

*Texts: Acts 8:26-39*

*Subject: Ethiopian Eunuch*

*Theme: Meet You There*

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Apr. 25, 2021; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Risen Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

A little more than twenty years ago, I was living in Jacksonville, Florida, working at a radio station on the West side of town. Jacksonville is a city with many personalities. It's the south, so working at a country music station on the city's west side exposed me to folks who lived the kind of lives you hear about in those songs. It's the location of a Naval Air Station, with strong ties to the U.S. military, and I had friends who flew aircraft and dropped bombs at Vieques island near Puerto Rico. It's a beach city, and walking along the white sands of the east coast and enjoying the sunshine was a favorite pastime. It's a sports town - home to the Jaguars of the NFL and the Ospreys of the University of North Florida, and the Dolphins of Jacksonville University, though most people there are Gator fans. And it's an urban center, the most populous city in the state, with a close-knit African American community on the North side. Jacksonville is known as the River City, and has nine major bridges - with many of these distinct communities divided by the curves of the Saint John's river.

I was driving over one of those bridges, the Buckman bridge, nearly 3 miles long, on my way to work one morning, when I heard a loud POP! My tire blew out, in the middle of the bridge. I was able to steer my little pickup truck to the center divider, and stop. I was all alone, about 22 or 23 years old - this was before I had my first cell phone, and there was traffic passing at a high rate of speed. As I wondered what I was going to do, a driver pulled over, got out and asked I needed some help. Once I pulled myself

together, he assisted me with changing the tire there in the center of the bridge, I thanked him, and I was on my way. As I drove off, I was amazed at the help I received, and surprised by the kindness of this person, who seemed to know just what was needed in the moment, who met me there, and made a difference.

Last week we heard the story of the stoning of Stephen, one chosen to serve the people of God, who upset some of the established religious people with his proclamation of Jesus. This led to more persecution in Jerusalem, and many of the first followers of Jesus were forced to leave the city and went out to Judea and Samaria. Saul was leading the charge and dragging people out of their homes and putting them in prison. Phillip, who was one of the seven deacons, went down to Samaria, where he shared the good news of Jesus with them, and saw great numbers of people joining the church, and was baptizing men and women. The gospel was going out to all the nations, just as Jesus had commanded. There was even one there Simon, who was known as a magician, who would not have been accepted by the Jewish community - who believes. Peter and John hear about all this and come out to Samaria to lay hands on the people and pray that they would receive the Holy Spirit too. Simon like this is wants to pay them so he could receive it too, but Peter curses him for it. It's not about the money.

But then Phillip is sent - by an angel - down south toward Gaza - where he encounters a chariot. I don't know if he had a flat tire, but Phillip runs up to this chariot and meets there a person from Ethiopia - an important person - a Eunuch. This was a person who had likely suffered a mutilation at a young age, so they could no longer bear children, and would not be able to seek the throne for themselves. The Ethiopian had

just been to Jerusalem to worship, but likely would not have been allowed into the temple, but maybe forced to stay outside in one of the outer courts, due to being a gender minority and ritually unclean. This person served the Queen of Ethiopia, and was in fact in charge of the *entire treasury*. But that's not what interests Phillip, who notices the scripture the court official is reading. It's from Isaiah 53, a prophecy of a servant who would suffer:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth”

Phillip asks if the reader can understand this scroll, and is allowed to go the extra mile and to share the good news of Jesus. The gospel is not just for jews, or greeks, but for all. The Ethiopian is so enthralled by the promise, that when they come upon some water along the road, asks the question, “What is to prevent *me* from being baptized?”

What's the answer to the question? The answer we know, of course, is *nothing*. In Jerusalem the answer might have been different, but here, Phillip, in the name of Jesus, welcomes this person into the new life of Christ, into the family of faith, and imparts the means of God's grace right there on the side of the road. Right there on the road they are the church. That's what it is - “the church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the sacraments are correctly administered (AC VII).”

This powerful story is one held closely by Christians in Ethiopia, known in history as one of the oldest continually practicing churches in the world. It's a story deeply regarded by the LGBTQIA+ community, who identifies the grace of God for those

deemed as sexually other, outside the accepted norms of many societies. It's a story highly regarded by people of color who see themselves represented in scripture in a powerful way. This deeply moving story of welcome and acceptance, of God's grace for all is a bridge across the rivers that seem to divide us, and shows us a God who knows each one of *as we are*: loved, forgiven, welcomed, and accepted - of how the Word always meets us right where we are.

It's a little shocking right? The Eunuch maybe wasn't expecting Phillip to get in the vehicle - being rejected was the norm, being reviled, not revered - for being different from the rest. This one served the queen, but only because there was no threat - not virile enough to start a family, or seek to marry into a powerful dynasty, this one could be trusted because they had no other place to go. As Phillip opens up the scriptures, proclaiming the suffering and cross of Christ, sharing how he has risen from the dead and is ascended to heaven, this far away child of God learns that no matter what happens in someones life they are loved and included in the Kingdom of God.

Across rivers and bridges in our own community, across the tracks and flood channels live people who have been pushed aside in our society, by the culture - by Christians. They're only allowed to participate in ways that are not threatening to the status quo, or they're forced to assimilate, made to blend in and be quiet, not given the freedom to be themselves, to sing loudly or draw attention. They'd be called too flamboyant, too out, too dangerous, too much.

This Word still meets us right where we are - to change our hearts. Even though we are all outcasts and sinners, broken by the world, ones who defy the Holy One with our unkindness, our self-centeredness and self righteousness. We don't deserve it but

we find grace too - when the Spirit blows, and she blows where she will - inviting in those whom some might find abrasive or off-putting, of different classes or races or educational levels. Inviting *us* even though *we've* been divorced, or locked up, or bankrupt, or shamed. Sometimes those people are our neighbors - sometimes those people are us.

We've been ones who have divided what God has brought together, drawing red lines in neighborhoods, and crafting drug laws designed to favor one race over another, making healthcare more available in affluent parts of the city, and creating food deserts. Yet, sometimes - our hearts are convicted, and the Spirit awakens us to see the tears and notice the the pain and the fear in the eyes of our neighbors. And sometimes she even sends *us* out to the wilderness roads we are afraid to walk down at night, and brings us together to work for change. But always, when we hear the Word proclaimed we can know too that we are loved and included, forgiven and given new life through Jesus Christ.

Across rivers and bridges, on the side of the road, by the water, in Bible study, among family and friends, here in this place, gathered by the Spirit, sent to ALL people, Christ is always near to us. Jesus is the Word on the lips of servants who are afraid but go anyway. Whether we think we're too much or not enough, God sends us grace enough to spare. Even when you find yourselves broken down on the outside of town, God sends the Word to meet you there.

Amen.