

The Rainbow Deacon

Baptists in America have always been marked by our unfortunate preference of multiplication by division. That is to say, we are prone at the slightest excuse to split our churches and denominations over differences of theological or political or even decorative opinion and then throw ourselves into growing that new church or denomination so that we claim numerical superiority over “those other guys.” Probably the most famous example of this is when the previously nationwide Triennial Convention of Baptists split in 1845. Baptist from the South thought it should be permissible for missionaries to own slaves. Baptists from the North thought this was a bad idea. The Southerners took their ball and bat and went home and created the Southern Baptist Convention. Later, as some of us in this room know all too well, groups of those Southern Baptists got cranky with each other over various issues of Biblical interpretation, including the question of whether women could be pastors. The conservatives held sway and ejected in various ways as many of their foes as possible. Thus was born the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. The Northerners had their own conservative/liberal split which produced the Conservative Baptist Association of America in 1947. And, of course, this church was one of those which chose to accept the invitation of ABC of the Northwest to form a new ABC region some 13 years ago in response to issues of local church autonomy and human sexuality and thus, Evergreen Association was born.

I have become convinced in recent days that most if not all of these divisive controversies could have been avoided if Baptists took the story of Philip the Deacon more seriously. Philip, also sometimes called Philip the Evangelist, was an early Christian whose story can be found in the Acts of the Apostles, beginning in chapter 6. Like the better known Stephen, Philip was one of the seven Greek-speaking (or Hellenist) Jewish believers chosen by the apostles to make sure that food was distributed fairly between the widows among the Hebrew Christians and the widows among the Hellenist Christians. After the death of Stephen and during the subsequent persecution led by Saul of Tarsus, Philip was among those who fled Jerusalem and turned to preaching since he could no longer fulfill his calling as a deacon. The first story strictly about Philip tells how he went to preach among the Samaritans, that mongrel race to the north with their aberrant theology. Philip’s mission was wildly successful, so much so that Peter and John came from Jerusalem to give their blessing to the new believers and to their former pupil’s work.

After his experiences in Samaria, Philip is sent by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness between Jerusalem and Gaza, where he encounters the Ethiopian eunuch, a story to which I will return in a moment. But first, I want to jump ahead to Acts 21. Saul the persecutor has by now, as I hope you will all remember, undergone a complete change of heart, become a Christian and a missionary himself and taken the name Paul. In Acts 21, Paul and Luke are traveling to Jerusalem for what will be Paul’s last visit to that city before he is taken to Rome for trial. In verses 8 and 9, Luke writes: “The next day we left (Ptolemais) and came to Caesarea; and we went into the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the seven, and stayed with him. He had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy.” In other words, they were preachers and, according to legend, highly effective ones.

So, what we have in Philip’s story in the Book of Acts are the solutions to most of the major problems that have plagued the Baptist movement in America for some 200 years. Jewish Christians of the south, that is to say, Jerusalem, did not despise their racially diverse neighbors to the north with their odd theology, that is to say, the Samaritans, but reached out to them with

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the love and good news of Jesus. I wonder what amazing work for God Baptists in the United States could have done since 1845 had we followed the pattern of Philip, Peter, and John? Or if the fundamentalist/modernist split had been avoided in the Northern Baptist Convention and the conservative/moderate split been healed in the South? How might God be using Baptists today if so many of our brothers hadn't been so hung up on what women should and shouldn't do? Philip's daughters seem to have answered that question a long, long time ago.

But the story I skipped over is the best known of the stories about Philip and it is with that story I want to spend the bulk of my time this morning. It is worth considering the identity of the man whom Philip evangelizes and baptizes in this story, known forever more as the Ethiopian eunuch. "Ethiopian" as a descriptor is easy for us to understand. The country still exists in East Africa, south of Egypt and Sudan. Protruding in part into the Horn of Africa, it is separated now from the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden by the modern countries of Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia. Unlike the people of North Africa, barely distinguishable in features from their Arab or Jewish neighbors, the Ethiopians for centuries were physical exemplars of Black Africa. The word, "Ethiopia," comes from Greek roots meaning "burned by the sun." Shakespeare used the word "ethiope" in several of his plays as a synonym for a Black African. To Philip, this man was racially other, even more so than the Samaritans who were essentially cousins to the Jews.

