



---

# **Of Eunuchs, Uber Drivers, and God's Expansiveness**

---



A Sermon By  
The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell

April 29, 2018  
The Fifth Sunday of Easter  
Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/2018-04-29-AAA.mp3>.

## Of Eunuchs, Uber Drivers, and God's Expansiveness

The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell  
Grace Episcopal Church  
The Fifth Sunday of Easter  
April 29, 2018

Acts 8:26-40  
Psalm 22:24-30

1 John 4:7-21  
John 15:1-8

Our first reading from Acts this morning is one of my favorite stories in the New Testament. The encounter between Philip and a man called only "the Ethiopian eunuch" shows the Church growing beyond the religious, cultural, and geographical bounds of Israel through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. This story illustrates the beginnings of the mission to the Gentiles, or non-Jews, and shows the ministry of the Church extending in ever-widening circles. It shows that God, who raised Jesus to new life, orchestrates unlikely relationships that the status quo would not otherwise permit, so that new life may flourish. The story is an expansion of how the Gospel message was understood. It's an expansion of who's in and who's out. It's an expansion of our very understanding of God's mission for us who dare to follow Jesus. In short, this 14-verse narrative is revolutionary!

To us – 2000 years removed from its occurrence – this story may not seem so extraordinary. After all, the book of Acts is loaded with similar stories of the Spirit-filled disciples' adventures spreading the Good News of Christ to the ends of the earth. But this story is one of the first instances in Acts in which the Spirit of God draws two unlikely strangers into an encounter that changes both of their lives, the scope of Christian mission, and the world itself.

As the passage begins, an angel of the Lord has sent Philip from Samaria down the wilderness road between Jerusalem and Gaza. This, in and of itself, is significant. Though a devout follower of Jesus, this Philip was not one of Jesus' original 12 disciples. He wasn't even Jewish like the 12. Philip is one of the first Greek followers of Christ to be appointed, not by Jesus himself, but by the disciples to serve the church. He represents a new generation of disciple. He's a newcomer and in many respects an outsider. This is one of the first times in Acts that we learn about the Spirit leading a non-Jew into evangelical action.

So we have this newcomer-outsider-apostle Philip who encounters a fellow traveler on the road. The Spirit urges Philip to approach the man's chariot. The man is a eunuch and a high court official in charge of the entire treasury of the queen of Ethiopia. As both a Gentile and a eunuch, this man would have been considered more of an outsider in the fledgling Christian community even than Philip. As an Ethiopian he represents those who are geographically and ethnically, far away from the first recipients of the Good News. As a eunuch he is ritually or religiously far off. Eunuchs, who were sexually altered and considered sexually other, were excluded from participation in Temple rituals and from full admittance into Israel's community. The Ethiopian represents those who are other. Philip represents those who are other. Together, they represent God doing a new thing in the life of the church. They represent God working with, in, and through the "outsider" to expand the mission of the Church.

As Philip runs alongside the Ethiopian's chariot, he hears him reading from the Prophet Isaiah. It was customary at the time for people, even when alone, to read aloud. As Philip approaches, the Ethiopian invites him to join him in his chariot and asks Philip to explain the scripture passage. Philip shared the news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection with the Ethiopian who eagerly accepted the message of the Gospel and was baptized by Philip. After the baptism, the two men part ways. Being forever changed by their encounter with one another, they both go on their way and continue to share the story of Jesus with others.

In this story God's invitation to draw near to God and to live in the resurrected life of Christ is extended beyond the usual circles. It is a story in which two outsiders are the heroes of the faith, portraying what true Christian discipleship looks like. This was a first in the early Jesus movement. It's an example of God's expansiveness extending beyond religious, cultural, sexual, and geographical bounds. This is good news for anyone who doesn't fit the traditional mold. This is good news for someone like me and maybe for someone like you. And that's what makes it one of my favorite stories.

But it never would have happened without Philip's willingness to reach out in relationship and ask, "Do you understand what you are reading?" It never would have happened without the Ethiopian eunuch's honest response, "How can I unless someone guides me?" These two strangers enter into relationship with one another. They dive into authentic conversation. They mutually share God's Good News with each other and they are both forever changed. In their encounter, the invitation to new and abundant life in Christ reaches from Israel to the Hellenistic world to Ethiopia and beyond. But it started here with one life-giving and life-altering conversation.

Opportunities for such conversations abound if we are ready for them. Just the other day my wife, Sarah took an Uber home from the airport. Her driver was chatty. They talked about their hometowns and what brought them each to the DMV. Sarah was rather vague at first with what she shared. She, like me, is an Episcopal priest. It's sometimes hard to know how others will receive that identity. But the longer their conversation went, the more Sarah shared. By the time they pulled into our apartment complex, the driver knew that Sarah was a gay, married, Episcopal priest. He told Sarah that she had challenged – in a good way – everything he thought about Christianity. A) He didn't know women were allowed be ordained. B) Even if they could, he didn't think ordained people could be married, and C) even if they could he didn't think an ordained woman would marry another woman. His understanding of who was included in Christian leadership had been challenged. While my wife's conversation with her Uber driver may not have had the same instantaneous evangelical result as Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, it stirred up new revelations and opened the door for God to continue working and growing both Sarah and the Uber driver.

And that's what God does. God stirs up our preconceived ideas of who's in and who's out. God stirs up all our preconceived notions and invites us to stop seeing the world in a limited way and start seeing God's expansive invitation to abundant and abiding life for all – for those who fit the traditional mold and for those who don't, for those far off and those near. We are called to be the Philips of this world, opening up people's eyes to God's faithfulness and work among us. Joining the dots of what people read and experience in their own lives. And we are called to be like the Ethiopian eunuch, open to new learnings, open to listening and asking for others to share their insights with us.

God's expansive love is for all and we are called to share our experience of that love with others in thought, word, and deed. Because we know what it means to be loved by God and we want other people - whoever they are, whatever their circumstances - to experience that too. God's grace and love are for all people. May we be bold enough to join Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in embracing and proclaiming this Good News in our daily lives. Amen.