

Building A Church – Part 3**“Tear Down the Walls****Rev. Rob Carter**

Trinity Sunday B-18

May 27, 2018

Isaiah 6: 1-8

Acts 8: 26-40

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Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip,

“Get up and go toward the south to the road
that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.)

So he got up and went.

Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch,

a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians,
in charge of her entire treasury.

He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home;

seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

Then the Spirit said to Philip,

“Go over to this chariot and join it.”

So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah.

He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?”

And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading 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.”

The eunuch asked Philip,

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

Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture,

he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

As they were going along the road, they came to some water;

and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water!

What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

He commanded the chariot to stop,

and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water,
and Philip baptized him.

When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away;

the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.
But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region,
he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Building A Church – Part 3 “Tear Down the Walls”

It’s been a little while since I’ve been in this pulpit. Four weeks to be precise. To be sure, it’s good to be back. I missed two Sundays upon my son’s emergency surgery, and then, upon my return, we had the blessing of hearing Lenore Chapman preach on the balance between being and doing on *Gifts of Women* Sunday. Then, last week, in celebration of Pentecost—and the confirmation of 13 wonderful young adults into full membership of Christ’s Church—Joel offered a powerful message reminding us that the church doesn’t exist for itself. The only reason there’s a Church in the first place is because of the Church’s call to participate in the mission of God. It is God’s mission, Joel reminded us... it is always God’s mission that comes first, second, and last.

I didn’t tell him this, but as Joel was preaching last week, I kept thinking to myself, “You know, this would’ve been the perfect sermon to end that “Building A Church” sermon series I’d started but hadn’t finished.” It was a series I began over a month ago, but we had to jump from it when was away.

So today... today we return to it today. Not because we have to. Frankly, we don’t. I could’ve chosen to preach on what I’d already scheduled to preach this week. But... truth be told... I don’t like to start something and not finish. But even more to the point, isn’t this what we’re all about? Building up Christ’s Church? Participating in the Spirit’s movement that blows God’s kingdom through the world? Sharing the grace of God in Jesus Christ so that each and all might uncover just how loved and blessed they are?

Some of you may recall how it first began. How this movement we call “Church” began just bubbling up as Jesus’ first followers sought to live out their faith.

Luke and Acts make clear, there was no strategic plan or yearlong feasibility study on whether or not a church could be born or should be born. It just started happening. With Jesus suddenly no longer with them... after he was killed and resurrected and ascended into heaven... it just started happening as his followers looked at each other and asked, “Now what?” “Having just spent the last three years of our lives following Jesus around like a puppy, now what do we do?”

The answer, it turns out, wasn’t rocket science. Those first followers went out and simply shared their stories. They went out and told others about their experiences. They testified to all they’d witnessed during their time with Jesus—the truth as they’d experience it—all the love and grace and beautiful inclusivity they’d uncovered amid God’s kingdom.

And as they did, Acts says an amazing thing happened. As those first followers shared their testimonies, people who’d never met Jesus began to uncover a bit of God’s kingdom for themselves. They began to uncover the love and grace and peace to be found in a living relationship with the God of Jesus Christ. And the kingdom of God spread... from a few dozen to a few hundred to a few thousand in the seeming blink of an eye.

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But we know those first followers of Jesus did more than just witnessing to their relationship with God. They also sought to treat others as Christ had taught them. They sought to live into Jesus’ central command to love others. Love not in the sense of emotional

sentimentality or affectionate feelings—but love in the sense of sacrifice. Love in the sense of intentionally working on behalf of another’s well-being, even at risk of your own.

A few weeks ago, we explored how Jesus calls himself a Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep in contrast to a hired hand who just runs away at the first sign of danger. The difference between the shepherd and the hired hand, Jesus tells us, is that the hired hand isn’t interested in getting to know the sheep. He’s just there to make a buck. The Good Shepherd, on the other hand, he invests himself in knowing those he’s called to care for. So while the mass of sheep just look like one big mess of wool to everybody else, the shepherd can tell them all apart from 50 yards away. He can even distinguish them by their voices. After all, he’s invested himself in getting to know them.

So the sacrifice love requires... it isn’t a problem for the shepherd who *knows* his sheep. It’s easier to love those you know.

