

Over the past few weeks we have been reading through the book of Acts. The Acts of the Apostles as it is called is the book in the Bible which tells us about the adventures of the early church. And it was indeed an adventurous time.

Last week we read from the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter about Saul, whose name will later be changed to Paul, and his conversion on the road to Damascus. Saul was someone who persecuted Christians and then he met Jesus on the way to Damascus and Jesus completely turned him toward a different direction. Saul then felt called to share with others about the grace that God had shown to him.

Today we are reading the two stories that are wrapped around Paul's conversion story. Paul's story of conversion that we read last week and the two stories we read this week all mark a turning point in the life of the early church. Up until these stories, the church's ministry has been focused inwardly. It has been focused on their ministry within Jerusalem and it has been focused on the Jewish community.

In fact, in the story of Pentecost in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit falls upon the Jewish people spread all over the region. But in the story that Karl read and in our second Scripture story the Holy Spirit is leading God's people to branch out and to focus their ministry outside of the Jewish faith.

Not everyone thought this reaching out was such a good idea. Most of the folks within the Christian community thought that they should focus their attention only on the Jewish folks. And they had really good biblical support to back them up.

For instance, in the Scripture that Karl read earlier, Philip, who was one of the 7 appointed along with Stephen to care for the poor and widows, has an angel appear to him. This angel of the Lord tells Philip that he is to go south away from Jerusalem. Not only is he to go south but he is to go on a wilderness road. A wilderness road would be a lonely road and one where people could be robbed or killed.

But Philip does not balk at this invitation from the angel. The scripture says that Philip got up and went. Now along this wilderness road, Philip meets up with an Ethiopian eunuch who was returning from worshipping in Jerusalem. Now Scripture is very clear about eunuchs.

According to Deuteronomy in the Old Testament, eunuchs were not allowed to worship in the Temple. Eunuchs were forbidden by the Scriptures to worship in the Temple around other people. I am not going to read that Scripture. Let's just say that Deuteronomy makes it very clear that eunuchs were forbidden from worshipping.

But even though he was considered a person who Scripture said was forbidden from worshipping God in the Temple, this Ethiopian eunuch came to Jerusalem to worship God. An example of how God works outside of the church to reveal who God is.

The Holy Spirit then tells Philip to go over and sit in the chariot with this man who Scripture says should not be allowed to be a full part of the community of faith. Can you imagine what Philip must have been feeling? Sit, in his chariot, with that half-man over there? I don't know what the slang term for the day would have been but I am sure Philip thought it to himself.

But this is where it gets really amazing. Philip runs over to the eunuch. Philip runs over to this eunuch and hears that he is reading from the Old Testament. Philip then initiates a conversation with this eunuch in which the man says that he cannot understand what he is reading. Philip then uses his gifts of interpretation to help the eunuch understand what he is reading.

And then as they continue along, the eunuch asks Philip. "Look, here is some water. What is to prevent me, an Ethiopian eunuch, from being baptized?" And Philip knows very clearly what is to prevent him from being baptized. The words from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy can be used to prevent this Ethiopian eunuch from being baptized.

Scripture says very clearly that this eunuch should be treated differently. But Philip does not allow an obscure passage from the Old Testament to prevent him from doing what the Holy Spirit is now guiding him to do. Philip then baptizes this man from Africa.

We next read about Saul being converted on the road to Damascus and then we come to this story in chapter 10 of Acts. Caesarea is an important community along the seacoast. I was blessed to visit Caesarea while I was in Israel a few years ago.

Caesarea is actually a resort town now. I was also blessed to visit the home of Simon the Tanner that is mentioned in the story. These are real stories of real people in real places. But today rather than read the text we are going to watch this story as it was interpreted in a miniseries.

In the first scene we will find Cornelius. Cornelius is a member of the Roman army. Cornelius is a Gentile and outside of the Jewish community. In the second scene we will find Simon Peter, one of the apostles. Peter has been taught that God shows partiality to the Jews and that it is the Jewish people that he is to reach out to and teach about God's love in Christ. Let's watch about what happens to the two of them.

