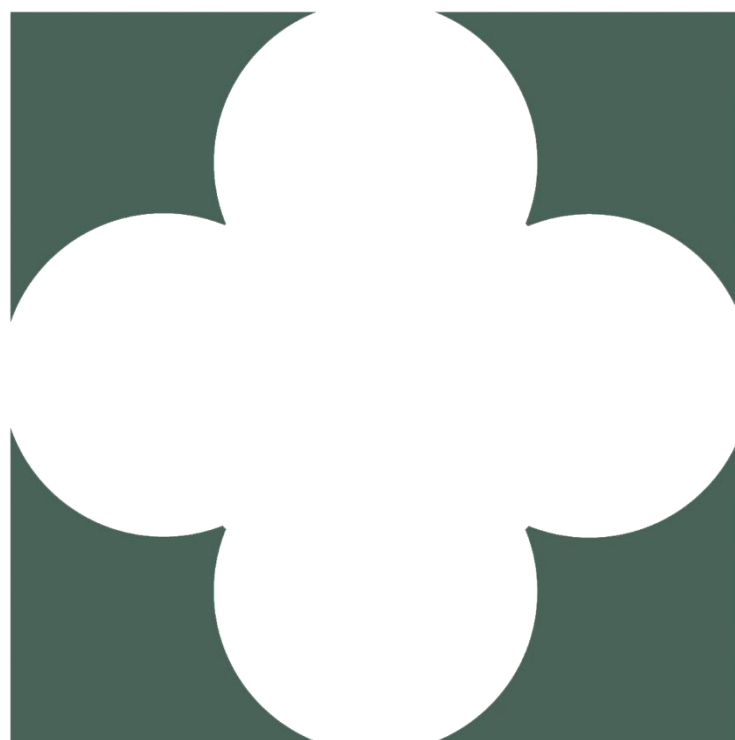


# Right Place, Right Time

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Pride Sunday

Acts 8:26-40

Friends, this has been a deeply difficult week. If you are scared right now, you are not alone. If you are angry right now, you are not alone. If you are anxious right now, you are not alone. If you are depressed right now, you are not alone. If you are despairing right now, you are not alone. Your gender, your sexuality, your body, your love—these are sacred gifts that no human can invalidate. You are beloved, beginning, middle and end.

Since Pentecost on June 5, we have been reading from the book of Acts. Acts relates the stories of the early church, how the Jesus movement went from a small band of disciples who were a part of the Jewish community to a widespread missionary organization that sought to differentiate itself, eventually becoming its own organization. The book of Acts follows the disciples, Peter and John and Paul particularly, as they spread the gospel, meaning “good news” of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection across the Mediterranean world. Throughout the book of Acts, we read about how the early church shared all their money, property, and food in common; how generosity was so emphasized that those who did not share were struck dead immediately; how the apostles struggled to figure out what being a community meant to them as they waited for Jesus’ coming again.

And as a church in transition—and we surely are in transition—we may be able to relate to the early Jesus’ movement. We wonder—what makes us special? What differentiates us from other religious groups? How are we particularly positioned to do justice work in this world? Where is our generosity most needed? How do we govern our finances—with a scarcity mindset as we hoard and store up, or with an abundant mindset as we share?

These kinds of questions are raised by the book of Acts, and these kinds of questions are important for us, today, in Seattle First Baptist Church.

The main character in the book of Acts is the Holy Spirit, the one whom Jesus promised would come to be with the disciples following Jesus’ ascension into heaven. Remember, the Holy Spirit in Greek is “the Paraclete,” which can also be translated “Counselor, Advocate, Comforter.” The Holy Spirit is working in and through the situations the apostles experience, calling people to ministry and leading them to opportunities to proclaim the justice and peace of which Jesus’ spoke.

