

First Presbyterian Church
Acts 8:26-40, “Philip on the Fringes”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 4/28/2024

Imagine you walk into a room with some furniture around the outside
and a beautiful oriental rug in the middle with some fringe around it ...
where do you want to stand.

Where do you feel most comfortable?

(Usually, toward the middle of the rug.)

But ... [Tapestry demonstration from our house]

When it comes to a wall hanging like this,

what part do you most want to touch? [the fringe!]

The fringes.

Fringes draw us in. If you see a leather jacket with long fringe pieces,
it draws you in. It's a little dangerous...

but also suggests opportunities await.

If you're part of a political group that some feel threatened by,
you might be called “a fringe movement.”

Fringes are exciting, unpredictable, scary ... and necessary.

We need something that is just on the edge of ordinary.

The fringes happen where the main thing transitions to the next thing.

God loves the middle. There's nothing wrong with being in the middle.

What are the people, places, or situations that are in your comfort zone?

Where do you not have to think about what you say before you speak?

And at the same time in times of change,

God is especially at work on the fringes. Why is that?

Because the fringe areas of life are where we cross barriers

and we serve a God who knows no bounds. [REPEAT]

Who might you encounter that would cause you to freeze up?
What bumper sticker would boil your blood enough to say,
“I’m not giving them that parking space.”

Today’s Scripture passage that takes us out onto the fringes
of our spirituality,
the fringes of our social engagement,
and the fringes of what we think is even possible.

In this passage, the Holy Spirit arrives as a surprising gust of wind
and blows Philip into a situation he hadn’t expected to find himself in.
In this story, the Spirit of the Living God
is active outside the traditional boundary lines.

This is a story that calls us to identify the people, places, or topics
that we might believe to be out on the fringe of normal life
where the Holy Spirit could call us into action.

It begins in v. 26 with a character named Philip.

Now back in chapter 6, the apostles told the other disciples
to select seven men filled with the Holy Spirit for a specific purpose:
to assist in distributing food to widows
who were of both Hebrew and Hellenistic descent,
which is to say, they were Jews and Greeks.

Well, this sounds like a focused enough task with good boundaries,
but one of those seven was Stephen who gave witness
to the story of Jesus before the Sanhedrin and was stoned and killed
as the first martyr of the church.

Being a martyr is a very fringe calling.

And another of those seven was Philip, who is also called by the Holy Spirit
into a ministry other than the original calling he was given in chapter 6.

And so it happened that an angel of the Lord gives a message to Philip.

We don't know if it was one of those magnesium bright white angels
or one of the young messenger appearing in a room angels,
or the voice in a dream variety, but it was an angel of the Lord –
and we know that in the New Testament
that means the Lord *Jesus*.

So Jesus' messenger tells Philip, "Go down the road, the desert road,
from Jerusalem to Gaza."

Today, this is not possible.

You cannot walk down the road, the desert road, from Jerusalem to Gaza.
You won't make it there. There are many boundaries,
and crossing them is deadly.

If Philip and this Ethiopian could revisit the place of their encounter today,
I'm certain that they would weep.

But our passage takes place in a different time.

In walking this road from Jerusalem to Gaza,
I don't think Phillip would have necessarily
known he was going to be blown across a boundary.
(But he was!)

Philip hears from the angel to head toward Gaza and says, "Okay, boss."
No questions asked, Philip heads out down the road.

Then he sees a group of travelers that certainly indicated
a social and cultural boundary: An Ethiopian eunuch
(and his traveling companions) moving down the same road.

There are some features about this individual that require some context:

1.) Ethiopian – this refers to the southern Nile area of Egypt
rather than the area we call Ethiopia today.

Nevertheless, it means this person held a distinct ethnic
and national identity that were unfamiliar to Philip.

- 2.) Eunuch – this is usually a male who has been castrated, but in Matthew 19, Jesus says, “there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others— and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.”

Whatever means of arriving there, a eunuch is a person who held an accepted role in ancient society with one caveat: Eunuchs were considered unclean and thus were not allowed to offer sacrifices at the Jewish temple.

Claire Davidson Frederick writes that,

“Eunuchs were often assigned the task of assisting royal women or guarding the royal harem.

They could not establish a competing dynasty.

But their status as eunuchs also made them vulnerable to violence.

They could easily be replaced or killed without repercussion because they had no sons to avenge their name.”

