

May 14, 2017
Fifth Sunday of Easter

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“What is to prevent me from...?”

The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine



*“Indeed, how can I understand the plight of my neighbor unless I sit at their feet,
walk their streets, hear their pain, participate in their deepest joys?
How can I unless God gives me the grace and patience and humility
to heed the witness of those the world tramples?”
~ Eric Barreto*

The Church of the Covenant
Presbyterian Church (USA)
11205 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, Ohio 44106
CovenantWeb.org

1 John 4:7–12

7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Acts 8:26–39

26 Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. ³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." ³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

“What is to prevent me from...?”

1 John 4:7–12; Acts 8:26–39

I have never been a great scrapbook maker. Every year, I think this is the year I’m going to sort through all those pictures on my computer and put them together artfully to tell the story of our family. And every year it doesn’t happen. The closest I’ve ever come is making baby books for each of my three children – pictures and statistics from their birth and their first-year milestones of smiling and rolling over and sitting up.

The Book of Acts is like a baby book that illustrates the early years of the church and, like a baby book, Acts gives us a glimpse into the triumphs and failures of this growing and changing community of believers. But unlike our baby books, in the book of Acts there is another main character, besides the baby, who shows up in just about every story: God, in the form of the Holy Spirit. Acts is the book that teaches us the power and importance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church.

In today’s story, the Holy Spirit sends Philip to a wilderness road. In the Bible, the wilderness isn’t just a physical description, *it’s a spiritual one*. The wilderness is where **transformation** happens, and this story is no exception. Once on the road, Philip sees a chariot – the ancient version of a souped-up sports car. When he follows the orders of the Holy Spirit and starts running alongside it, he hears someone reading something familiar: a passage from the prophet Isaiah.

Reading for pleasure was not something that happened much in the ancient world. The sacred texts of the Jews were painstakingly copied onto parchment scrolls, which were very expensive. When Philip hears the rider of the chariot reading from this scroll, he immediately knows: this person is wealthy and powerful and educated, *and* this person knows something about God.

Imagine the scene: Philip, running alongside a moving chariot, struggling to keep up, panting out the question over the sound of wheels and the horses: “Do you...understand...what you are...reading?” At this point, what should

have happened is that the man in the chariot would have dismissed Philip as a rude and intrusive stranger – like the person who starts washing your windshield at a stoplight and then wants money for his efforts. People didn't come running up alongside fancy chariots and start questioning the occupants. The man inside *should* have urged his driver to go faster and leave this unwelcome interruption in the dust. Instead, this wealthy, powerful, well-educated court official, *asks for Philip's help*. He doesn't understand what he's reading, or at least he's not sure he does. So he invites Philip to join him, and to teach him about this passage of scripture describing a suffering servant of God.

What Philip could not have known when he went running alongside the chariot, is that, in addition to being wealthy, powerful and educated, the rider in the chariot was also a eunuch, a castrated male servant classified as a sexual minority. This is why he could work near the queen, because eunuchs were deemed safe to serve women of the royal household.¹ This particular eunuch was literate and had access to Hebrew scriptures, where he would have found contradictory messages about whether someone like him – a eunuch and a foreigner – could be welcomed into God's family. *Then, as now, the Bible doesn't always give us clear and straightforward answers to our deepest, most urgent spiritual questions.* And so he asks Philip for help, which is just as remarkable, if not more so, than the fact that Philip agrees to help him.

This winter and spring, members of our congregation joined with members of Fairmount Presbyterian Church to engage in conversations about the sin of racism. One of the concepts raised in our readings and discussions was *white privilege*: the fact that our society has been constructed in such a way as to afford certain privileges to people based solely on the color of their skin. The only way to effectively confront white privilege is for those of us who identify as white to actively work to recognize and give up some of the privilege we hold...and the only way we can do this is to recognize that we can't fully understand our privilege without help from our brothers and sisters of color.

¹ Karen Baker-Fletcher, commentary in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*, Westminster John Knox, 2008, pp. 454-458.

The Ethiopian may be marginalized because of his status as a foreigner and a eunuch, but compared to Philip, he is the one privileged by wealth and power and education. Yet he is willing to set them aside to ask for Philip's help.² When Philip discovers that the eunuch is reading the prophet Isaiah, he must have immediately understood why the Holy Spirit had brought the two of them together. Because Philip could teach this eunuch that the whole book of Isaiah promises freedom and justice for all those labeled as outcasts. And Philip could explain that the passage the man is reading, which describes a messianic figure being led to slaughter like a lamb silent before its shearer, well, this passage was about none other than Jesus, who had come to show that God's love extends to and includes *all* people.