The apostle Philip encounters one of these situations in Acts 8:26-40, which I will read from the New Revised Standard Version—Updated Edition:

*Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south[a] to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:*

*"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."*

*The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.*

The Holy Spirit led Philip to the right time and right place to share the gospel. And Philip paid heed to the Spirit, enough that he went to the wilderness road between Jerusalem and Gaza. Philip paid heed to the Spirit, enough

that he chased down the chariot, not batting an eye at the man who rode within, though he was a sexual minority. Philip paid heed to the Spirit, enough that he engaged in conversation with the eunuch as he read the Scriptures and enough that he took the opportunity to baptize the Ethiopian eunuch right along the road.

Now, the Greek that is translated “eunuch” in the Christian testament can be interpreted several ways. Kittredge Cherry, a lesbian Bible scholar and author, writes that eunuch could mean a man who was castrated, but it could also signify sexual minorities in general. The position that eunuchs held in ancient near East society was interesting—they could hold positions of power and influence because they were unlikely to—or unable to—procreate. Thus, it is not surprising when the eunuch in our story is the keeper of the treasury for the Ethiopian queen Candace—this man, though we do not know his name, was clearly thought of as trustworthy because he was not liable to put his own biological line in power.

The Ethiopian eunuch holds a particular confluence of identities within the Scripture: Barbara Brown Taylor writes in the *Feasting on the Word* commentary that “the Ethiopian was someone wealthy enough to ride in a chariot, educated enough to read Greek, devout enough to study the prophet Isaiah, and humble enough to know that he cannot understand what he is reading without help. He is also hospitable. When Philip speaks to him (at the direction of the Holy Spirit), the Ethiopian invites the talkative pedestrian to join him in his chariot. For a modern parallel, imagine a diplomat in Washington, D.C., inviting a street preacher to join him in his late model Lexus for a little Bible study.”

Philip ignores any difference of race, class, and social status. The eunuch’s body parts or their sexuality pose no barrier for Philip’s ministry – the Holy Spirit sent Philip to the wilderness road, and there he ministered – with someone whose spiritual thirst was so strong that he asked to be baptized right then and right there. Philip did not call for the eunuch to be anything but who he was, and he engaged in theological conversation with the new disciple. Dr. Willie James Jennings writes that this story shows that “there will be no correct or proper image of a disciple, no bodily model by which to pattern himself, and no one to begin a process of erasure or eradication of his differences. Philip will not be allowed to stay to tell him who to be or how

to be, how to see himself or receive a preloaded life script in Christ.”  
(pulpitfiction)

And Dr. Jennings is right – Philip was whisked away by the Holy Spirit after the baptism, leaving the Ethiopian eunuch to continue on his journey “rejoicing.” This is truly a story of “right place, right time.” Philip followed the lead of the Holy, allowing himself to be put in the place where he would meet the new believer. But Philip did not accept this passively, though – the text tells us that he had to chase down the chariot – God literally was chasing after the person whose sexual identity was different from the norm! God didn’t say, “well that chariot was too fast, better catch the next one,” no, God called Philip to run after the chariot and invite the rider into a relationship.

It is also significant that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading Scripture, and that one interpretation alone wasn’t enough to make the meaning clear. Philip and the eunuch engaged in conversation, asking questions and wondering together as they traveled. Out in the liminal space of the wilderness road, between cities, the apostle in the Jesus movement and the royal subject were able to meet – meet each other and meet the Holy. A lesson I glean from this part of the story is that Scripture interpretation should lead us into community and should be done communally.

Of course, being Baptist, we have something to say about Scripture. Well, a lot of things, really. One of the “four fragile freedoms” that Baptists hold central to our tradition is “Bible freedom.” That is, that individuals have the freedom to interpret the Bible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit—and alongside Christian community. We read together because we must check each other and be in conversation with each other. We must ask each other, “Do you understand what you are reading?” and have dialogue about what Scripture means for our lives. But though the Bible is central to Baptists, classical Baptists know that the Bible is not the final authority on how to live and how to be – Jesus is.

There you have it: that’s one perspective on who Baptists are and what we think about the Bible. And there are plenty of other Christians out there talking about what “real Christians” should be about and what the Bible “really teaches” on certain subjects ... plenty of those folks celebrated the

news on Friday of the Supreme Court decision overturning Roe v. Wade and thus eliminating federal abortion protections for the first time since 1973. And a huge part of the perspective leading to this decision is based on a specific, narrow, biased, uninformed and exclusionary reading of the Bible – not to mention significant dehumanizing of over half of this country's population.

