



***Rooted and Ready:***  
**"WELCOME ALL"**

Acts 8:26-40

Rev. Elbert Paul Dulworth

First United Methodist Church  
Birmingham, Michigan

One of my favorite Sunday morning comic strips from a few years back was *Kudzu*. Did anyone ever follow *Kudzu*? It was written by Doug Marlette, who later lost his life in a tragic auto accident. So the comic strip ended when he passed away, but I still enjoy reading the archives from time to time. One of the primary characters in *Kudzu* was a Baptist preacher by the name of the Rev. Will B. Dunn.

One day, a parishioner named Ida Mae approaches the Rev. Dunn to share a concern that she has. Now Ida Mae is the one who knows everything about running the church. In fact, she knows everything about everyone. She has an opinion about everything that happens in her church and she'll be quick to tell you about it. In this particular vignette, Ida Mae is clearly bothered by something to do with the church volleyball league as she approaches the Rev. Dunn, saying, "The Accupressurists, the Zen Masters, the Astral Projectionists, the Past Life Regressionists... Look, I'm all for opening up church league, but this has gotten out of hand. It's scary!"

Trying to connect with her concern, the Rev. Dunn says, "I know—the Satan Worshippers team, right?"

"No," shouts Ida Mae, "The Reality Show Rejects!"

You really have to draw the line somewhere, don't you?

Friends, there are plenty of preacher's jokes and stories about what happens to lawyers, doctors, CEOs of HMOs, Baptists, Fundamentalists, Catholics, and even Methodists who stand before the pearly gates. We might laugh at the punchlines, but they hint at the same thing for us—namely, the Church can sometimes seem to be filled with people who decide who is in and who is out, can't we? As hard as we might work to be included ourselves and even inclusive of others, the world sees us at times as quick to talk about who we think is outside the walls, outside the kingdom, outside of a grace-filled life, or just OUT! There are some that we'd warmly receive as members of the body of Christ and then there are others that...well, they just aren't like us!

In our lesson from Acts this morning, we see Philip, the Evangelist. This is not the apostle Philip. This Philip was chosen as one of seven by the twelve apostles in order to provide care for others as the mission of the early church was beginning to expand.

Interestingly enough, Philip went first to Samaria, the land of those who had been excluded from the promises of God because they were the first to fall away. While in Samaria, Philip had witnessed to several people including Simon, the sorcerer. Simon was excluded from the community of the faithful because he was a Samaritan as well as a sorcerer. With two strikes against him, Simon came to believe in Christ and was baptized by Philip.

Today in our scripture lesson, Philip is travelling south from Jerusalem to Gaza along a quieter road. In fact, it was an angel of the Lord that had given Philip his direction of travel that day. Faithful to God's call on his life, Philip begins his journey. Along the way, he encounters an Ethiopian eunuch who is travelling back home from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Back home in Ethiopia, this man is a man of great responsibility in the court of Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians. He is put in charge of her entire treasury. He has plenty of power back home. Serving in the court of the queen may have been what has caused him to have to give up his gender and become a eunuch, but he is still a person of distinction back home. In Jerusalem, however, this Ethiopian man has two strikes against him in the community of faith.

He had come to Jerusalem for worship, but he would not be eligible for temple worship. For one, he is an Ethiopian. He is a Gentile, an outsider. He could not enter beyond the Court of the Gentiles in the temple. He would not have been allowed into the inner courts of the temple no matter how faithful or God-fearing he had become.

The second strike against the Ethiopian who had made this long pilgrimage to Jerusalem was that he was a eunuch. According to Robert W. Wall in *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary, eunuchs were forbidden to enter the temple for worship.<sup>1</sup>

Now as he returns home, this Ethiopian man is sitting in his chariot and reading the prophet Isaiah. As Philip approaches, he recognizes this passage that the eunuch is reading. You have to know it's the Spirit of God at work in Philip because it's amazing that he would even approach a eunuch. If a Samaritan sorcerer wasn't enough to defile this God-fearing disciple, then a foreign-born eunuch surely should make him unclean. What in the world is Philip thinking even trying to go up to this guy?

But Philip, running alongside the chariot, hears the words of the prophet Isaiah and asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

Do you realize how counter-cultural this is for Philip to engage in such a cross-cultural experience? Now he's talking to this man that is on the outside. It doesn't matter how faithful the eunuch wants to be, his very touch may defile Philip. The eunuch answers back, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" So he invites Philip into the chariot to sit beside him. Philip hops in and sits right beside him.

The Scripture from Isaiah was this: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.”(NRSV)

And the eunuch asks Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?”

Stop for a moment and take that in. Listen to how the eunuch’s life story and probable experience in Jerusalem resonates with the words that he is reading in Isaiah. You can’t make this story up. Here you have a man whose life was stripped away from him as his masculinity was taken in order to make him less of a threat in the court of the Queen. Yes, he is now entrusted with the Queen’s wealth, but it came at the cost of his own life and his identity as a man. Like the sheep, he could not fight it, it just happened. We don’t know the details about when it happened or entirely why it happened. It happened and his life was more difficult in many ways as a result.

Most likely, he was turned away from the temple after making a pilgrimage to grow in his faith. Imagine the humiliation that he must have felt. There is no justice for this eunuch. Again, his position came at a price, the price of his gender; his identity; his life. His life was taken away from him so that he could serve someone else. No gender, no threat, no identity, and no justice for this eunuch. Even as he makes an attempt to draw closer to God, he would have been turned away yet again. At this point in our story, he is headed home, still trying to understand his faith, his life, and a generation of people who would count him as nothing.

