

Date: May 3, 2015
Scriptures: 1 John 4:7-21; Acts 8:26-40
Title: Bearing Witness to God's Love

LAST SATURDAY, MY SISTER, KATHY, ANGELA, AND I
WENT TO BARTON CREEK MALL.
KATHY WANTED TO BUY A NEW PAIR OF SHOES,
AND I NEEDED SOME COSMETICS.
WE SPENT SOME PRODUCTIVE HOURS
IN THE SHOE DEPARTMENT,
BEFORE HEADING OVER TO COSMETICS.
THE YOUNG MAN WORKING THERE
WAS EXTREMELY HELPFUL AND VERY CORDIAL.
IN ONLY A FEW MINUTES, HE WAS RINGING UP MY PURCHASES.
SURPRISINGLY, HE DID NOT URGE ME TO BUY
ANYTHING OTHER THAN WHAT I HAD ASKED FOR.

AS WE WAITED FOR THE RECEIPT TO PRINT, I ASKED
IF THE PROMOTION FOR FREE FINGERNAIL POLISH
WITH A PURCHASE WAS STILL RUNNING.
HE SAID, "NO, BUT I HAVE SOME LEFT,
AND YOU ARE WELCOME TO HAVE TWO BOTTLES."
I THANKED HIM FOR HIS KINDNESS.
WHILE KATHY AND ANGELA
CAREFULLY MADE THEIR SELECTIONS,
I FOUND MYSELF THINKING ABOUT THE YOUNG MAN
AND WISHING I HAD AN OPPORTUNITY
TO GET TO KNOW HIM BETTER.
HE RADIATED SUCH GENEROSITY OF SPIRIT.
SUDDENLY, I FOUND MYSELF WISHING
I COULD SEE LIFE THROUGH HIS EYES,
SEE LIFE FROM HIS PERSPECTIVE.

IT IS DIFFICULT FOR ANY OF US TO SEE LIFE
THROUGH ANOTHER PERSON'S EYES.
NOT HAVING LIVED THEIR LIFE,
WE CAN ONLY IMAGINE WHAT THEIR LIFE
HAS BEEN LIKE.
ONLY IMAGINE HOW THEIR EXPERIENCES
MIGHT HAVE SHAPED AND MOLDED THEM.
IT IS DIFFICULT UNDER THE BEST OF CIRCUMSTANCES.
THE MORE DIFFERENT PEOPLE ARE FROM US,
THE MORE DIFFICULT IT IS
TO PUT OURSELVES IN THEIR SHOES.
THE YOUNG MAN AT THE COSMETIC COUNTER WAS GAY.
I WANTED TO SEE THROUGH HIS EYES
NOT FOR ANY VOYEURISTIC REASON
BUT SO I MIGHT KNOW MORE FULLY THE CHALLENGES

HE HAD FACED AND OVERCOME
TO BECOME THE PERSON HE IS.
HE HAD MY UTMOST RESPECT.

WE ARE ALL DIFFERENT FROM ONE ANOTHER.
SOME OF US ARE MORE DIFFERENT THAN OTHERS.
THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH IS SUCH A PERSON.
HE IS VASTLY DIFFERENT FROM EVERYONE HE MEETS.
HE IS EXCEEDINGLY WEALTHY.
HE RIDES IN A CHARIOT,
A TWO-SEATER MODEL.
HE HAS THE MEANS TO TRAVEL FROM ETHIOPIA TO JERUSALEM,
A 1,600 PLUS MILE TRIP,
AND TO PURCHASE A SCROLL
OF THE WRITINGS OF THE PROPHET ISAIAH.
HE IS WELL EDUCATED,
AND AS THE ADMINISTRATOR
OF THE ETHIOPIAN TREASURY,
A VERY WELL PLACED MAN.
HE IS ALSO A EUNUCH,
A MAN, WHO AT A YOUNG AGE
HAD BEEN CASTRATED AGAINST HIS WILL
SO HE COULD SERVE AT COURT.

THERE IS ONE MORE THING
THAT MAKES THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH DIFFERENT
FROM EVERYONE ELSE.
HE LEFT THE FAITH OF HIS CULTURE
TO BECOME A FOLLOWER
OF THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC, AND JACOB.
EVERYTHING ABOUT THE MAN~
HIS ECONOMIC STATUS,
HIS EDUCATIONAL LEVEL,
HIS SEXUAL IDENTITY,
HIS SOCIAL STANDING,
HIS RELIGIOUS BELIEF ~
MAKES HIM DIFFERENT
AND SO BOTH DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND
AND HARD TO RELATE TO.

THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH IS TRAVELING ALONG THE ROAD
FROM JERUSALEM TO GAZA ON HIS WAY HOME.
HE HAD VISITED DAVID'S CITY TO WORSHIP THERE.
HIS SEXUAL IDENTITY, HOWEVER, MADE THAT PROBLEMATIC.
DEUTERONOMY 23 SAYS POINT BLANK
THAT EUNUCHS MAY NOT WORSHIP IN THE TEMPLE.
THAT PASSAGE WOULD PROHIBIT HIM FROM WORSHIPPING THERE.
BUT, ISAIAH 56 SAYS THAT THE DAY IS COMING
WHEN EUNUCHS WILL BE ALLOWED TO WORSHIP IN THE TEMPLE.
THESE TWO COMPETING SCRIPTURES PREVENT US

FROM BEING ABLE TO SAY WITH ANY CERTAINTY
WHETHER OR NOT HE GAINED ENTRY TO THE TEMPLE.
BUT, WHAT HE IS READING
AS HE BOUNCES ACROSS THE DESERT ROAD
GIVES US A CLUE.
HE IS READING CHAPTER 53 OF THE ISAIAH SCROLL WHICH SAYS,
“HE WAS OPPRESSED, AND HE WAS AFFLICTED,
YET HE DID NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH;
LIKE A LAMB THAT IS LED TO THE SLAUGHTER,
AND LIKE A SHEEP THAT BEFORE ITS SHEARERS IS SILENT,
SO HE DID NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH.
BY A PERVERSION OF JUSTICE HE WAS TAKEN AWAY.
WHO COULD HAVE IMAGINED HIS FUTURE?
FOR HE WAS CUT OFF FROM THE LAND OF THE LIVING,
STRICKEN FOR THE TRANSGRESSION OF MY PEOPLE.”

THE SORROWFUL TONE OF THIS PASSAGE
AND THE BLEAKNESS OF THE WORDS,
“HE WAS CUT OFF FROM THE LAND OF THE LIVING”
SUGGESTS THAT THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH
WAS NOT ALLOWED TO WORSHIP IN THE TEMPLE.
HOW PAINFUL IT MUST HAVE BEEN
TO EXPERIENCE SUCH EXCLUSION.
HOW PAINFUL TO MAKE
SUCH A LONG, ARDUOUS, EXPENSIVE TRIP
AND THEN BE TURNED AWAY.
HOW PAINFUL TO BE SO CLOSE AND YET SO FAR.

WHAT THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH IS READING
ALSO GIVES US INSIGHT INTO THE ESSENCE OF THE MAN.
HIS LIFE WAS DRAMATICALLY ALTERED
AND HE WAS POWERLESS TO PREVENT IT.
HE WAS IN EVERY WAY LIKE A SHEEP LED TO THE SLAUGHTER.
A TERRIBLE INJUSTICE HAD BEEN DONE TO HIM ~
AN INJUSTICE
THAT MADE HIM DIFFERENT FROM OTHER PEOPLE;
AN INJUSTICE,
THAT DENIED HIM THE SIMPLE PLEASURES OF
WIFE AND FAMILY,
EASY GOING COMPANIONSHIP WITH OTHERS,
WORSHIPPING AS HE PLEASED.
HIS IS A LONELY, SOLITARY LIFE.

UNBEKNOWNST TO THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH,
GOD PUTS A PLAN IN ACTION
THAT WILL DRAMATICALLY CHANGE HIS LIFE.
THE PLAN INVOLVES PHILIP,
ONE OF SIX MEN CHOSEN
TO BE THE FIRST DEACONS OF THE EARLY CHURCH.

GOD'S SPIRIT INSPIRES PHILIP,
TO LEAVE HIS WORK IN SAMARIA
AND GO TO GAZA.
OUT THERE ON THE DESERT ROAD,
THE TWO MEN'S PATHS CROSS.

AS SOON AS PHILIP SPOTS THE CHARIOT,
THE SPIRIT INSTRUCTS HIM
TO GO UP AND SERVE THE ONE RIDING THEREIN.
IMMEDIATELY, PHILIP BEGINS RUNNING TOWARD THE CHARIOT.
DRAWING CLOSE, HE HEARS THE MAN READING ISAIAH.
PHILIP ASKS HIM,

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE READING?"
THE MAN RESPONDS,
"HOW CAN I IF NO ONE EXPLAINS IT TO ME?"
THIS RESPONSE SUGGESTS THAT HE IS NOT ABLE TO INTERPRET SCRIPTURE,
BECAUSE HE IS NOT ALLOWED TO GO TO SYNAGOGUE
WHERE SCRIPTURE IS STUDIED.

REALIZING THAT PHILIP'S QUESTION IS A SUBTLE OFFER
TO EXPLAIN THE PASSAGE TO HIM,
THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH INVITES HIM
TO JOIN HIM IN THE CHARIOT.

