

From the time that human beings first walked the earth, they grouped themselves into circles. Your circle tells you who you are, what you believe, and what your responsibilities are in life. Your circle also tells you who you are not and what you should be worried about.

There is certainly nothing inherently wrong with belonging to a community that give us identity. In fact, identity is a wonderful gift of community. But every circle is tempted to divide the world between us and those outside of our circle, especially when we become afraid. Your circle will tell you to worry about them. "Worry about the liberals or the conservatives. Worry about the people who are Woke. Worry about the Evangelicals or those here illegally." Our circle becomes dangerous when it makes us afraid of those who are not like us, when it blames the mythical "them" for our problems, and when it frets that "they" are trying to take something from us. That's when we tear at the social fabric, as we are seeing so clearly today.

In spite of the clear teachings of Jesus Christ, from the very beginning the church has also been tempted to think of itself as a circle with clearly defined borders. Just before his ascension into heaven, Jesus commissioned his disciples to go to Jerusalem, and all Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the world to witness the ways that the Spirit of God is at work. But even after Pentecost, when the wind of the Holy Spirit pushed the disciples out of the upper room and enflamed them with the message of sacred hope, the new church still stayed in Jerusalem.

The first several chapters of the NT book of Acts describes a church that was comprised only of Jewish converts because everyone had forgotten about Christ's commission to go to "them." But when the church in Jerusalem began to be persecuted and a deacon by the name of Stephen was stoned to death, the church had to scatter. And finally, it began to move from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and eventually the ends of the earth.

Philip, another church deacon, fled to Samaria. The Samaritans were not Jews but their distant cousins. They worshiped on their own holy mountain rather than the temple in Jerusalem. They didn't read all of the Hebrew Bible, and the Jews thought their religion was syncretistic. But since Philip was in Samaria, he figured he might as well do some preaching to them. And crowds of Samaritans believed, were baptized, and joined the church.

As Deacon Philip was trying to figure out how to explain this to the church board back in Jerusalem, an angel of the Lord told him to hit the road again. So he stood along the wilderness road that led south from Jerusalem to Gaza waiting for the next person God brought to his path. Before long, he saw an Ethiopian Eunuch being driven in a chariot coming from Jerusalem where he had been trying to worship. Apparently, he was on his way back home where he served as the treasurer for the Queen of Ethiopia. So, this is an important man. But we are not given his name. Instead, we're forced to see him only as Philip did - by categories. He's Black. He's a foreigner. And he's a Eunuch. He's not even close to being an Israelite. He's one of them, outside of Philip's circle. The text tells us specifically that the Holy Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to the chariot and join it."

Filled with the Spirit, we are told that Philip ran up to the chariot and gets close enough to hear that the Eunuch is reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The Ethiopian responds, "How can I unless someone guides me?" So, Philip hops in the chariot and helps him understand the passage.

The text he was reading was from Isaiah 53, which included the words: "He was like a lamb led to the

slaughter. In his humiliation, justice was denied him. Who can declare his posterity?" The Ethiopian Eunuch's first question of Philip was, "Who is this talking about?" Now why do you think he would be so interested in this passage about one who was humiliated, without posterity?

According to Hebrew Law, as depicted in Deut. 23, a eunuch was not allowed in the holy assembly. So, when this man went to the temple to worship, they wouldn't let him in. Maybe he made it as far as the Court of Gentiles, which would be like our Narthex, but not into the holy temple. Perhaps he explained that he was the Ethiopian Queen's treasurer and he had come a long way to get to worship in the temple, but he was still stuck outside.

Imagine coming to church one Sunday morning only to discover that you are not good enough to be let inside. There's something wrong with you. You're one of them. So you stand outside and ask people what it was like as they leave. "How was the music today? What did they sing? What did the preacher speak about? Were there any hopeful words about depression, failure, or disease? Or doubt? Was there a word from God that will help me?"

If we're paying attention to the hard truth of our lives, and the holy truth about whose house we have wandered into on Sunday, we would all wonder what we are doing here. By law, none of us are clean enough, or good enough to stand in God's presence. When you look around at others who look so good, you think, "Well, she belongs here, but not me. I don't have a great family like they do in that pew over there. I'm not even sure I believe all the things the church believes, and I'm positive that I cannot make my life right. I know what I have done and left undone. If everyone knew the truth about me, they'd toss me out of here because I don't belong in this circle."

Trust me on this: when we get to the Prayer of Confession in the liturgy, no one can say, "Well that's not about me." The Confession and the Declaration that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven may be the most relevant part of the worship service for all of us. No one is in the family of God by rights, except the Son Jesus Christ, and the Spirit who adopts you into his relationship with the Father.

Do you see? When it comes to church, there is no them. There is only us, and the common need for grace that binds us together. The church is defined only by its center in Christ, and the center will hold. Thus, we don't have boundaries. A circle without boundaries is not really a circle. No, as Jesus explained, the church is a mission that witnesses his saving work to the ends of the earth.

As Philip begins to interpret the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah to the Ethiopian Eunuch, a chapter that describes the coming Messiah as a suffering servant, he relates Isaiah's description to Jesus Christ. You can see the lights going on in Philip's own mind as he explains that Jesus was also despised and rejected of men, but with his stripes we are healed. He too was humiliated and denied justice. And he too had no posterity. But as our Messiah, Savior, he created a new family with a table that has room for us all.

The Eunuch was so thrilled, he wanted to join Jesus's family right there on the road. "Look there's water right over there," he points out. "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" When Philip heard those words he and the Ethiopian Eunuch went into the water. And when they came out of the water, two men of different colors, with different backgrounds and stations in life, living in different ends of the earth, an Ethiopian and an Israeli, became brothers.

And a little more hope entered the world. Amen.