

**Sunday, May 2, 2021**

**Sermon: “Baptizing Eunuchs and Others” By Rev. Dr. Rodney Kennedy**

**Text: Acts 8:26-40**

Some place names are funny. French Lick, Indiana; Hell, Michigan; Intercourse, PA; Boring, Oregon; Oblong, Illinois; Pee Wee Township, Ohio. Ethiopia strikes me that way and I can't explain it to you.

The mention of Ethiopia always stirs my imagination. Perhaps a Sunday school teacher had a thing for Ethiopia and went on and on about it in my youth. Maybe it was my mama insisting I eat all my food, because as she would say, “There are children starving in Ethiopia that would gladly eat all that good food.” Then, there's this OT text: “Zerah the **Ethiopian** came out against them with an army of a million men and three hundred chariots, and came as far as Mareshah.” The Bible gets squirrely with numbers, but a million-man army.

And there was never a way I could unsee this text after reading Isaiah for the first time: Then the Lord said, “Just as my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and **Ethiopia**.” (Is. 20:3). An army of a million men, a naked prophet as a sign against Ethiopia, a eunuch from Ethiopia. This seems on the edge of a violent, X-rated movie. Violence and sex – the two main ingredients in American entertainment.

### **A word about eunuchs**

There are two stories in the Bible about eunuchs and both show eunuchs in a positive light. In the Old Testament, the prophet Jeremiah was saved by a Ethiopian eunuch. “Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, a eunuch in the king's house, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern.” A eunuch who saves the preacher gets my recommendation. The other one is in our Acts passage.

The law made clear that eunuchs were outsiders to God's grace. Deut. 23:1ff reads, “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.” Leviticus 21:16 – 21 reads, “No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God .... no one who has crushed testicles.” I understand that no one shows up for church thinking this would be a good Sunday to talk about Ethiopians, crushed balls, a cut off penis, and eunuchs, but there's a lot going on between the lines that ask for our attention.

### **The Ethiopian eunuch admits a lack of understanding**

The Ethiopian eunuch does a most un-American thing – he admits that he doesn't understand what he is reading. American Christianity has a reductive tendency, a kind of “Weight Watchers” approach to Scripture. There's an entire tribe of Bible-crushing reductionists among

us. Damage has been done to the gospel with the words “simple” and “easy”. We have been telling people that Christianity is easy for so many decades that folks are now convinced that all they have to do is believe. This is how the church has produced so many people who say, “I believe Jesus is Lord – but that’s just my opinion,” or “It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you believe something.”

### **Ethiopian eunuch as professor**

The Ethiopian eunuch has a lesson for preachers as well. Phillip asks: “Do you understand what you are reading?” The eunuch responds: How can I, unless someone guides me?” This conversation justifies the development of highly skilled guides.

A man presented himself to the board of Deacons as a preacher/carpenter or a carpenter/preacher. The deacons hired him to do renovations to the sanctuary because his bid was much lower than all the others and he was a “preacher.” I watched him working on the stairs one morning and he was using a buzz saw to cut little corner pieces to attach to the sides of the stairs. Even I knew that this man was no carpenter. In any event, he finished the job and then offered to preach for us on a Sunday. I told the deacons that this man’s preaching was probably like his carpentry work and there was no way I was allowing him within 50 feet of the pulpit. They accepted my judgment. They then had to hire an actual carpenter to repair the mess that the carpenter/preacher had made.

Preachers can be ineffective interpreters of Scripture. While the Bible is neither an impossible book nor an impenetrable book, it does not give its treasures to just any old hack who claims to be a preacher. Hard work, discernment, prayer, the Holy Spirit, a community of faith, questions, and openness are all required for the work of reading and most often, an interpreter skilled in the understanding of the Bible needs to be present. A good Bible reader has to be grounded in the incarnation with a solid theology that runs close to the ground where people live.

### **Can you believe it? Phillip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch.**

Philip, having baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, changed everything, but it has taken the church centuries to grasp. Here is one of those seminal moments when the barn door has been left open, and nobody knows it yet.

Baptism kicks the door wide open. The notion that someone is not eligible for entrance into the church is burst open in a way that is heavy with contemporary ethical consequences. Holiness is now reconfigured as the power to reach out to the stranger, the different ones, the outsiders. Sometimes I think we haven’t paid enough attention to what happens when we baptize someone. You welcome someone into the church in baptism. From the outset, the nature of the church is to be welcoming. They become part of the family of God.

## **We are all Ethiopian eunuchs but we are in denial.**

This foreigner, this excluded from God's assembly eunuch, has a spirit of humility toward the Scripture. I think that God often does God's best work among foreigners and outsiders. This is one reason I think we should be more hospitable to immigrants because Jesus is among them. Sometimes the leadership for change comes from outside – from secularists, atheists, and others who profess no faith of any kind. Ellen Davis suggests this is happening in ecological studies. Secular physical and social scientists are teaching us about the stewardship of the earth. They are also accusing the church of silence or even complicity in the depredation of the earth. These secular scientists have become our teachers and with their help, a growing number of preachers and theologians are now bringing to light aspects of the Bible that had been wholly neglected for thousands of years except by a few earthy mystics like Hildegard of Bingen, Francis of Assisi, Thomas Traheren and Rav (Abraham Isaac) Kook (Ellen F. Davis, *The Art of Reading Scripture*, 179 – 180).

