

A sermon preached May 6, 2012, at the Church of St. John the Evangelist, Bowdoin St., Boston, MA. The readings were from RCL Easter 5, year B.

✠ In the Name of the Risen Christ. Amen.

We have all experienced being excluded from something in which we wanted to participate, from childhood games—maybe to the ideal job as an adult. The feelings exclusion evokes in us are as varied as hurt, anger, confusion or bewilderment, sadness, worthlessness, blame, even betrayal, and sometimes a fear that we *are* worthless or a loser.

The contrast to our feelings when we experience **in**clusion can be dramatic: affirmation, belonging, hope, being liked & approved & appreciated, worthiness, happiness, eagerness to participate, and gratitude.

If they are treated well, even a six month old infant receiving Holy Communion seems to have the religious experience of belonging, and of knowing that this food is special, which is why some parents teach their babies to receive Communion with a flat hand, and not grabbing fingers.

A criticism I've heard about the Episcopal Church, (or at least about "the progressive" parts of it, and about some other "progressive" Churches), is that we are interested in inclusion, when supposedly "that isn't even a biblical concept" and we ought to be preaching the Gospel instead. Critics sometimes say that the only way that the Bible is concerned with inclusion is that **anybody** can become a Christian, the eligibility requirements are open to everybody. Everybody is welcome to attend services as a guest, (as long as they are not dangerous or substantially disruptive), and nobody is excluded *a priori*, that is, before they even begin to explore the Christian faith. [And if somebody *is* dangerous or disruptive, the Church may still be able to serve them, and still bring them to baptism and greater participation in the life of the Church.] Actually, inclusion sounds progressive to me. Although they may say that inclusion isn't a biblical concept, actually, **it is** a biblical concept, and it shows up in more than just one passage. And preaching about inclusion can *easily* be about preaching the Gospel...because it is just as inclusive as the love of God is.

[Do you know where Ethiopia is? In east Africa, Uganda & Kenya to the south, Somalia to the east, Sudan to the west, Eritrea to the northeast. From Egypt go south to Sudan, then SE to Ethiopia. Formerly called Abyssinia.]

Let's recall our first reading today, about Philip and that Ethiopian eunuch, who was reading from Isaiah, and trying to understand it. He was reading **Isaiah 53:7-8**. He was 1500 miles as the crow flies from central Ethiopia, 2500 km., [as far as Miami, FL or Dallas, TX, is from here] & I'm impressed that he could read it in either Hebrew or Greek. I believe that this man was **smart, knowledgeable, and wise, and** that he was in the process of becoming **holy**.

OK, so he's been puzzling over this bit about the silent lamb, and Philip asks if he understands it. He probably throws up his hands, or maybe expresses his frustration with his voice, or maybe with a twinkle in his eye, "How **can** I, if I have nobody to teach me?" So he invites Philip aboard his chariot, and Philip tells him that Isaiah is not describing himself, but somebody else, and the description matches Jesus. And Philip witnesses to who Jesus was and is—this takes some time, maybe several hours as they travel along

toward Gaza. Notice that Philip is taking the man's questions seriously and treating him with respect. Doubtless some people treated this man **with respect** because he held a high office in the Ethiopian government, and must have wielded significant power... And, doubtless others treated him **disparagingly**, because he was a eunuch, which they could tell at a glance, since he had no beard or mustache. (Just *maybe* Philip wondered to himself whether or not he should mention that Jesus once said that some people were made eunuchs by men, meaning surgically, and others were born eunuchs, [as **Matthew 19:12** records], but maybe Philip was too wise to bring that up until he was asked a question on the subject.) So they continued to ride south in the chariot as they studied the Bible, reading Isaiah, and discussed its meanings, and how what Isaiah wrote related to Jesus.

I was in 10th grade when I first read this passage, and this next part went right over my head. I *completely* missed it, (and my Religious Studies teacher either didn't know, or didn't think it would be edifying for a bunch of 10th grade girls to be discussing men's anatomy.) Now I think that this man had not only been studying the scroll of Isaiah, *but* that he had probably read, or maybe in his recent visit to the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem he had heard about **Deuteronomy 23:1**, which forbids eunuchs from *becoming* Jews and joining the House of Israel. (Maybe he had gone to Jerusalem not just to conduct any business his queen, the Candace, might have had there, and for himself not only intending to worship at the Temple, but *maybe even to convert to Judaism there* –unless, of course, he was already a Jew, which was possible, but unlikely. Maybe he had just heard for the first time a few days before meeting Philip that he could not *become* a Jew, because he was a eunuch. If he had studied enough to be convinced of the truth of Judaism, this might feel like a deep rejection *by God*. [I can think of two reasons for such a law: first to discourage castration, and second, because, depending on exactly how the surgery was done to make a eunuch, afterwards, circumcision, the way a male became a Jew, could be impossible.]

