**Conversion to Inclusion**

**Easter 4 – Narrative Lectionary**

**May 7 2017**

Acts 8: 26-39 Russell Mitchell-Walker

This week at our Faith Exploration class we were learning about Sacraments and had a conversation about Baptism. Over the years in the church some have expected that the parents who are bringing a child for baptism should be members of or active in the congregation. This has led to much conversation in congregations as things shifted over the years with fewer young families attending church regularly. So it is a question we explore in the program, that we asked on Wednesday as we gathered :

Should families who bring their children for baptism be actively involved in the church?

It was clear in the conversation that if we practiced this thinking, two of the folk in the program would not be there. They have had their children baptised but were not involved in the church at the time and are now attending regularly. I am of the mind that the sacrament is filled with grace and we never know the impact it will have on the family, at the beginning or even years down the road. We trust and know God is with us, in the sacrament, and that it has meaning for those involved. We say it is an outward sign of an inward Grace.

The Ethiopian Eunich experienced that grace in our reading today. This person travelling on the road might have resonated with the story in Isaiah “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  and like a lamb silent before its shearer”. It may have reminded this one of their feelings when taken at a young age to be castrated and forced to become a eunich. This one had the opportunity to learn about the scriptures and Philip shared with them the Good News of Jesus Christ. Moved by the story and the power of it, in that moment the Ethiopian Eunich asks, what is to prevent them from being baptised right then and there. There actually could have been many reasons, expectations and rules that could have prevented it. We actually learn much about this person in the first few verses of the passage. [Peterson Toscano](https://petersontoscano.com/ethiopianeunuch/) indicates that the author of Acts provides us with much detail about this traveller – in fact besides Jesus, no other character in the New testament is more fully described. From these few sentences we learn that the Ethiopian Eunich is, a foreigner, an African, a eunich, a rich person, employed by a queen, literate (most people wouldn’t be able to read during that time) and a person of faith, Jewish. Eunichs, traditionally were not welcome in the temple. However the Spirit sends Philip to this person, and Philip, following this guidance sees no reason not to baptize him. God’s tent is wide enough for this gender variant, racially diverse, rich official.

Today has been identified by Saskatchewan Conference, our provincial body of the church, as Affirming Ministry Sunday. A day to acknowledge and celebrate the importance of being affirming, intentionally and publicly welcoming of all, including LGBT folk. The prayers in the worship are largely from the resources for this day. It happens that this is the reading for this week in the Narrative Lectionary we follow and it is fits well for Affirming Ministry. While the focus of the story is the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian Eunich, we can also consider that Philip also experienced a conversion that day. If not led by the Holy Spirit, would he have engaged in conversation with the official who was not only black, but also a eunich? It is clear when examining this story that God, through the Spirit was further opening up the church to include those traditionally excluded.

It may have been common back then to have such experiences of the Holy Spirit. Was it actually a voice talking to Philip or an inner inkling? We may have more experience with an inner inkling, an urging to do something that we may not know where it comes from. Too often we ignore it, most often we don’t talk to others about it. How do we know when it is the Spirit talking? It can help to discern in a number of ways. We can pray about it. We might discern if it matches our understanding of the gospel message. We might talk about it with others. We might watch for other signs that point us in that direction. Sometimes it is clear and we know right away, like Philip must have. Other times it can take time to discern. I am presently on a path of discernment as I explore possibilities for my sabbatical next January to April and wondering the direction God wants for me and for this congregation.

Last week, I was at a conference called [Inhabit](http://inhabitconference.com/), offered by the [Parish Collective](http://parishcollective.org/), an organization that evolved out of the book, [The New Parish](http://www.newparish.org/), How Neighbourhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community. I have been interested in this movement and its implications for ministry since I started reading the book a few years ago. I have been wanting to get out into the community, this neighbourhood more since then as well. However, the demands of full time ministry have not allowed much of this. It is out of this thinking that I did start and continue with having office hours at the local coffee shop. As I have thought about how to spend my Sabbatical, I have been exploring what church is doing things well in this changing time for the church, that I might go spend time with and could learn from During the conference, I began to wonder, and have some Spirit nudging, maybe rather than going somewhere, I should stay here and spend time in the community, in the neighbourhood and also do some community development assessment that I have not had time to do. I have also been considering taking the program that the Parish Collective offers, the [Leadership for the New Parish Certificate](http://theseattleschool.edu/programs/leadership-in-the-new-parish/). It is about a 10 month program that includes 4 weekends together in Seattle as part of the training. The real training ground is your neighbourhood. This would start in October. The challenge is that the first weekend is the same weekend as the [OPEN Network](http://www.theopennetworkus.org/about/) conference of Progressive Evangelicals, which I was planning to go to and which will have a gathering of Mainline church folk as part of it. So my discernment is which I am being more called to do? Going away during my sabbatical or staying in the neighbourhood? The certificate program, or the OPEN network conference? Which will be more beneficial for this community – what direction do we want to go in? Discerning the Spirit includes conversation with your faith community so I am open to hearing from you what you think. It is important to be in touch with where the Spirit may be leading us, in the same way that she led Philip to the Ethiopian Eunich.

The United Methodist Church seems to be, in my opinion, out of step with the movement of the Spirit across the wider church. This past week, they had their national gathering and just before that, a judicial committee was meeting to determine whether Bishop Karen Oliveto, consecrated Bishop for the Conference of the Mountain Sky region, which includes 400 churches in Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Montana and Idaho can remain as Bishop because she is lesbian. She was elected unanimously but the Judicial Committee decided that she is in violation of church law, which bars “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” from being ordained. The matter goes back to the Conference to decide her fate. This is out of step with the movement within the church of inclusion of LGBT, including among a growing number of evangelical churches and leaders. Are these laws out of step with what many believe is the movement of the Spirit? Is upholding the law, unfaithful to the direction the church is being called to go? Many believe so.

We might say that we live in a time similar to Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Not many people know the story of Jesus and the Good News experienced by his message. The Ethiopian was spiritually curious and open to having someone help understanding the message. The conversation was guided by the Ethiopian, not by Philip. This is an important aspect for us to note. If we are open to having these conversations of faith and spirituality with others, let them guide the conversation. We can let go of our own agendas and be open to where the conversation may go. Recent polls tell us that most people believe in God and pray. People are still spiritually curious. They want to know who Jesus was and what he did. I met many at the conference this weekend who are not connected to a denomination but are faithfully following or leading through communities of faith like house churches or church plants. There are also those who while they may not want the church, they still want some of what the church has. They want to know how to make sense of God and life. Our challenge is how do we bridge this gap? How do we be open to what we can do to offer opportunities for this exploration, outside of church, outside of Sunday morning? This is where being in the community and the neighbourhood may be a start. This is where being open to having spiritual conversations with those you meet can be important. Many don’t know what church is anymore, and are looking for that inclusive welcome that is in the church which is the message of our scripture today.

May we celebrate those who come to us through baptism and stay. May we continue to welcome all, knowing God’s grace is in and with us. May we be open to having conversations with the spiritually curious, being bold to name that we are Christian and involved in church in ways which open the conversation. May we, like Philip, be open to following the Spirit’s guidance and message, however we receive it, knowing that God calls us to radical inclusion.