Beloveds, this is a scary time. Even though we knew this decision was coming a few months ago, even though we knew this decision is just the first in the line of privacy protections that are going to be debated – knowing these things does not make this easier or better.

And honestly, I have been at a loss for words. I write this on Friday, as thousands of people march downtown and all over the country. I write this as we plan to have an SFBC table at PrideFest Capitol Hill tomorrow, proclaiming how this church has married all couples since 1972 and how proud we are of our LGBTQIA+ members and ministers and friends and family and neighbors. I write this as I try to remember that despair is a tactic of division, a tactic that the conservative Christians and fundamentalists in this country are counting on stalling progressives in our tracks. I write this as I hear from many of you, and friends and family members, wondering what will become of the right to utilize contraceptives and to practice sexual intimacy with intimate partners and to marry. With this decision being handed down, and now looming over landmark cases named in the concurring opinion, we enter (or perhaps return to) a period of US American history marked by the rule of the few powerful, despite widespread support for the rights under attack.

And let's remember that the people most impacted by bans on abortion services are the most vulnerable in society: those at the intersections of oppressions – poor women, transgender and nonbinary people who are Black people, Indigenous people and people of color. Wealthy white women will always be able to access abortion care. As I preached back on May 8<sup>th</sup>, following the leak of the draft decision to overturn Roe v. Wade, though the rights of people here in Washington are more protected than in other states, we cannot allow this to make us complacent. We cannot sit here in “progressive” Seattle and look down on people in red states who, some uncharitably say, “have brought this on themselves.” We have to be honest

that this decision is the result of decades-long strategic planning and moral manipulation on the part of people who want to control the bodies of women, trans, and nonbinary people, and people of color. We have to honestly figure out how we are going to protect each other – you and me here in this room and our children and grandchildren and our neighbors on the margins – because we have to love each other with daily, practical showing up for each other. Because we know that if this was really about being pro-life, we'd have universal prenatal healthcare, universal education, housing and food for all, gun safety so that children aren't being murdered in their schools, gender and sexuality education free and accessible for all.

Friends, if this is tiptoeing a little close to the separation of church and state for you, I invite you into that conversation. Our faith is political. Our faith is a matter of life and death. No amount of "I'm not that kind of Baptist" or "I'm not that kind of Christian" is going to get us out of this mess—no, we need to be accountable to the faith tradition we claim and show that there are ways of following the Way of Jesus that do what Philip the apostle did: show up and engage with and minister with people on the margins.

Philip was part of the early church, following the Way of Jesus and discovering what that meant day by day. And those of us right here and right now are also discovering what it means to follow the Way of Jesus each and every day – our church in transition, our world in turmoil, attempts at curtailing human rights every day – the question arises: how, then, do we live? There is much we don't know about the future, what it will look like for us and our children – but what we do know is that the gospel calls us to be present with those who are marginalized. Those whose identities mean that they are disenfranchised by human-made systems of control and oppression. People with uteruses—women and trans men and nonbinary people; people who are gay and lesbian and bisexual and transgender and intersex and asexual; people who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color; people who are disabled ... these are the ones who are most impacted by the overturn of Roe v. Wade and the impending questioning of decisions around contraception and sex and same-sex marriage. And the people on the margins – margins humans made, not margins God made – are the people whom God chases after out of deep, abiding love.

Beloveds, we need each other. We need to keep reminding each other that God runs after us, chasing a relationship with us. We need to keep reminding each other of the power of wondering together, as we embrace the liminal spaces of conversation begun in our sacred text. We need to keep reminding each other that, like the Ethiopian eunuch, nothing prevents us from being baptized, that we can take the opportunity to minister to each other whenever and wherever it comes. We need each other to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit to the right place and right time. We need each other in this place and in this time. We need each other to survive.