

C Narrative 35
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Poulsbo
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Acts 8:26-39

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace from God our father and the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?

Well, to be honest, lots of things. And nothing.

There were lots of things standing in the way of this Ethiopian eunuch being baptized. This whole story is so far-fetched, even implausible. Very few in that time would have been wealthy enough to possess a scripture scroll. He had one. Very few in that time would have been literate enough to read that scroll. He was. This man was in the middle of nowhere in a chariot, and yet here comes Philip, running alongside. In a land where water was scarce, they happened to be on a road that passed by water. What is to prevent me from being baptized?

And then there was the church. At the time, the Christian church was a mash-up of Jewish laws and customs and new Christian customs. According to Jewish law, this eunuch, because of his “deformity,” was unclean, not allowed in the temple, outcast among the faithful. He was also obviously not a Hebrew. What is to prevent me from being baptized? Well...

And the new Christian traditions...in the next couple of weeks, we will hear of the struggle to form new traditions and laws that replace the former ones. In this new church, nothing was clear, nothing was set in stone, nothing was standardized. What is to prevent me from being baptized? Well, we're not exactly sure yet what the “right” practice is...

As this new Christian church got its feet under it, someone saw an omission here in this story. Surely Philip wouldn't have just up and baptized him without some sort of confession of faith! A conversion story, after all, is nothing without a confession of faith. There must have been one that just didn't make it into the original story. So we'll just put one in. (Thus the missing verse 37 – it was inserted after the fact and then later removed to be more faithful to the older manuscripts).

This is a scandalous story! What is to prevent him from being baptized? All sorts of things. And yet, baptize him Philip does. Unclean, no confession, an outsider in every way.

Because this story isn't about the church. It's about God's work in the world. Philip recognizes the voice of the Spirit calling him to walk to some random road in the middle of nowhere. Philip recognizes the voice of the Spirit calling him to join the journey of the chariot. Philip recognizes the work of God in this place, and God's pursuit of this less-than-a-man from Ethiopia. The only thing preventing this man from being baptized would have been Philip. But who was Philip to stand in the way of God?

This is the way of God. God pursues. God is not content residing in some far-off heaven but rends the heavens. God came in the flesh in Jesus, God sent the Spirit to remain here, God resides in the hearts of humanity, making us God's own temple, tearing the temple curtain. God rolls away stones. God is all about removing the things that stand between us and God. God pursues, regardless of propriety.

And that makes us uncomfortable. Throughout history, the church has always been very good at standing in the very open doorways that God has created. God opens a gate, and the

church has considered itself the gatekeeper. We find comfort in the law, because then we know what's expected of us. We find comfort in the law, because unfettered grace is unnerving. We know our job is to share the grace of God, but it must be done right. We don't want to misuse the grace of God by bestowing it upon the unworthy. God has entrusted us with this grace to share with the world, and we want to make sure it's done right. So we put restrictions on who can partake at the table. We put restrictions on who can be baptized. We put restrictions on who is truly welcome to fully function in the body of Christ. The words of grace that come from our lips do not match the obstructions we put in the open gate, the open door, the empty tomb.

God is not a God of restrictions but of pursuit. It is our job to take up the pursuit. To hear the call of the Spirit when the Spirit says, "Go to that person and join him."

As I was turning this story over in my head this week, I had to laugh, because I encountered a woman who was trying to do just that. I had found myself a spot to meditate, but my solitary meditation was disrupted by a woman who wanted to give me a tract and talk to me about the witness of Revelation. Three times I gently attempted to assure her that I was, indeed, a person of faith and that her efforts would be better expended elsewhere, but she was not to be deterred. By the time she let me be, I was pondering how our methods might actually impede the gospel we are trying to share. I was less likely to truly hear her, partly because she was not hearing me.

Philip listened to the Spirit and answered the call, Philip listened to the eunuch, and answered his questions. When the eunuch asked, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Philip's answer was merely to get down and baptize him.

Philip listened, Philip joined the man in his journey, Philip became a guide.

In God's pursuit, Philip helped, partly just by not hindering. When the eunuch asked, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Philip's answer was merely to get down and baptize him. Philip could have explained about his unclean status, his lack of verbal confession, his position outside the church. But he didn't. He climbed down and baptized him.

God pursues, and we in the church are called by the Spirit to help in that pursuit. So we work hard to listen for the call of the Spirit. We work hard to walk when we're asked, to listen to those to whom we are called, and to act without fear. We work hard to recognize God's open doors and leave them open. We are not the gatekeepers, we are the nets of the fisherman who keeps throwing those nets into the deep and dragging in whatever happens to be there.

Because once upon a time, we were the sludge the net dragged in. God pursued you. God continues to pursue you. God pursues you, even in your sin. God pursues you, even when you stand blocking the doorway for others. God pursues you always. And God sends you out to pursue others with the same lavish, undiscerning grace you have known. Yes, it's uncomfortable work. Yes, it's unnerving to see God at work in such appalling, unclean ways.

But that's what God does. That's how we got here. And that's how God calls us to help. Like Philip: listening, answering, walking alongside, guiding, baptizing. And *not* getting in the way.

Amen