

United Church in the Valley: March 3, 2019

Minister: Matthew Heesing

*Making Space for the Stranger*

*"...that transforms us"*

**\*Note: Part II of this mini-series was a Guest Preacher (Rev. Paul Douglas Walfall);  
Part III of this mini-series was a KAIROS Blanket Exercise.**

Scripture Reading:

*Acts 8:26-40:*

Now an angel of God spoke to a follower of Jesus named Philip and said,  
"Go south to the desert road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

So Philip began his journey.

On his way, he met an Ethiopian eunuch,  
an important official

in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.

This man had come to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage,  
but was returning home.

He was sitting in his carriage, and reading the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah.

The Holy Spirit nudged Philip: "Go up and meet that carriage!"

When Philip ran up,

he heard the Ethiopian reading aloud from Isaiah the prophet,

and Philip asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

He replied, "How can I understand, unless someone guides me?"

So he invited Philip to come up into his chariot, and sit with him.

The Ethiopian said to Philip,

"Tell me, if you will,

who is the prophet talking about—

himself, or someone else?"

So Philip proceeded to explain the Good News about Jesus.

Further along the road, they came to some water,

and the Ethiopian said, "Look, there is some water right there!"

What is in the way from me being baptized?"

He ordered the carriage to stop.

Then Philip and the Ethiopian both went down, into the water,

and Philip baptized him.

When they came out of the water, the Holy Spirit sent Philip on his way—

afterwards, the Ethiopian did not see him anymore,

but went on his way rejoicing.

Sermon:

This morning is the conclusion  
of our current sermon series  
*Making Space for the Stranger.*

And over the last three weeks  
we have explored what making space for the stranger might mean,  
and why it is so important to us, as a people of faith,  
and we've even put it into practice,  
by welcoming special guests  
like Rev. Paul Douglas Walfall,  
a minister originally from Jamaica,  
and just last week, we participated  
in a Blanket Exercise  
with the help of Darlene Cox  
along with Clifford, Travis, and Ronnie  
from the Eden Valley Reserve.

I've been reminded,  
throughout these various events and encounters,  
of a quote from a man named John Dewey:  
"we do not learn from experience," he said;  
the way "we learn is by *reflecting* on experience."  
So this morning, we are going to take some time  
to reflect, together, on the last few weeks,  
to consider the ways that we've maybe been transformed  
throughout the process.  
Because every time we make space for a stranger,  
we end up transformed.  
"A mind, once stretched by a new experience,"  
said Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.,  
"can never go back to its former dimensions."

But first, let's talk a little bit about  
an early follower of Jesus named Phillip.  
And an Ethiopian eunuch that he met along the road.

As mentioned, Phillip was an early follower of Jesus,  
one of several Jewish apostles sent out  
after the resurrection,  
to share the good news and make disciples.

And as Philip embarks upon this great commission,  
he gets a nudge from an angel of God  
to "go south on the road  
that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

Now this particular road,  
according to John Holbert,  
was a “wild and [risky]” wilderness road,  
far from the safest route one might take  
upon leaving the sacred city of the Jews.”<sup>1</sup>  
But it’s here,  
along this wild and risky road,  
that Philip meets a stranger.

At the beginning of this sermon series, we talked  
about our automatic instinct of stranger danger,  
how we often view those  
who are different from us  
as a threat, as something to fear.

But Philip, he comes near this stranger:  
the Holy Spirit inspires him to  
“Go up and meet that carriage!”;  
and in that carriage, that golden chariot,  
is an Ethiopian eunuch,  
an official of the queen of Ethiopia—  
he’s a powerful, wealthy person  
in a position of prestige—  
you couldn’t find someone more different  
than Philip, if you tried.

And as Philip approaches this stranger,  
as he meets and greets this stranger,  
he discovers that this unfamiliar person,  
this Ethiopian eunuch  
is returning home from the Jewish temple in Jerusalem  
feeling incredibly confused and disappointed.

For you see, there were rules and traditions,  
about who could enter the temple to worship God.  
And though the Ethiopian travelled all the way  
to Jerusalem to worship  
he found himself barred from fully entering the temple,  
because for one, he was a eunuch, missing certain sexual parts,  
and for another, he was a foreigner,  
and unfortunately, both of these reasons  
were reasons enough  
to exclude this individual from being  
part of the community.

