

Readings:

Acts 8: 26-40

John 15:1-8

It is what it is – Not!
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Sermon Notes:

In this week's first reading, Luke establishes the boundaries or dimensions of the geography of discipleship in the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch. To understand this from Luke and his audience's perspective, we first have to talk about the area of Ethiopia and Meroe in what is today the Sudan region of Africa.

In Luke's time, this territory south of Egypt was an exotic place to those living in Jerusalem and the region. This far off land connected Central Africa with Egypt and major caravan routes and all the mysterious and strange items and foods from foreign lands. Not to mention its people who were equally exotic.

Kings of this land of the times were considered deities – and their only interaction with people, for the most part, was to be served by them.

The Queens were really the ones in charged and were called Candaces, actually Mother Queen.

As for the people themselves, they were considered beautiful, as well as living at the end of the world. Homer in the Odyssey refers to the Ethiopians as the "fathermost of men."

They also were a people very much interested in religious practices. This pilgrimage of the eunuch who is returning from worship in the Temple would be seen as a visit of some interest to the local folk, an occurred which always brought with it a good deal of attention.

It should also be said that Eunuchs were considered notable. Not because of the gender identity, but because they were important and powerful people in their own right, frequently holding high level positions in the courts of royalty of the Merotic/Ethiopians. In this narrative, the eunuch would be an interesting, exceptional, and exotic figure – connected to power and influence, as well.

So, the setting of the story is established. All of this would have been known to his audience.

The next exegetical question in this hermeneutical process is, of course, is it a true story.

Did it occur as described or is one of the “conversion narratives” of the times repeated over and again showing the power of the growing following of Jesus Christ. Well, we don’t know.

Please, remember that Scriptures were never meant to be historical treatises. They were meant to carry the message of the Good News in the risen Jesus. That’s what matters. That is what is true in the deepest of senses.

And this conversion story is told and retold, in part, as a confirmation of Acts 1:8, when Jesus appears to the gathered disciples and tells them:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

This interaction of Philip with the Eunuch from Ethiopia would be seen as a confirmation that the Good News was reaching even the ends of the earth to even the most foreign of people.

That’s the message. The universality and unstoppable force of the Good News.

And there is always more...

It is also a story about how others, those foreign among us (maybe those in the gap) stretch us beyond ourselves – giving us the opportunity to be more than we are, looking more deeply into what we believe, extending our lives and faith more fully into the world.

It is also a story about outside forces in our lives moving us. The voice we hear that calls to us.

In the story, Philip is not the initiator. Philip is used by the Spirit and the Eunuch to achieve what God has destined to be done. It was the angel of God who noticed the eunuch struggling with the Isaiah text and sent Philip to the chariot; it was the eunuch who invited Philip into his carriage, asking him for an explanation of the texts; actively seeking baptism, and then going on his way rejoicing, seemingly without any concern that Philip went “poof!”

No where in any of this narrative did the Angel of God, Philip, or the Eunuch say, “Well, it is what it is. Leave it alone. Let it be.”

No, instead interaction and explanation in the presence of the Spirit created a new understanding, a new freedom, a new joyfulness that freed the power and love through these actions. Actions that unleashed a message powerful enough to reach the ends of the world and the most exotic of peoples among us and send them rejoicing.

You might have heard Philip say, “People of Judea, it is not what it is! There is more! Listen to what the power of the risen Jesus does in the life of this exotic gentile. Think of what this power can do for you.”

“It is what it is?” Not!

Luke’s readers would have been in awe, again.

Like the different ways of seeing “mind the gap” – I’d like to suggest that this story and the gospel that follows also invites us to think about that expression, “It is what it is.”

Perhaps first used as a shorthand expression for acceptance of what cannot be changed, it is one of those sayings that for me, though, has always had a sense of futility about it. “It is what it is. There is nothing you can do about it. Suck it up. Just get through it. That’s the way it is. Period.”

The Angel, Eunuch, or Philip could each or all have said, “Well, it is what it is. Some will get it. Some won’t. Some will be with us in eternal salvation. Others won’t. It is what it is.”

And, yet, the gospels, all the writings in these and other holy books are about the opposite of what we see, what we think we know, what we are limited to in our thinking and our beliefs and interactions with God in our lives. In many ways, these teaching are the antithesis of “It is what it is” and might be referred to as embodying “it is what it is – not.”

Things are not without hope, not without promise, not without grace, support, help, explanations, intervention of the Spirit through others, and opportunities to carry the message of hope and salvation and the risen Christ in our lives. We are not about the transactional “it is what it is” but about the interactional “this is what it can be.”

One is a dead end. The other is a broad open highway in which we are inexorably part of the “vine” not a dismembered anecdotal aphorism or slogan.

Remember John’s words in this morning’s gospel the next time someone raises their eyebrows, shrugs their shoulders and says, “It is what it is”:

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

The message of this great tradition of ours, this living faith that is filled with God’s grace, Love, and Mystery is not about what it is – but all about what more it can be – if we abide in the presence of God with one another.

It is what it is? – Not.