch from taking part of the gospel. (In essence, the question is, "What's the bad news of the good news that prevents me from being a part of it?")

And how does Philip respond? He enacts the gospel. He baptizes the eunuch.

While there is a lot we cannot and do not know, what we do know from the most clear and direct reading of Acts 8 is this: 1.) It is God who chases after this eunuch. 2.) Beginning with Isaiah, Philip has shared the salvation story with Jesus at the center. 3.) That in crossing boundaries to come alongside this eunuch, Philip emulated Jesus' lifegiving ministry. And 4.) There is nothing to prevent Philip from baptizing the eunuch.

It's as if, after spending so much time watching and learning from Jesus, that Philip know that the gospel is good news of great joy for all people. Amen.