The eunuch reads from Isaiah and he sees himself in this story. So he asks, “Who is this about? Is this about the prophet or someone else?” You can almost hear him saying, “This is about *me*. This is *my story*! How could someone know *my story* so many years ago and in a far away land?”

Philip then tells the eunuch the good news about Jesus. You and I read the prophet Isaiah and we are conditioned to hear the story of Jesus. The eunuch reads Isaiah and hears his own story. When he finally asks, Philip connects him with the story of Jesus. Imagine what must have gone through his head in that moment. Philip tells this foreigner, this eunuch, nobody, untouchable, marginalized man about Jesus, and suddenly he discovers a God to whom he can relate his situation in life.

A defiled man, who can’t worship in the temple let alone in the Court of the Gentiles, hears the words of Isaiah, the story of Jesus, and realizes his own story. In that moment, the eunuch says, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

There was a lot to prevent him, wasn’t there? He was a Gentile. That was enough to prevent him from getting into the inner courts of the temple. He was a eunuch; a person without a gender; a defiled nobody; and that was enough to prevent him from worship in the temple. So what is to prevent him from being baptized? Perhaps, it depends on who is baptizing converts that day.

He commands the chariot to stop as he and Philip step down into the water. In the closest body of water they could find, Philip baptizes this untouchable nobody, who realizes in that moment that he is somebody in Jesus Christ.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to travel with an exchange program for young professionals to another place in the world where people are still turned away because they are labelled as “untouchable.” In one particular village that I was visiting at the time, we were introduced to a young woman who had become a nurse. She received her training as a result of the generosity of our hosts. Her calling to be a nurse, however, came as a result of her father, who was an outcast.

Her father was a survivor of leprosy. As such, he was put outside of the village. That day, we met the young woman and her father. I noticed that she was invited in to dine with us, but her father was left outside.

I don’t know what it’s like to be that ostracized by your own community, but I could only imagine the pain that he felt. Several of us young professionals probably broke the unspoken rules of our hosts that day as we went out to visit with the man who was left outside. In fact, some of our team brought out food to him and invited him inside. He stayed outside as if he knew that was his place. Again, I don’t know his pain, but I do know the frustration I felt as I saw a man that was treated as less than human because of a disorder over which he had no control and from which he had been healed. That day, I saw Jesus outside the walls of a building in which I had been invited to dine.

It seems to me that Philip, the Evangelist, saw Jesus on the outside as well. He saw Jesus in the untouchables of his day. He saw Jesus in those who were tossed aside and needed a good word. He saw Jesus in the outcast and brought a word of hope for those who were abandoned by the “community of faithful ones.” It was as if he knew that Jesus would welcome all and invite all to the table of grace. And so Philip found himself on the outside, willing to risk becoming the outcast so that the untouchable would know the loving touch of our God who embraces all; who receives all; who welcomes all into the Body of Christ.

I’ll never forget the day when, as a young boy, my great-grandmother called the church that would end up welcoming me into the faith. She was visiting us from Pennsylvania, and I happened to be staying with my grandparents who always hosted her. “Grammy,” as I called her, asked the person who answered the phone what time the service was. Then she said, “My great-grandson would like to join me, but he only has his tennis shoes with him. Is it all right if he comes along?” She hung up the phone and said, “It doesn’t matter how you come, just that you come. I knew they would say that.”

At the end of worship that day, the pastor’s spouse invited me to stay for Sunday School. That day, Peace United Methodist Church in East Detroit, Michigan, warmly welcomed me and made me a part of their community of faith. Each and every week, from that time forward, they looked out for me and let me know how important I was to them. If I was not there on a Sunday morning, I received several phone calls making sure that I was all right.

I'm so thankful that as we join together in ministry at Birmingham First and Berkley First, your very first core value is to "Welcome All." That's the very first core value that the body of Christ taught to me so long ago. During this summer as we examine our roots so that we might discover how God has created us to thrive, our very first value is to affirm that here in these sacred spaces, "All are truly welcome." Together, we recognize the sacred worth of every human being.

This is a place where you may connect and grow. You don't have to be so far along on the journey of faith. God seeks each of us as we are and welcomes us as we are to this journey of faith. We don't need to think the same, have the same stories, or even share in the same experiences to belong here. You belong because Christ has invited us on this sacred journey together. You don't have to have your whole life together or the answers to every question of faith. In fact, you don't have to have any answers. You are welcome here because Jesus welcomes all and so do we.

Think about it, sisters and brothers. If Jesus could sit at a table with one who would betray him, one who would deny him, and a whole host of others who would fall away in his time of greatest need, we, too, can welcome all, right where they are, to find their story with us in the story of Jesus.

With Philip, we are willing to hop on the chariots and help others to encounter the risen Christ right where they are. Perhaps now more than ever, what people need most is a guide along the way who will listen to their story. We'll even take the "Reality Show Rejects" because we see God in Christ as we look into the faces of those around us, especially those that seem most different from us.

Earlier this morning, we celebrated the sacrament of baptism yet again. It is one of our holiest times in our life together as the Church. For in this sacrament, we celebrate not what we have done, but what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ. At the font, we welcome all because we were first welcomed in Jesus Christ. At the font, we welcome all because the work of salvation isn't up to us; it's up to God.

May the words from the great hymn by Marty Haugen ring true for us in our life together, "Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and visions heard and loved and treasured, taught and claimed as words within the Word. Built of tears and cries and laughter, prayers of faith and songs of grace; let his house proclaim from floor to rafter: all are welcome; all are welcome; all are welcome in this place."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wall, Robert W. *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck et al. (Nashville: Abingdon P, 2002), 143.

<sup>2</sup> Haugen, Marty. *Let Us Build a House*. GIZ publications, 1994.