

Sermon 6-15-25
Paul Purdue preaching

“Open hearts, open minds and open doors” may be the best slogan the United Methodist Church has ever had. Is not keeping our heart open to wonder, our minds open to learning and our doors open to neighbors, essential to a life of faith? How can we grow in love of God and neighbor with a hard heart, a closed mind, and doors bolted shut?

The Psalmist prays “Open my eyes to see the wonderful truths in your instructions.”
Psalms 119:18

Hebrews 13:2 invites us to open our homes to strangers, because we might host an angel and never know it! The Bible invites us to be open to a Word from God in Scripture and also our experiences with friends and strangers! Be open!

Sadly, much of what passes for Christianity in America today is a closed minded, cultural bound, and increasingly hard hearted. Such a faith rides up like an ill fitting jacket binding us up with do's, don't, oughts and shoulds. Such religious straight jackets shut down our minds, pinch off our compassion, and limit our capacity to love God and neighbor, substituting a list of norms, beliefs, and behaviours for a relationship with God, who told Abraham to immigrate, made Sarah laugh, empowered Moses to challenge Pharaoh, emboldened Ester, entrusted Mary with the fullness of God's very self, went fishing with Peter, taught love, flipped over tables, suffered humiliation on the cross, rose from the dead, breathed out the Holy Spirit on the disciples, changed Paul's heart, and still speaks today. Would we even have a Bible, if Abraham, Mary and Philip had not been open to what God was doing around and through them? Maybe an open heart, open mind and open doors are essential to faith? God is not asking us to dress, act, think and fit into a one-size fits all straight jacket!

Philip's heart and mind were open when, *“An angel from the Lord spoke to Philip. “At noon, take the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza.”* The angel's message seems a little ho-hum. If an angel ever appears to me, I hope they have more than: *“At 10:35, take 1-24 to Manchester.”* But honestly, my spiritual prompts are usually that mundane: *Take a breath. Pray before you respond. “Blessed are the peacemakers,” Call “that” guy. Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly!” “Forgive.” Love them anyway. “You are forgiven.” and Try again.*

Not knowing what is next, Philip takes the calendar prompt. *Meanwhile, an Ethiopian man was on his way home from Jerusalem, where he had come to worship.* Our unnamed traveler is the Secretary of the Ethiopian Treasury working for Queen Candace. Most people walked everywhere, wealthy people might ride a horse, but only elites owned Chariots. The chariot was spacious enough for two folks to spread out a scroll and had a ride smooth enough to read a scroll. Let's think of a “Rolls Royce” with a driver, assistants and a few secret service agent.

The Treasury Secretary had gone to Jerusalem to worship. Did they stand outside the Temple courts while the others rejoiced inside? Did they know the Levitical Law declaring *"No eunuch can belong to the LORD's assembly.... not even the tenth generation of such children can belong to the LORD's assembly"* (Deuteronomy 23) Did they hide their gender identity and go inside? It was never right, never holy, and never just to wall off people based on who they loved. I think, Leviticus got it wrong by excluding people who were blind, lame, crippled, disabled, differently formed, broken foot, broken hand, curved spine, dwarfism, defected eyes, and certain nationalities. (Leviticus 21)

The Spirit told Philip, "Approach this carriage and stay with it." Philip takes his chances with the secret service and runs up to the carriage and hears the man reading the prophet Isaiah. Philip gets his speaking part in the whole story, "Do you really understand what you are reading?" The Treasurer replied, "Without someone to guide me, how could I?" Then the Ethiopian Treasurer invited Philip to climb up and ride with him. They read: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearers is silent" "so he didn't open his mouth." "In his humiliation justice was taken away from him. Who can tell the story of his descendants because his life was taken from the earth?" The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, about whom does the prophet say this? Is Isaiah talking about himself or someone else?" Starting with that passage, Philip proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him. As they went down the road, they came to some water. The eunuch said, "Look! Water! What would keep me from being baptized?"

This is an amazing bit of Scripture because of what Luke leaves out. Philip the evangelist has one line and it's an eight word question "Do you understand this passage?" The Eunuch poses three questions, voicing 34 words in the Scripture. The Spirit gets 18 words- the Isaiah scroll gets 44 words. Luke gives us the Scriptural puzzle and eunuchs questions but none of the preachers answers! I wonder, what if we church folks were more enamored with the world's questions than our answers? What if we did not urge other people to conform to our thinking, but instead helped others find their God-given beauty and voice? Maybe being more open hearted and open minded gives everyone the space we need to find our way to God?