Despite his wealth and education and access to power, the eunuch wants nothing more than the assurance that he too is welcomed into God's family. Into his desperation, Philip speaks the good news: through Jesus, God not only knows and understands humiliation and injustice and suffering; he has experienced it firsthand...and **overcome it with love**. "About whom is the prophet writing, himself or someone else?" the eunuch asks Philip. What he's really asking is what we all ask when we read God's word. **Is this a word for me?** Is this good news just about God and all those other people God loves, or **is it also good news for me?**³

As the chariot speeds along, Philip tells the eunuch that this good news is indeed for him – foreigner, outsider, outcast that he is. Philip tells him about John the Baptist, baptizing anyone who came, washing them clean of their past sin to prepare them for God's coming. Philip explains that Jesus himself, God's suffering servant, was baptized by John, and went on to demonstrate the boundary-breaking love of God, and to love all people so well that it got him killed. Philip tells the eunuch that even a violent and unjust execution was not enough to defeat God's love, and that God raised Jesus from the grave. Philip reveals that Jesus sent the disciples to share the good news that God's love really is for everyone. Philip must have said all of this, because when the chariot passed a body of water, the eunuch demanded that it stop and asked, "***What is to prevent me from being baptized?***"

² Barbara Brown Taylor, commentary in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*, Westminster John Knox, 2008, pp. 454-458.

³ Thomas G. Long, commentary in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*, Westminster John Knox, 2008, pp. 454-458.

This is a question we ought to ask every time we celebrate the sacrament of baptism. “*What is to prevent you from being baptized?*” Because the answer to this question reminds us that baptism is all about God’s love for each of us broken and sinful human beings, *and* that God’s love can **only truly be experienced in community**. We baptize Cora today **not** because there is nothing that would prevent her from being baptized. There are plenty of things, not the least of which is that she is so young she barely knows her own name, *much less God’s*. But we baptize her by asking her parents and her church family to take vows to teach her, to help her, to guide her as she begins to learn the wonder and mystery of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

When the eunuch asks this question: “What is to prevent me from being baptized,” he is challenging Philip, challenging the scriptures in his hand, even challenging God. And the question must have given Philip pause. The easy answer was that **there was a lot** to prevent him from being baptized. He had literally *just* heard about Jesus; he’d had no time to take a baptism class or meet with the pastor; he was an Ethiopian, a foreigner, far from the land of Israel and the first location of the church; he was a servant to the queen, loyal to the wrong sovereign; and he was a eunuch, one whose God-given body had been altered so that he could not live a so-called normal life.

What was to prevent him from being baptized? *All kinds of things*. But the Holy Spirit that brought Philip to this wilderness place was not about to desert him now, and when the eunuch asks the question and Philip struggles for an answer, the Spirit whispers in Philip’s ear an answer that surely surprised Philip as much as the eunuch. “**What is to prevent him? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.**”⁴

In the years immediately following World War II, Murat Yagan spent time in a remote corner of eastern Turkey, where he became friends with an elderly couple. Life had been good to the couple, but their one sadness was that they missed their only son, who had left some years before to work in Istanbul. One day Murat visited the old couple and found them *bursting with pride*, eager to show him the new cupboard their son had just sent from Istanbul. It was indeed a handsome piece of furniture, and the woman had already arranged her best tea set on its upper shelf.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Murat was polite but curious. Why would their son go through such an expense to send them a tea cupboard? And if the purpose of this piece of furniture was storage, why were there no drawers? “Are you **sure** it’s a tea cupboard?” Murat asked. Yes, they were sure. But the question continued to nag him. Finally, just before leaving he said, “Do you mind if I have a look at this tea cupboard?” With their permission, he turned the cupboard around and unscrewed a couple of packing boards. A set of cabinet doors swung open to reveal *a fully operative ham radio set*. The “tea cupboard” was intended to **connect** the couple to their son. But unaware of its real contents, they were simply using it *to display their china*.⁵

There is not one of us who can walk this journey of faith alone, who **alone** can figure out what it means **a faithful disciple**. Alone, we are much more likely to take the gifts of God – the Bible, the church, the Holy Spirit – and turn them into *beautiful pieces of furniture* that gather dust in the corner. Without Philip, the eunuch could not understand the scriptures. Without the eunuch, Philip could not understand the reach of God’s love. *We cannot navigate this journey of faith alone*. No matter who we are and what we think we know. *We need each other*.

We need infants and toddlers and adolescents.

We need millennials and Gen-Xers and boomers.

We need scholars and novices.

We need long-time members who know our history
and first-time visitors who see our unrealized potential.

We need pastors and lay leaders.

And we all need to **guide** and **encourage** one another, because we all have things that prevent us from feeling welcome and at home in God’s embrace. Which is why the task of *being the church* of Jesus Christ requires **constantly opening ourselves up** to the Holy Spirit *and to one another*.

We need each other.

We need to worship together and pray together.

We need to discern together and plan together.

We need to question together and wonder together.

⁵ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Tea Cupboard*, Monday, March 13, 2017, <https://cac.org/the-tea-cupboard-2017-03-13/>.

We need to rejoice together and mourn together.
We need to serve together and eat together.

And most of all, together, we need to open this book that is, for us, a sacred scrapbook of our faith, God's way of communicating with us, so that when any one of us dares to ask the question, "**What is to prevent me from answering God's call?**" we will all be ready and able to hear the Holy Spirit whispering in our ear and respond with conviction: **What is to prevent you? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.**

Amen.