Throughout the Bible, there are seminal moments when a man or woman of God has their breath taken away and they can only exclaim, "Didn't see that one coming." That's true of the Ethiopian eunuch. We need to be on alert for the moment when it happens to us. Somewhere in the church, when the announcement was made about Phillip baptizing an Ethiopian eunuch, some close-minded church member probably said, "An Ethiopian? A eunuch? Can you believe he baptized an Ethiopian eunuch?"

## **Who will we trust?**

Our struggle is that we are not very adept dealing with the various interpreters who differ and disagree. One interpreter pulls us in one direction and the other pulls in the opposite direction. We cannot follow them all. "Choices must be made, and the choices here, come down ultimately to a matter of trust. Who can be trusted, and on what basis?" (R. W. L. Moberly, "Living Dangerously," *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, 181).

Phillip became the guide for the Ethiopian eunuch: "Then Phillip began to speak, and starting with the scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus." Did you hear the starting point? "Starting with the scripture." Scripture is the starting point and the ending point for Christians. What we say must be faithful to the language of the Scripture. I can but warn you that if your starting point is liberal or conservative ideology – American politics – you have made a bad beginning that will not lead to truth or holiness.

There are so many guides clamoring for attention, devotion, and allegiance. Will you trust Franklin Graham on how to treat Muslims? Will you trust Robert Jeffress when he says that God gave President Trump permission to nuke North Korea? Will you trust Paula White who said that God was sending angels from Africa to change the results of the election? Will you trust Kenneth Copeland who tells you God will make you rich if you send money? Will you trust Jeremiah Wright who says that governments will lie and abuse and cheat people? Will you trust William Sloan Coffin's commitment to nuclear disarmament? Will you trust preachers

demanding nonviolence? Will you trust preachers insisting on social justice? Will you trust liberal preachers? Conservative preachers?

We are suffering a crisis of trust. A “Legion” of voices screaming at us not to trust the government, the sciences, the historians, the theologians, the experts, the university professors, the police, the health care providers, what’s a person to do? Millions of Americans are convinced that things are not right. When we feel that we are not in control, we are mistrustful. Tucker Carlson recently told parents not to send their children to college. Lack of trust in education. Some groups are agitating to “Defund the police.” Lack of trust in the police. Millions of Americans believe the election was stolen. Lack of trust in election officials.

As a people of trust, we need to protest the lack of trust. Like the psalmists lamenting injustice, we need to say that things are not right in the present arrangement; that they need not stay this way and can be changed; that we will not accept the status quo, for the present arrangement is intolerable; and have the boldness to cry out that it is God’s obligation to change things. The main task of the church is to announce when life is not right. Our voice must be added to the voice of the oppressed in a lament that is as old as Israel in bondage down in Egypt: “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters.” (See Walter Brueggemann’s chapter, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*).

When it comes to the Bible, who are we going to trust? I believe we should trust those who know that the loss of life and faith can’t be accepted. I believe we should trust those that we asserted with their bodies, like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. that the system is broken down and will not be tolerated. But I also believe we should trust those who start with Scripture and proclaim to people the good news about Jesus.

### **What is to prevent baptism?**

Of all things, the eunuch exclaims: “Here is water? What is to prevent me from being baptized?” The question posed by the eunuch can be answered: There is nothing to prevent anyone from being baptized. All are welcome to baptism. Now, some churches are still battling over the baptism being open to all. Some baptize but then go back on the baptismal promises by refusing to ordain women and gays. But let the whole church of the Lord Jesus Christ say, “Nothing at all, my sisters and brothers. There is nothing to prevent your baptism.” Let the United Church of Christ cry, “Nothing at all.” Let the American Baptists churches announce, “Nothing at all.”

The eunuch, having heard the gospel, took initiative. The eunuch, an outsider, asks a question that most outsiders no longer ask. Why would they? The church rejects them. The church excludes them.

Maybe we should fill the baptistery with water in anticipation of those who will be coming to trust Jesus as Savior and Lord and asking to be baptized. Maybe we should position the baptismal font next to the Lord's Table?

Maybe the church needs a new emphasis on Scripture, proclaiming the good news of Jesus, baptism, humility, and hospitality to Others. There's no question that the story of the Ethiopian eunuch kicks open the door. The man with crushed balls has joined the assembly of God. The man once excluded from the priesthood has been baptized and now he is "a royal priesthood, God's own people. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

"Here comes everybody" down to the church to be baptized. Together a bunch of people who are different will transform the church. May we all pray for those deeply moving spiritual movements when we can only say, "Didn't see that one coming."