

## **Old Boundaries, New Inclusion**

*A sermon preached on Acts 8:26-40 by Emily Hull McGee  
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on April 29, 2018*

I stood at the back of the Sanctuary that day, preparing for a processional I'd never forget. Processionals are part of many a minister's life, you know, those final moments before the combined efforts of worship begin. In them, I regularly take advantage of the vast privilege to look upon the people I love dearly and give thanks to God for them. This day, that privilege nearly knocked me to my knees. Because as I looked around, I saw a room filled with those whose love for me and I for them had withstood the test of time and years and miles and difference, those who loved me when I sure wasn't easy to love, those whose love was muscular and active and hopeful, those whose love compelled them to abide together this day.

Clutched in my hand was my bulletin, its cover bearing the verse that would orient our worship: "I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." I looked out and saw knotty branches adorning each pew, the visual reminder I knew I needed, stretching with bursts of colorful flowers towards the vast ceiling above. And as I looked ahead to lock eyes with my beloved whose name I would soon bear, I knew the love we shared was far from perfect or complete, but it was love filled with the presence of the God in whom we did abide and through whom we would create a new abode. For the verse we would soon hear anchored me then as it does now: *God is love, and those who abide in love, abide in God and God abides in them. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*

What is love, exactly? We certainly talked about love a lot on our wedding day; we hear about love (or the absence thereof) in the news,

around the world, and all in scripture; we talk about love a great deal in our lives – in the mall, with our family, in our homes, here in church. But what is love? How does it function? How do we engage within love and through love? In her book *Becoming Wise*, author Krista Tippett has this to say about love: “Love is the superstar virtue of virtues, and the most watered down word in the English language. I love this weather. I love your dress. And what we’ve done with the word, we’ve done with this thing – this possibility, this essential bond, this act. We’ve made it private, contained it in family, when its audacity is in its potential to cross tribal lines. We’ve fetishized it as romance, when its true measure is a quality of sustained, practical care. We’ve lived it as a feeling, when it is a way of being. It is the elemental experience we all desire and seek, most of our days, to give and receive.”<sup>1</sup>

I bet her explanation of love sounds as familiar to you as it does to me. And I imagine it was no accident when the curators of the lectionary put these three texts we’ve heard this morning together in the midst of Eastertide to teach us a thing or two about love. Because in all the stories that scripture tells of faithful worship of God and discipleship of Jesus, perhaps there is none better than the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch to illustrate the boldness of the gospel and fruitfulness and fearlessness that grows when one abides in God, and thus abides in love.

As we’ve been hearing these past weeks, Jesus’s band of disciples has been living into his instructions to them after his resurrection, to (in the words of Acts 1:8), “be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Persecution against this early form of church had begun to stir in Jerusalem, so the disciples had fled to carry their message to Judea and Samaria, which is where we meet Philip as our story

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<sup>1</sup> Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry Into the Mystery and Art of Living*, p104.

begins. The text tells us a messenger, or angel, of the Lord compelled Philip to “get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” It was a wilderness road we’re told, a ‘middle of nowhere’ kind of trek through the middle of the desert, perhaps even in the middle of the day.<sup>2</sup>

There, Philip encounters a chariot bearing an Ethiopian eunuch whose name we never learn, just these details about him. The text tells us he’s Ethiopian, which to the first hearers of this story would simply mean “the outermost reach of the world,” sort of like we might say “oh, she’s from Timbuktu.” Not just any Ethiopian, but one who works as the queen’s treasurer, thus in high positions of power and influence. The text is also careful to identify him as a eunuch, meaning a man castrated likely from an early age. Castration was a cruel and unusual practice, which had the erstwhile effect of severing the possibility of deep relationships and intimacy in which love could be expressed.

But what this man had not lost was his yearning for More. We learn that he was traveling this wilderness road after a trip to the Temple, where as a eunuch he was sure to have been excluded. For instructions in Leviticus and Deuteronomy forbade those of differing sexualities from entering the assembly of the Lord.<sup>3</sup> And as a Gentile, or a non-Jew, the religious restrictions he faced were clear. By any measure, this man was an outsider — dark-skinned among others of lighter shades, a foreigner among the insiders,

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<sup>2</sup> As described by Matthew Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*, p61.

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 23:1 and Leviticus 21:17-21.

an ambiguous minority orientation among the unambiguous majority, wealthy and literate among others who were wanting and uneducated.<sup>4</sup>

Maybe it was a wave of fearlessness — what does someone who has lost so much have to fear? — or perhaps it was the wind of the Spirit urging him to deeper understanding, but either way, this man hungered for God, for inclusion, for understanding, for Love. That’s how Philip encountered him on that wilderness road, reciting aloud from the prophet Isaiah after a holy nudge propelled Philip to intervene. One theologian says, “imagine a diplomat in Washington, D. C., inviting a street preacher to join him in his late model Lexus for a little Bible study. The inclusion in this story runs both ways.”<sup>5</sup>

And when they began to abide together, they began to abide in God, and they began to abide in Love. Scripture was opened, questions were asked and answered, good news was proclaimed. The ancient words of God were interpreted through the resurrected Word of God. Old boundaries gave way to new inclusion, for when the eunuch saw a asked “here is water; what is to prevent me from being baptized?,” Philip seemed to hear the reminder: *God is love, and those who abide in love, abide in God and God abides in them. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.* And there in the waters of new life, the names he had been called — Eunuch. Different. Alone. Outsider. — washed away as he received the name we all receive at our baptism — Beloved.