"Eunuch" is a word perhaps less familiar to us. The standard definition is provided by Wikipedia, perhaps now our world's most common encyclopedia. "A eunuch is a man who (by the common definition of the term) may have been castrated, typically early enough in his life for this change to have major hormonal consequences... Castration was typically carried out on the soon-to-be eunuch without his consent in order that he might perform a specific social function... Eunuchs would probably be servants or slaves who, because of their function, had been castrated, usually in order to make them reliable servants of a royal court where physical access to the ruler could wield great influence... Eunuchs supposedly did not generally have loyalties to the military, the aristocracy, or to a family of their own (having neither offspring nor in-laws, at the very least), and were thus seen as more trustworthy and less interested in establishing a private 'dynasty'."

While being a eunuch might enable a man to rise to a position of great responsibility in other countries, as is clearly the case here, this man being in charge of the queen's treasury, such was not the case among the Jews. In Jewish life, a man who had been made a eunuch, whether purposely or accidentally, was unclean. Deuteronomy 23:1 tells us that he would have been barred from worship at the Temple: "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord." The man in our story may have been reading from Isaiah but he could not have been one of those Gentiles who were baptized into the faith of Moses. He would have qualified only as a "Godfearer;" a righteous Gentile. He was religiously "other," again in a way more profound than the Samaritans whom Philip had so recently brought to Christ. And, he was sexually "other." He lacked sexual organs and the hormones connected with them.

He was also economically "other." In details that I previously glossed over, we learn that he was in charge of the Ethiopian queen's treasury and almost necessarily well-compensated. He was wealthy enough to ride in a chariot with servants of his own from his home to the distant city of

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Jerusalem. Legend says that there had been worshippers of Yahweh in Ethiopia since the time of Solomon, equating his famous visitor, the Queen of Sheba, with the Queen of Ethiopia. Indeed, a small Jewish population existed in Ethiopia until modern times when most of them relocated to Israel. The eunuch may have gone in hopes of worshipping at the Temple only to be turned away based on the Deuteronomic law. Why would he have gone? Why was he reading from Isaiah? Isaiah 56 contains a vision of the blessings of the future for the world under God. “Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, “The Lord will surely separate me from his people”; and do not let the eunuch say, “I am just a dry tree.” For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.”

Philip was in the spirit of Isaiah but modern Christians in the United States seem to fall short. I was messaging with a friend of mine in Louisville this week. The subject turned to what I was working on and I wrote to him, “A powerful, Queer Black man in a nice ride: I wonder how many buttons he’d push today.” My friend, a middle-class, straight Black man who drives an old convertible, replied, “Of course, a cop would have just shot him... Surely a Black man in charge of money, riding in a nice vehicle while reading his bible HAD to be up to something.”

That’s what too many White Americans have come to believe, isn’t it? That “they” must be up to something. When a young Black man in a hoodie on a drizzly night is in the “wrong” neighborhood, he must be up to something. And so Trayvon Martin was shot. When a Black man just a little older but still younger than my oldest son runs from a cop, even though he was never charged with a crime, he must be up to something. And so Freddie Gray is dead. A Black man in a nice car? To my shame, I remember when I was a teenager in St. Louis, hanging out with my all-White friends. If a Black man drove by in a car we coveted, someone would invariably say, “Hey, what’s that N-word doing with MY car?” And we would all laugh.

I see things differently now. Now, in my head and in my heart ring the words of our dear friend, Clem Winbush, who told me of her grief and fear when she had to remind her grandson of how he had to act differently around police officers because he is Black. Connie and I had dinner with a group of friends this week and our host and hostess told us of an incident earlier this school year. In the first week of school, before student ID cards had been printed, their son, who attends a well-respected South Lake Union private school, was pulled off his bus home by the police “for his own protection” and held at the local precinct until his father could come pick him up. Did I mention that they are Black? That he was the only Black child on that bus and the only one singled out by the police? That he is only 14 years old?