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<sup>1</sup> John Holbert, “The New Community: Reflections on Acts 8:26-40,” May 2, 2012.

According to tradition, prejudice and custom,  
 according to how certain people interpreted Scripture,  
 the Ethiopian wasn't welcome.

Due to certain beliefs  
 against his background and ethnicity,  
*and* his sexuality, as a eunuch,  
 the Ethiopian just didn't belong.

But along comes Philip.

And when Philip sees the Ethiopian riding in his chariot,  
 the Holy Spirit nudges Philip *not* to stay away, to play it safe,  
 but to approach,  
 and when he comes a little closer  
 he can hear the Ethiopian reading Scripture aloud.  
 "Hello," Philip says, "Do you understand what you are reading?"  
 "How can I understand," he says, "unless someone guides me?"  
 So the Ethiopian invites Philip—  
 sweaty, dusty, dirty Philip—  
 Philip, a first-century peasant apostle,  
 who is not a Eunuch,  
 who is not a foreigner,  
 Philip, who in so many ways  
 is different from the Ethiopian—  
 he is invited to come up into the Ethiopian's chariot,  
 and sit with him.

From the start, this is a story  
 of making space for the stranger:  
 Philip makes space  
 in his journey down along the road,  
 he makes space in his mind and in his heart,  
 for this person who is different  
 he gets up close, instead of staying at a distance,  
 he sits with this unfamiliar individual,  
 getting to know him face-to-face—  
 Philip makes space for this stranger—  
 a stranger that *his* own community excluded.

And the Ethiopian also makes space—  
 physical space, beside him in his chariot,  
 emotional space to make a connection,  
 cognitive space to have a conversation  
 to share perspectives, sorrows, hopes and dreams,  
 it seems that *the Ethiopian*  
 also makes space for a stranger –  
 a stranger whose own community *had excluded* him.

And in this space  
 that both create and make, together,  
 the two individuals end up transformed:  
 because despite the exclusion previously experienced,  
 by the end of the story,  
 the Ethiopian is actually baptized—  
 included and acknowledged as part of the community.  
 But really, it's *Philip*  
 who is transformed more.

For, it's almost easier, let's admit it,  
 to be embraced and included.  
 It's another thing entirely,  
 to embrace and include.

One transformation involves being accepted.  
 The other transformation involves doing the accepting—  
 moving past one's previous presumptions,  
 thinking differently regarding one's assumptions,  
 redrawing the lines in the sand,  
 or acknowledging the lines were pretty arbitrary to begin with.

Most interpretations of this story  
 emphasize and focus on how the Ethiopian is the person transformed—  
 it's all about transforming the stranger.  
 But the way I see it,  
 this story is actually more about the eunuch transforming Philip,  
 the eunuch transforming how Philip sees him  
 how Philip regards him,  
 how Philip accepts him completely as he is.

In so many ways,  
 making space for the stranger  
 is less about transforming the stranger  
 and more about the stranger transforming us.  
 Both of the characters in this story  
 make space for someone else.  
 And as a result, both of the characters in the story  
 experience some form of transformation—  
 one is welcomed,  
 and even more, the other *welcomes*,  
 and the Spirit—  
 the Holy Spirit of God—  
 is actively present throughout the whole process  
 from start to finish and beyond.

And over the last few weeks,  
we've made space for some strangers as well—  
and quite a few strangers have made space for us—  
space in their lives and schedules and commitments,  
space in their hearts  
to come into this place  
a place that—symbolically—at least,  
hasn't always treated  
people of color and Indigenous descent  
with dignity and rights,  
the church as a whole,  
has excluded such strangers time and time again,  
but when we made space for them,  
and they made space for us,  
I *know* that the Spirit was moving among us,  
stretching our minds to new dimensions,  
leaving us not as we were before,  
but even in small ways, some how transformed.

So, church,  
how have we recently been transformed?

What's changed for you, the last few weeks?  
What's something you've learned,  
or will look at differently,  
after our experiences of making space together?

Even if only in some small way,  
how has making space for the stranger  
transformed us?

Let's share.