

## Ethiopian Eunuch

What is to prevent me from being baptized?

There had to be at least a slight awkward pause after the eunuch's question. To us, the answer might seem obvious – nothing prevents it. It seems like Philip and the eunuch hopped right down from the chariot and Philip baptized the eunuch without hesitation.

But this man's identity as a eunuch makes this actually a more complicated question than you might think. Philip was a Greek Jew – he would have known Torah...the law, or teachings contained in the first 5 books of the Bible. Here is what Deuteronomy, the 5<sup>th</sup> book, says – no man whose genitals are crushed or cut off shall be admitted to the assembly.

And of course that's exactly what a eunuch is. The culture of many of the peoples of that region included the creation of eunuchs – boys or men who were castrated to make them infertile and less of a threat to the royal bloodline.

Eunuchs were typically captives or slaves who were castrated as boys. However, some young men – or their families – volunteered. And has always been true, uncommon congenital conditions exist that can result in a similar state.

Eunuchs were often put in positions of great power, and like our character in this story, they were often well-educated and wealthy. In some cultures, they were even highly respected.

But that didn't really make up for the fact that any kind of living legacy was out of reach. It didn't eliminate the trauma of what happened to them. And It didn't change the fact that he was forever marked as an ambiguous character.

His castration would have made him appear different from normal men. Shorter, heavier with less muscle, beardless, higher voice. But in the absence of female hormones, he wouldn't have looked completely female either.

He was returning home from the Temple in Jerusalem. He was either born a Jew in Ethiopia, or he had somehow become a worshipper of Israel's God. We don't really know how he would have been seen by the other Jews at the Temple, but you have to assume he stood out. His status as a eunuch likely kept him from being fully a part of the Jewish religion.

It's not surprising that the passage he read from Isaiah resonated with him. And when Philip pointed to Jesus as the suffering servant, he found a kindred spirit and he found hope. He was ready to jump in...to be baptized.

The Deuteronomy law I read was designed to prohibit intentional castration among Jews, so they didn't create eunuchs. However, the Babylonians did.

It's likely that after the Babylonian exile, when the people returned to Jerusalem, there were eunuchs among them. That created a problem – should these eunuchs be excluded on the basis of something done to them by the Babylonians?

Perhaps in response to this quandary, the prophet Isaiah issues a promise from God – it says this:

For thus says the Lord:

To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,  
who choose the things that please me  
and hold fast my covenant,

<sup>5</sup>I will give, in my house and within my walls,  
a monument and a name  
better than sons and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name  
that shall not be cut off.

God promised to give even eunuchs a full place in God's house.

The eunuch asks, What's to prevent me from being baptized?

Philip's mind may have been whirling with all kinds of responses – well, there's Deuteronomy... this whole eunuch thing might prevent it.... but then there's Isaiah...and well, Jesus seemed to embrace all sorts of people, questionable or not.

Philip has already had quite a mind-blowing time of it. Jesus told the disciples they would be his witnesses to all Judea, to Samaria...Samaria! And to the ends of the earth. But they hunkered down in Jerusalem and the surrounding villages...waiting for who knows what.

Then, persecution broke out after the stoning of Stephen and the disciples finally began to scatter, spreading the news of God's reign outside of Judea. Philip wound up preaching, healing, and casting out demons in Samaria. As a result of his proclamation the new community of Jesus followers grew even in Samaria!

Philip is beginning to grasp that this new movement truly has no bounds. So, he comes to the conclusion that there is nothing to stop the Ethiopian from being baptized. Both hop out, walk down to the water, and the eunuch is baptized...he is adopted into the family of God, in full.

His status as a eunuch is no longer what defines him. Neither does his position or his wealth. His identity is child of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.

When we deal with this character, it's easy to focus primarily on his status as a eunuch...and what he lacks. There is much more to him than that. As we said, he has a position of authority. He's educated. He's respected, at least in his position. He's got access to all the trappings of wealth.

But none of that is all there is to him either. Like all humans, he has a bigger story. What does he hope for? Who does he love and who loves him? What family does he have? Is it a loving family? Like most people his story is complicated. No one thing makes up a person's identity.

He has a whole story that is more than just the biological fact that he is a eunuch.

Sometimes, what gets us in trouble is our vision of how things or people should be. And people who are different in some way get short-changed when they don't match our vision.

At one time, and maybe still for some, there was an image of the ideal church going family. Generally, this image gets placed in the 1950's and early 60's.

Dad, mom, kids. Dad worked, mom stayed home to raise the kids. Or around here, they were a typical farm family, working together to bring forth the fruits of the earth. They had a decent house, a car.

They were all upstanding...in the case of the Lutheran denomination they were virtually all white. They dressed up in their Sunday best to go to church...and you never missed.

It was the golden era for the church with burgeoning Sunday schools and the need for educational wings and bigger buildings.

It's the church I grew up in. But I don't know that we ever stopped to ask who wasn't there. Or who wouldn't have been especially welcome. I wonder what kind of reception an exotic, black, gender ambiguous character might have gotten in the church I grew up in. I hope it would have been welcoming, but I know there would have been lots of stares.

We always seem to come up with ways to sort out who should be in and who should be out. But every single time we do that, the Holy Spirit will do more or less what she did with Philip...psst...hey Philip...go to the Samaritans and proclaim the good news of Jesus, the Messiah...they'll listen. And they did.

Then, pssst...hey Philip see that guy over there? Yeah...the foreign looking one...the guy who doesn't look like a normal guy. Yeah...go talk to him. And as Philip opened the word to him, the eunuch began to feel, maybe for the first time in a long time, here's someplace I can belong.

And the answer to his question, truly what can prevent me from being baptized is...nothing.

I've always liked this story. It strikes me a little different each time I read it. I think the most important thing we can do as Jesus' disciples is recognize that there is more to everyone than the one identity that strikes us first off.

People have a whole story.

What do we miss when we focus on a trait that designates someone an outsider?

We are so quick to judge...to think we know all we need to know about someone on the basis of one part of their identity. This story calls us to a better way. It calls us to see every person...even those we might dismiss...as a child of God.

It calls us to what Martin Luther King Jr. called the Beloved Community...a community that is strikingly diverse...but still united as children of God.