We fall short of the mark of the spirit of Isaiah when it comes to those who are sexually “other” as well. As we wait for the Supreme Court of the United States to rule on the constitutionality of

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same-sex marriage, a basic case of equality in civil rights, the most vocal opponents are, of course, Christians. The state where the Boyers lived just before coming here, Indiana, was the center of a firestorm just weeks ago because Christians were backing a new law designed to “protect them from the oppression” of a tiny minority of people who just want to be afforded equal rights under the law. And last week, there was a media frenzy over Bruce Jenner, by all accounts a private man who has been thrust into the limelight by his previous athletic prowess and the notoriety of his step-daughters, who is just trying to figure out his true identity, given to him by Our Loving Creator who we are now learning makes human beings in as many different varieties as the birds of the air or the lilies of the field. As the political movement from some years ago reminded us, we human beings are our Loving Creator’s other “rainbow.”

The problem is that as soon as we relegate those who are different from us in some way to “other” status, they cease to be fully human in our eyes. As soon as they are “those people,” as soon as we only see the one differing characteristic, they lose their status as our equals, our brothers and sisters. They become Yankees or crackers, dykes or fags or straights, or a whole host of other epithets I will not utter in this sacred place. They become objects, not people. We are called by Jesus to love each other, to love our neighbors. But if we do not see our neighbors as people, we cannot love them. For me, that is what the apostle John was warning against in the key verse of our epistle passage for the morning. “Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”

You may wonder why I chose this topic this morning. This is, after all, a congregation with a good track record of loving everybody. We proclaim our openness to others and other ideas in our mission statement and we do our best to live it out. But we can always do better. And all of us, I think it’s safe to say, know other people who still objectify others, based on their characteristic differences. We need to remember that we have influence on the lives of those within our circles of family and friends. We need to lovingly hold up the witness of Philip, that “rainbow deacon,” and of Isaiah and of Jesus and of all of God’s servants who teach us to love. It can take some courage to stand apart from family or friends but it can bear fruit. When I was last in Arkansas, I spent a lot of time with my Uncle Denny Glaze. Denny and his twin sister, Denise, are only 4 years older than I am. When we were young, we were playmates. Denny often took me under his wing and he taught me a lot about the world and subsequently got me in a lot of trouble. The only time I’ve ever been shot at was when I was with him but that’s a story for another day. He’s lived a rough life and done a lot of things that I will not defend. But I know he loves me, in his own way. One day while I was there, there was a gathering of the family and friends in the yard of the house he lives in now, my grandparents’ house. We were sitting together on a porch swing and Denny was regaling the crowd with his opinion of why women and Black men could not be union pipefitters, which is his profession. As is his habit, and was the habit of his father, my grandfather, he used the N-word anytime he referred to Black people. Finally, I reached over and grabbed his leg to get his attention. “That word’s not OK with me,” I said. “You need to stop.” And he did, at least while I was around. It was a start.

I altered Denny’s behavior that day because, as I said before, for all his faults, he loves me. There is a communion between us. It is faulty and broken – we’ve seen very little of each other in the past 40 years and he has chosen a very different path from me – but it’s there. We are

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reminded this morning to be in communion with our Savior, Jesus. A verse from the Gospel reading for this morning, from John 15, says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” When we stay in communion with Jesus, through prayer, through studying his teaching, through talking with our friends about him, we gain the spiritual strength to do anything, to change our world, one friend at a time. When we stay in communion with each other, we have influence over each other, we learn from each other, we love each other as God would have us love. As we celebrate our ritual of Communion together in a few moments, let us remember the lessons of the “Rainbow Deacon,” the man who was chosen to serve his own people at the communal table but who was inspired by the Holy Spirit to take the Good News of Jesus to those who were different from himself. Surely, in communion with God, we are empowered to do the same. Thanks be to God!