Think how devastating such a rejection might have felt. Philip knew this, and the Jewish readers of Acts knew it was part of the unspoken context of the story, even though **I** was clueless when I first read this passage.

Not only that, but this Ethiopian man may also have already read ahead in Isaiah, three chapters beyond the verses Philip finds him studying here, and those verses, **Isaiah 56:3-4**, say that **a time will come when eunuchs will be able to join the house of Israel!** Maybe he wondered if that time *had* come.

So when this African official finally decides to ask his most important, crucial question of Philip, about whether **he** can be accepted by Jesus, he phrases it this way: "Look, here is water. What is to prevent **me** from being baptized?"

1. Did Philip say, "Oh, Gee whiz, I'm terribly sorry to have to say this, it's kinda awkward and embarrassing, but, umm,... **you** don't seem to have a **mustache!** There **is** a reason **you** can't be baptized. I'm sorry to have to tell you, but, see, it's... your status as a eunuch which prevents it, because of a rule in Jewish Law!" **No!** He doesn't say that.

2. Nor does Philip pass the buck and say, "Gee, That's a good question, but I don't know. See, it's not up to me. I think you'll have to wait a few decades to find out, until after a Church Council in Jerusalem decides if Gentiles have to convert to Judaism before

baptism. Y'see, we're only in chapter 8 of Acts, and that doesn't get addressed until chapter 15:1-35, so if you could just hold your hors—**Oops, Sorry, driver, keep driving, I didn't mean that literally**—well, keep praying until God makes that clear... & if God says no, ask God what you should do. It's God's job to let you know."

3. Also, when the man had asked, "Look, here is water. What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Philip didn't tell him that he could be baptized,.. someday,... after, Oh, maybe a three-year catechumenate to prepare for baptism. (Who was going to teach him in Ethiopia, anyway?)

4. Instead, he baptizes him *immediately*. It is important that he not make him wait another hour, since water is available and he appears to be convinced and converted. It is a **spiritual emergency** in his case. He has opened his heart, shown real courage by risking deep rejection not just once but maybe twice, and he must experience prompt and full spiritual affirmation to heal that! (I'm not saying that hurt feelings constitute an emergency *per se*, but that in this case there should be no further delay.) The Holy Spirit has taken the initiative in bringing him to study and appreciate Jewish Scripture and the God of Israel, in bringing him to Jerusalem, in worshipping in the Temple, and in seeking God and now finding Jesus. And right after his baptism, off he goes on his way celebrating!

So, when sexual minority group members have faith, nothing stands in the way of their baptism! Just like other people, **they belong in the Church!! Their sexual status is no bar to baptism**, whether it is a result of surgery or just how they were born, (which are the categories Jesus recognized and mentioned), or whether their sexual status results from an accident or some other cause! The Holy Spirit is already acting in their hearts and lives. Who are any of us to **dare** to withhold consent and baptism in such situations? & once a person has been baptized, who are any of us, who may be in different sexual minority groups ourselves, to **dare** try to push them out of the Church, **God's Church?** (Often people interpret how the *Church* treats them as being the will of God, which is understandable, although it may or might not be accurate.) For that matter, who are any of us to **dare** try to push any visitors or members out, or to fail to be welcoming, when it **is** our collective responsibility to be welcoming, to enact God's welcome?

For Jews, Ethiopians were accepted as representing one of the diversity of nations, and they were so well recognized and accepted in that role that this particular man could also represent another category of people, sexual minority group members.

As our epistle says, **God is love**. And I would add, God's love is inclusive—it has included us, after all, and everyone else, baptized **or not!** And if God can welcome us at the baptismal font and at the altar in Holy Communion, with all our sins and imperfections, then **we** are fed here to grow to be just as welcoming to all the others who God welcomes here and in every Church, with all their sins and imperfections, and with all their gifts. And that's Good News!