### **Acts 10:1-48**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4J0pN4EL9ug>

"I truly understand that God shows no partiality," Peter says in Acts 10:34.

In both of these scenes, people outside of the Jewish community come to Christians and ask to be baptized. And the question for both the eunuch and the Roman Centurion is this. Am I allowed to enter into the Christian faith even though your Scriptures and your traditions say that I am not allowed?

And in both instances, Philip and Peter extend baptism to these men and proclaim that everyone is invited into the community of faith. In the words of Peter, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality.” Even if the Old Testament forbids it and even if our tradition forbids it. Peter announces his new understanding that “God shows no partiality.” All are invited into the community of faith.

So the question before us today in this Christian church is this. Who do we think is not allowed into the community of faith? Who do we think should be excluded? In our reading of the Bible, who do we think is forbidden from full inclusion into the household of God?

And when we have decided who should be in and who should be out, how does the experience of Philip and how does the experience of Peter challenge our beliefs? Are there individuals or groups of people that we are excluding or want to exclude that the Spirit is now saying to us, “God shows no partiality.”

The second part of these stories that we have read today is that both of these men were challenged to leave the comforts of Jerusalem and head out into unknown places. They did not know what they would experience out there but they answered the call to leave Jerusalem and go out there. The Christian church was challenged to look outward away from the place where they had always been. I wonder if that is the same challenge being placed in front of the church today.

A friend of mine, Sharon Core, is the pastor of the Arlington Presbyterian Church outside of Washington, DC. Like most main-line churches they have a big building and a small congregation. The church building was built to reach out to a certain community but the neighborhood around the church has changed. Now the community is made up of immigrants and young adults in lower wage jobs.

So rather than focus on trying to get their new neighbors to come to their church, the 70 or so members of the Arlington Presbyterian Church decided to ask the question of what was the biggest need in their community. After researching that question, it became evident to them that the biggest problem was affordable housing.

So last month the congregation of Arlington Presbyterian Church, with the endorsement of their presbytery, decided to do a radical action. The congregation voted to convert their church facility into affordable housing. The congregation made a commitment to convert their sanctuary and church buildings into affordable housing for the community.

As part of the deal with the developer, a multiuse space will be built on the site where the church will continue to worship and provide a Christian presence to the community that emerges on this property. The effective church community today is not the same as the effective church of our past.

Allison Creek has some wonderful ministries that helps us make an impact in the community around us. I am sooo excited by some conversations I have been having with some of you inside this church and people outside this church who are hearing about our story. It seems clear to me that God is creating something new and exciting in our midst.

One unique development that I am seeing going on here inside the church is the diversity of ages that are leading worship and becoming involved with one another. Why is this choir and this band welcoming more and more youth and children?

Why did we have a multigenerational learning experience last week in which many folks joined in who are not ordinarily here at 11:15 on a Sunday morning? What is this coming together of different ages saying to us? Why are we having random large checks appear in the church mail and why are we having people come to the Session with some great ideas for new ministry into the community like the one which Session will hear about today?

I believe it is because this congregation is catching a vision like Philip and Peter had in Acts. A vision in which we are being called as a church community outside our walls. A vision in which God is using us to impact the community in a very powerful and dramatic fashion even if we don't really see it yet.

In your bulletin you have 5 questions that Session wants asked of people inside the congregation and outside of the congregation. These questions are also now on the church website. These are questions to help us begin to listen to people outside the congregation and to listen to the ways that God is calling us outside the church into the community to share the good news of God's love. Use these questions to talk to people who are not part of a faith community and listen to their responses.

I invite you to allow these two stories from Acts of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch and Peter and Cornelius to really kind of aggravate you this week. Ask yourself a couple of questions. Who are we excluding that God is speaking through Peter to say to us, "I have learned that God shows no partiality." And how is God leading you to help this community of faith connect with people outside of these walls?

As we continue to reach out and seek to impact the community around us I have no doubt that we will continue to see more random and powerful witnesses to God guiding us along the way. AMEN.

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