

This past week I’ve been caught up in the story we find in Acts. Acts—as you may know—is the sequel to the gospel of Luke. It’s written by the same author and it continues the story of Jesus as we see how his mission is carried on by his followers.

The story starts with Jesus telling his followers, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” And—as many have pointed out—the model is that they are to start at home, in Jerusalem, and then spread the message a little wider, which would be Judea, and then wider still— to Samaria—and eventually to the ends of the earth. And because we tend to be literalists we take this to be all about geography. We think the idea is that we just have to bring Jesus’ teaching to every “where”... to every nook and cranny of the globe.

But because we read the text so narrowly we risk missing the larger point... just like the Ethiopian eunuch was in danger of missing the point of the scripture text he was reading when the angel sent Philip to him. We get so caught up in reading this as if it’s just about the need to stamp our missionary footprints in the remotest regions of the globe that we miss the most amazing parts of these stories of the apostles witnessing to all the earth.

It’s not “where” they’re witnessing that’s so astounding; it’s who they’re witnessing to. In fact, the “where” is the easier part. The where is about preparing for a journey and setting out on it. The where is about packing your backpack and hitting the road; the where is about buying your ticket and getting on the boat; the where is about finding a translator who can interpret your sermon into a different language. The “who” is where it gets difficult.

Look at “who” Jesus and the apostles bring the good news to. In our story today it’s an Ethiopian. This is a man from a distant “where” but he’s an even more distant “who.” This is a man who has no cultural or ethnic connection to the Hebrew people... he’s an ethnic outsider. And of even more difficulty: this is a man who is considered only half a man... he’s a eunuch. And the Old Testament clearly states that people like this are to be held at arm’s length from the holy places and practices of the faithful people. Leviticus and Deuteronomy are very clear on the fact that no one who has “a blemish” or is “blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf,” or has “a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs” or has made himself a eunuch through accident of nature, or accident of labor, or their own choice shall come near the Lord for this would “profane the Lord’s sanctuary.” It’s right there in the scripture, you can’t miss it. And yet, Jesus went out to these very people. He went specifically to the blind and the lame and the blemished; he touched and cured and cared for those with these very conditions proving that God’s love is even greater than the authors of the ancient scriptures could fathom.

And now in Acts, Jesus’ disciples are carrying that mission on. They’re not just taking the marvelous good news of God’s love further and further from the geographic epicenter; they’re taking it further and further from the culturally and traditionally—and scripturally—bound taboos and prohibitions they’d once lived under.

The stories we read in Acts are about the disciples spreading the Good News to those who were—like them—Hebrews of the Jewish tradition; and then they’re taking it to the Samaritans who they shared a diluted ancestry with and with whom they angrily disputed the tenets of their faith to the point where the Samaritans were considered foul and unclean and polluters of the faith. And they shared the word with Gentiles from faraway places like this Ethiopian with whom they shared no evident trace of ancestry... and whose religious beliefs were foreign and shocking. And they shared the good news of Jesus with Gentiles who were ranking officers in the army of their occupiers and their sworn enemies.

And the deal is that when we think of witnessing as a matter of “where” it can be a very sterile and academic process: “We know the truth; you don’t. We will put the truth in writing or

words that you can understand and drop it on you and you can do what you will with it and at least we've done our part. But witnessing to the "who" is a whole other matter. It was in witnessing to the "who"—it was in going among the "unclean" people, and the pagans, and those with the most diverse customs that the Apostles found themselves having to wrestle with what it means—not just to slap the word of God in a stranger's hand or shout it in their face—but to actually live the word by loving the other as God loves them.

It was in living with a Gentile Centurion that Peter had to wrestle with the many places in scripture that prohibited him from eating the foods the Gentiles ate... and Peter has a vision in which God shows him all the foods the Bible had previously described as unclean abominations and the voice of God tells Peter to kill and eat, and Peter cries out, "Never Lord; I've never eaten such things in my life!" But God tells Peter, "What I have made clean you are not to call unclean." So Peter is convinced that now the God they've seen revealed in Jesus is calling them to love others in a way that surpassed the vision of the writers of the scriptures.

And over and over again we see it in the "who" that Jesus and the Apostles share God's love with. It's a woman caught in adultery that scripture would condemn without flinching. It's the blind and the lame and the paralyzed and the man with a deformed hand and the ones with leprosy that we could have never imagined—from our scripture reading—that God might care for. It's the enemy, it's the unclean foreigner, it's the sinners and the religiously and ethnically and sexually different that we see God reaching out to in and through Jesus and the Apostles.

And not everyone liked this. In Acts we read of that huge debate in which Peter and Paul bring their case before the pillars of the young church and some rage at them for daring to suggest that God might love these outsiders and welcome them in the fold. To them, apparently, it was okay to bring the Gospel message out to the ends of the earth as long as you didn't bring anyone from the ends of the earth back into the body with you. It's okay to share God's good news so long as you don't suggest that God might actually love them with all their peculiarities and differences, as long as you don't have to uncurl your lip and unfurl your brow and actually love them as though they were your brother or sister; as long as you don't have to open yourself to the possibility that the "who" you're bringing the word to might challenge your grasp on the word as well... and cause you to grow.

But the message that Peter and Paul brought swayed the body, and through them the Spirit spoke... and they loosened the chains of the laws and traditions, and the Gentiles were allowed into the kingdom, and the blind and the lame and the unclean and the eunuchs and the blemished were welcomed in by the mercy of our Lord. And thank God for that because you and I, we are the Gentiles, and we are the blind and the lame and the deformed and the eunuchs and the unclean... We are the blemished, and let us never forget that. We are the blemished. And it is only God's mercy that casts a wide enough web to drag us into the kingdom where we have found hope and joy and new life.

And in this day of easy and affordable transportation—in this day of cheap and amazing communications technology—it is all too easy to revert to the idea that bearing Christ's witness to the ends of the earth is just a matter of "where" the message is preached. May we be among those who always keep in mind that it's about the "who;" that we are still in the process of reaching the "who" who live not far from us today, just beyond our stunted imaginations' ability to believe our God could possibly love. May we be bold to love the "who" who stretch our imaginations and challenge our readings of scripture and may the spirit guide us—through the grace of God we see in the Acts of the first followers—to continue widening the circle today. In and through the power of his Spirit and always and only to his glory. Amen.