PHILIP DOESN'T HAVE TO BE ASKED TWICE.
TAKING HIS PLACE ALONGSIDE THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH,
HE BEGINS EXPLAINING IT
THROUGH THE LENS OF JESUS CHRIST.

PHILIP TELLS HIM JESUS IS THE ONE WHO WAS LED AWAY TO DEATH.
JESUS ALLOWED HIMSELF TO BE CRUCIFIED
IN ORDER TO REVEAL GOD'S GREAT LOVE FOR THE WORLD
AND TO FREE PEOPLE FROM BONDAGE.

HEARING THIS GOOD NEWS,
THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH ASKS,
"IS THERE ANYTHING
TO PREVENT ME FROM BEING BAPTIZED?"

ALL THE UNREALIZED HOPE THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH
HAS CARRIED IN HIS HEART IS BOUND UP IN HIS QUESTION.

WHEN PHILIP OFFERS NO REASON,
THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH STOPS THE CHARIOT,
AND THE TWO MEN GO INTO THE WATER
WHERE PHILIP BAPTIZES HIM.

AFTERWARD, THE SPIRIT SENDS PHILIP TO AZOTUS
AND THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH GOES ON HIS WAY REJOICING.

IN THE PAST WEEK,
MANY PEOPLE HAVE HAD SOMETHING
TO SAY ABOUT THE RIOTS IN BALTIMORE,
WHICH FOLLOWED THE DEATH OF FREDDIE GRAY.
IN THE RECENT PAST,

THERE HAS BEEN A SPATE OF DEATHS
OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN MEN
AT THE HANDS OF WHITE POLICE OFFICERS.
THE LINK BETWEEN ALL THESE DEATHS
IS THE TWO GROUPS CANNOT SEE THE WORLD
THROUGH THE EYES OF THE OTHER.
THEY HAVE NOT WALKED IN EACH OTHER'S SHOES.

PROBLEMS HAVE BEEN SIMMERING IN BALTIMORE FOR A LONG TIME.
IN 1970, ABOUT A THIRD OF THE LABOR FORCE
HAD MANUFACTURING JOBS AND A LIVING WAGE
THAT WENT WITH IT.

"IN 2000, ONLY 7% OF CITY RESIDENTS
HAD MANUFACTURING JOBS,
AND THE LOSSES HAVE CONTINUED SINCE."

(E.J. DIONNE, JR., "ROOTS OF BALTIMORE'S STRIFE IN DISAPPEARANCE OF JOBS," *THE AUSTIN AMERICAN STATESMAN*, MAY 1, 2015.).

TO MAKE MATTERS WORSE, POOR BLACKS,
UNLIKE POOR WHITES WITH MORE MOBILITY,
WERE STUCK WHERE THEY WERE.

THE LOSS OF JOBS PRECIPITATED
A LOSS OF INCOME,
A LOSS OF OPPORTUNITY,
A LOSS OF STRUCTURE,
AND A LOSS OF HOPE.

NO DOUBT THAT THE PEOPLE LIVING
IN THE POOREST AREAS OF BALTIMORE
FEEL AS IF THEIR LIVES ARE CUT OFF
FROM THE LAND OF THE LIVING.

IT IS SO EASY TO JUDGE THOSE DIFFERENT FROM US
AND CONCURRENTLY FAR MORE DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND
WHERE THEY ARE COMING FROM,
WHY THEY DO THE THINGS THEY DO.

YET, THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT WE MUST TRY TO DO.

IT IS IMPERATIVE
THAT WE LOOK BEYOND WHO WE THINK THEY ARE
AND SEE THEM AS GOD SEES THEM,
SEE THEM AS GOD'S BELOVED CHILDREN.

BUT, THAT IS NOT ALL.

SEEING THEM AS GOD SEES THEM IS ONLY THE FIRST STEP.

WE MUST ALSO ACT IN WAYS
THAT WILL ACTIVELY PROMOTE PEOPLE'S WELL BEING.

WE MUST STAND AGAINST PREJUDICE,
WORK TO PROMOTE JUSTICE,
CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION,
AND REDRESS INEQUALITY AND MISUSE OF POWER.

IN THESE WAYS AND MORE,
WE MOVE BEYOND INDIFFERENCE, JUDGMENT, PASSIVITY

TO LOVE OF NEIGHBOR.
WE CANNOT SAY WE LOVE GOD
IF WE DON'T LOVE OUR NEIGHBOR,
FOR HOW CAN WE SAY WE LOVE GOD,
WHOM WE HAVE NOT SEEN
IF WE DO NOT LOVE OUR NEIGHBOR,
WHOM WE HAVE SEEN.
IT'S JUST AS SIMPLE AND HARD AS THAT. AMEN.