The Secretary of the Treasury is a very powerful person, but their last question is heart breaking: *"What might prevent me from being baptized?"*. They politely open the door to allow Philip to close the door by answering, "well, now that you mention it, you are eunuch... and Deuteronomy 23 states that..." Acts does not tell us what Philip said.

What do we say to people who ask "Is this Good News for me?" How do we welcome those too long excluded from our assemblies? If it had been written, maybe Philip could have repeated parts of Romans 8, but God was still working on Paul. Still I can imagine the Spirit putting Romans 8 on Philip's lips. "Dear eunuchs and differently gendered friends, there is nothing to prevent you from being baptized, marrying or preaching. You see, there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus. The law of the Spirit (in Christ Jesus) has set us free from all death-dealing laws. All who are led by God's Spirit are God's

children, so do not fall into a spirit of slavery or fear. You are a child of God. God's Spirit testifies with our spirit, that we are God's children. Listen, God is for us! No one can condemn us! No one can separate us from the love of Christ! Can affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? No, our nakedness (our gender identity) can not separate us from God, who loves us! For neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8) If it had been written, maybe Luke could have included Romans 8 as an answer, but maybe God sometimes moves our hearts before changing our minds? Luke does not tell us what Philip said, but what Philip did. *Philip and the eunuch went down to the water, maybe the Mediterranean sea near Gaza, and Philip baptized them. When they came up out of the water, the Lord's Spirit suddenly took Philip away. The eunuch never saw Philip again but went on their way rejoicing. Philip went on preaching the good news in all the cities."*

Sometimes serious minded Christian folks focus on transgressions of theological laws instead of lives being filled with joy. Acts tells us despite never seeing Philip again, the Eunuch life was filled with rejoicing. Often theologians dismiss or skip over verses like "*The Spirit told Philip*" preferring clear cut rules that cite chapter and verse. They argue "How can you ordain women" when 1 Timothy forbids it? How can you eat pork barbeque when Leviticus 11 forbids it? How can you be 100% sure that it is okay to baptize that eunuch or marry those gay folks? They rarely ask why we have stopped stoning to death sabbath breakers and sassy children. They are rarely satisfied with Philip's silence or Peter's answer in Acts 10 "*The Spirit interrupted me... God has shown me that I should never call a person impure or unclean... I am really learning that God does not prefer some people over others*".

If the legalist had put Philip on trial, Philip might have replied: *Well, In Joel, God promised to pour God's spirit on all people. On Christmas Eve, we sing with the angels "good news of great joy for all people". On Ascension Sunday, Jesus told us to go and make disciples of all people. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit filled everyone. One day an angel said "Go to this desert road at noon." When I got out there in the middle of nowhere, this chariot came down the road. I wondered what it meant, but the Spirit told me to run alongside. The nice Ethiopian invited me to ride along and I did. We got talking about Isaiah's image of a suffering servant and Jesus' exclusion and humiliation and the Good News. Just then they asked "what might prevent me from being baptized"? I know what Leviticus says, but as I thought about Jesus' suffering and the exclusion my Ethiopian friend had endured, I felt this overwhelming compassion welling up within me and I baptized them! You should have seen their joy! Good News for all people! I think the Spirit was in all that!*

Friends, Acts does not give us all that. I just made it up from clues in our Scriptures- Acts simply reports "the Spirit told Philip" There is

- No commentary... just 4 questions, three by the Eunuch
- No Jerusalem Council debating the issue

- No carefully crafted exegetical statement setting aside Deuteronomy 23 or Leviticus 21
- No calling up Peter and making sure it was okay
- No elaborate theology of grace and inclusion.
- No condemnation! Just the prompting of “the Spirit”, a fuller and richer theology would come along later.

I want to live with an open heart and open mind that allows my faith to grow. I want to hold open doors so that others can find their way to the love of God, I found in Jesus. I hope you do too! We do not need to know all the answers or force others into what works for us. We can trust that the God who brought us together (sometimes in the middle of a wilderness- sometimes with a series of unanswered questions) can lead us all home. Amen.