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<sup>4</sup> Great credit to several sources for helping me best understand the dynamics at play in this interaction between the Ethiopian eunuch and Philip. Matthew Skinner’s *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts*; Guy Sayles tremendous sermon and published article, “What Prevents One From Being Baptized?,” in *Christian Ethics Today*, a sermon I first heard at the CBF Conference on Sexuality and Covenant in April 2012; and Thomas Long’s commentary on “Acts 8:26-40” in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, p455-459.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Acts 8:26-40,” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, p457.

This week ahead, I'll spend a few treasured days in the mountains with some dear friends — pastor colleagues of mine of similar age, church culture, life stage, and values — in our third annual gathering we affectionally refer to as 'preacher camp.' That's where I first heard this story, when Alan shared it with us a couple years back. It's a story he heard in worship from a member named Ken in his former congregation, Metro Baptist Church in New York City. The tenth anniversary of 9/11 happened to fall on a Sunday that year, and themes of remembrance threaded the elements of worship together including this story that Ken shared with his church.

You see, Ken owned an African music store located in the shadow of the towers, three blocks away, which he ran with his friend, Alberto Barbosa (or Beto as he was known), who was from the very small West African nation of Guinea-Bissao. On Sept 11, Beto was on the last subway to arrive at the World Trade Center terminal, meaning as he came up from the tunnel he entered the madness. Fear began to take over, and he just wanted to get out of there. But he noticed as he steadied himself a woman who was very pregnant, and very frightened, struggling to breathe. He came near, but she couldn't really speak to him... so he lifted her up in his arms and carried her as far as he could, then let her down in the shelter of a doorway and gave her some water.

"I'm not in labor," she said to Beto, "I'm just terrified. "Me too," he responded, "But we'll help each other."

Beto helped her to her feet, put his arm behind her waist, and they walked... and when she needed to rest, they would stop and then keep going. It took them seven hours to walk seven miles to the Hudson Ferry crossing on West 33<sup>rd</sup> Street that would take them back to New Jersey. Other terrified people raced by them the whole time, but still they walked slowly, arm in

arm, until they arrived at the river where masses of people had converged there because it was the only way to leave Manhattan.

Beto had her sit on a bench and after some searching, he found someone in authority who let her on the ferry...

“I won’t go without this man,” the woman cried. And they crossed together and arrived in Hoboken, to another mass of people racked with fear.

Someone with a car saw the woman and said, “I’ll take you wherever you have to go.” But the car was nearly full, and there was no room for Beto. The woman insisted again that Beto remain with her, but he insisted back: “You go on ahead of me, we’re safe now,” and so she left.

It wasn’t until eight years later that Beto told anyone that story, like so many stories from that day, petrified in the memory of the horrors. But see, Beto had been in a shopping mall, and there he bumped into a woman. “Alberto,” she had shouted... “Alberto!” “I know you,” Beto responded, the warmth of recognition dawning upon him. “September 11,” she continued, “You saved my life.”

“Ohh, you were so strong... we helped each other.”

“Alberto,” she said, “when death surrounded me, I prayed to God that God would spare my baby, and when I opened my eyes you were there, and you lifted me up, and you carried me away from danger... you saved me and my baby.”

And Beto said, “how is your baby?”

The woman urged him to wait a moment, as she ran away only to come back with a man who rushed to Beto and embraced him. “Every night I thank God for you and prayed that we would someday meet!,” he said to Beto.

Behind the man, of course, was a boy.

“Alberto...” the woman said, “I’d like you to meet our son... his name is Alberto...”

And Beto said, “Oh, is that a name in your family?”

To which the father said, ‘It is now.’”<sup>6</sup>

*God is love, and those who abide in love, abide in God and God abides in them. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*

The love to which God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit calls us isn’t always as grand as a wedding day suggests it will be. Love doesn’t always look like a surprise baptism in the middle of the desert. It isn’t always as dramatic as love exchanged in the trenches of terror, or as poignant as love whose name bears with us for a lifetime.

But sometimes, love looks as simple as one who sees beyond race or gender or nationality to a person in need and responds. Sometimes love sounds as simple as the words “I do.” Sometimes love looks like a warm meal to someone in the cold throes of grief, or a protest in the face of injustice, or a devastating no to one thing so that you can say yes to another. Sometimes the love we experience is as straightforward as robust participation within a beloved community where difference cannot become the wedge that drives us apart. Sometimes love looks like bold risk and hard decisions, even when it means sacrificing spaces and places we’ve long adored.

That kind of love, the God-love that we’re to share with one another, is a sacred ordinary kind of love. As Paul reminds us, it’s love that is patient and kind; love that is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude; love that does not insist on its own way; love that isn’t irritable or resentful; love that doesn’t rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices instead in the truth; love that

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<sup>6</sup> As told to me and the Dear Friends by Alan Sherouse, who heard it from Ken at Metro Baptist Church in New York City on September 11, 2011.

bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things; love that never ends.<sup>7</sup> In my life, that kind of love is often mundane and unnoticed, sometimes hard and always transformative... because it invites me into bold fearlessness and deep fruitfulness of God and through God, and in so doing, gives me space in which to abide.

And so I ask us all today — how might you seek out and participate within this fearless and fruitless love of God and neighbor? What might you be willing to sacrifice in order to abide in this kind of love? What fears or boundaries might you need to relinquish in order to experience such bold and boundless expressions of love? Knowingly or unknowingly, where have you erected a dividing wall that Love demands you tear down? Ordinary or extraordinary, what practices and habits might you develop in order to root the branches of your life more fully to the divine vine?

I imagine if we risked enough to do so, we would meet again and again and again the God whose name we know is Love.

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:4-8