We don’t have eunuchs today, but one wonders if there might be a correspondence to some aspects of the LGBTQ community?

Or some other “fringe” social category of our day?

If this story was happening today,

who do you think Philip would be introduced to by the Spirit of God?

Who is the unexpected traveler you might encounter on the road today?

- 3.) Position: in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (or Queen Candace). Again Clarie Davidson Frederick notes that

“This eunuch served Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, as treasurer during one of the most prosperous times in the ancient history of the kingdom of Cush.”

Being in charge of a queen’s finances is a thing of great honor and considerable influence.

The high status of this individual could have been a barrier for a common person like Philip.

4.) Speaking of money – this Ethiopian Eunuch has their own scroll of Isaiah!
That’s unusual. I wonder how this Eunuch,
considered unclean by Temple law, acquired this precious,
hand-written, papyrus scroll?

Given the substantial length of Isaiah, it would have cost a fortune.

A person reading their own scroll aloud on a carriage
presents a boundary of both privacy and privilege.

Despite these four fringe areas Philip needed to negotiate,
the Spirit tells Phillip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

When he does so, he hears the words of Isaiah 53 being read
– words that describe the servant of Yahweh suffering injustice and death.

You should know that in ancient times,
reading was always done *aloud*.

Reading silently is a relatively new practice among humans.

So the Eunuch was riding and reading out loud,
which enabled anyone within earshot to hear what was read.

Philip musters the courage to speak across the gap. He addresses the Ethiopian:
“Do you understand what you are reading?”

And so begins a conversation that leads to Philip jumping up on this royal carriage
and sharing with this new acquaintance the story of Jesus
beginning with that very scripture.

Which is to say that what God has done in Jesus
is not a new thing that arrived apart from the Hebrew promises,
but a continuance that is intelligible from
within the heart of the Hebrew Bible.

And then they encounter some water and it’s the eunuch who suggests a baptism!
They must have talked for quite a while, and the eunuch
must have found an acceptance
with Philip and the story of Jesus that was transformative.

So Philip baptizes this eunuch and immediately the Spirit takes Philip away.
Now this is not something I've ever experienced when doing baptisms,
and I don't see how it is in any way necessary,
but ... that's what the Good Book says.

And so we are left to wonder: where are the people, places,
or topics that we might believe to be out of bounds
where the Holy Spirit could call us into action?

The answer depends on how much time you've spent in the middle of the rug.
If you don't have much experience crossing cultural boundaries,
then you'll want to go cautiously at first.
Helping at Community Dinner, visiting the Mac Youth Collective,
or getting to know a neighbor you always wave at from the car
could be a start.

If you're already comfortable with those easy steps,
then consider where you might be more bold.
Back in January I declared this to be a year of welcome for our church.
Who could you invite to be part of something you enjoy doing?
The Holy Spirit might be in conversation with them,
and you don't even realize it.

For me, I'm entering into the fringes through an event called "Dinner and a Fight."
This is an attempt to bring people from both sides of our political divide
right here our church for a potluck dinner.

The fight is over the question:
"Should we help all our homeless neighbors without exceptions?"

I've reached out to a group called Braver Angels to help me walk on this thin ice
because this is what they do. At every level of government,
all across the country, this group cultivates conversations
that help people learn how to disagree better.

Talking to local politicians and inviting them to be part of this
is way outside my comfort zone.

It's nerve wracking for me to ask people to be involved.

So I'm praying that the Spirit will blow in unexpected ways,
and we'll get people in the room
who really disagree about that question and that they will come away
with a better understanding of each other,
with more resources for dealing with their contempt
toward those who think differently.

When we do this as followers of Jesus,
it's called *peacemaking*, or *the ministry of reconciliation*.

Speaking of contempt, how about walking the road from Jerusalem to Gaza?
That's way out on the fringes.

We can't go there physically, but can we seek a way of peace there
that holds leaders accountable for their deadly decisions
but refuses demonize or dehumanize Jews or Gazans?

I don't know how to do that.

But I know I could do more to learn about it.

I'm looking for people who are working for genuine, equitable peace.

The life of the Spirit is highly active when we are crossing boundaries of
status, culture, ethnicity, language, gender, and politics.
Why? Because God is a God of reconciliation!

When we open ourselves to engage across these boundaries,
to be blown by a surprising gust of wind without
immediately scrambling for familiar territory,
we open ourselves to the wonder and joy
of life on the road in the mission of God.