So the dividing walls must come down, Jesus tells his disciples. The dividing walls we allow to exist between ourselves and others aren’t just unhealthy, they’re also unfaithful. It’s why Jesus embraced the lepers and ate with the tax collectors and spoke to Samaritan women. He tore down every dividing wall he encountered, showing his followers that we must be willing to get to know the ones we’re called to love. We need to do much more than simply see their faces. We need to learn their names and get to know their stories. We need to uncover their joys and concerns and their fears. For in getting to know them, we come closer to truly loving them.

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I reiterate all that because, if you notice, we see these very practices—getting to know others, and sharing our stories—we see them being lived out in our lesson from Acts.

It’s really a fascinating story that begins with the disciple Philip walking down a road from Jerusalem to Gaza. It’s a wilderness road not many travel on. But he’s passed by a chariot carrying an Ethiopian eunuch. That’s... an Ethiopian eunuch. You didn’t encounter many Ethiopian eunuchs in Hebrew society, to say the least.

But evidently, the eunuch is a big wig in the Ethiopian queen’s court. He’s her treasurer. And as a male destined to serve in a queen’s court... he had been castrated as a child, as was customary back then. So he was a man with more of a boy’s physical characteristics, like an unchanged voice.

But that’s not his only distinguishing characteristic. According to Luke, the African eunuch was also deeply interested in the Jewish faith, having gone all the way to Jerusalem to worship, undoubtedly trying to worship at the great Jerusalem temple—the center of Hebrew life.

The only problem with that, though, is that there’s no way a eunuch could ever worship in the temple. That was a big-time no-no. Plus, he was almost certainly a gentile—a non-Hebrew. And only Hebrews were allowed in the temple. That’s a double-whammy—a eunuch and, most likely, a Gentile.

So the eunuch’s trip had likely been unsuccessful.

But he doesn’t lose faith. He decides to read from Isaiah during his long journey from Jerusalem back to Ethiopia. So as his chariot passes Philip along the road, Philip overhears this

rather strange voice of a eunuch—a man whose voice hasn't changed—reading from Scripture. Incredibly curious and led by the Spirit, Philip runs the chariot down to see who's inside.

And well... the two get to talking. So much so the eunuch lets Philip into his chariot... and as they continue along the eunuch's journey home, these two men—who couldn't be more different—begin getting to know each other.

Picture it—Philip and the eunuch.

Philip—a Hebrew. And the eunuch—an Ethiopian.

Philip—a Jewish follower of Christ whose Hebrew roots give him access and privilege throughout Jerusalem. And the eunuch—a rich and powerful Ethiopian officer who wants to worship at the Hebrew temple but can't.

Philip—a man who is accepted in Hebrew society. And the eunuch—a sort of half-man, half-boy who, in the eyes of the Torah at least, was considered an outsider from the people of God.

The dividing walls between these two men are staggering. But as the chariot keeps rolling, they keep talking. About life... about faith. Philip, we know, shares not only his understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures, but also about his relationship with Jesus Christ.

And the eunuch is moved so dramatically that, at the first sign of water, he blurts out, "Stop the chariot! What's to prevent me from being baptized?"

He jumps out of the chariot and asks again, "What's to prevent me from being baptized?"

Well... let's see... for starters... only Hebrews and Samaritans had been baptized to this point... certainly not anyone outside of Hebrew society... let alone anyone from another continent altogether. You don't j

ust up and welcome some foreigner into the fold.

But even if you did, he's a eunuch. And as the Torah says, and I share up front that this is a tough quote... but it's a direct quote from Deuteronomy 23:1, "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord." It's written right there... plain as day... black and white.

"What's to prevent me from being baptized?" the eunuch asks!!!

Well... if the eunuch couldn't see them, Philip certainly could. The dividing walls are just staggering! A gentile from a different continent who's a eunuch to boot!

... But Philip saw through all that. He saw that it didn't matter if the man was from Jerusalem or Ethiopia or Timbuktu. He saw that it didn't matter if his anatomy or biology or ethnicity were different than his.

For he'd gotten to know the eunuch. He learned his story, and had shared his own. And in the process, he learned a thing or two about the eunuch, and himself, as well as his faith.

So you know what Philip did? He tore 'em down. He tore down the dividing walls between his faith and the eunuch, and baptized him then and there along the road to Ethiopia.

And the kingdom of God spread that day... from Judea and Samaria all the way to Africa. Because Philip had the courage and compassion to get to know someone... and tear down the walls between them.

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“What’s to prevent me from being baptized?”

It’s such an important question for the church. How often do we needlessly let walls stand in the way of doing God’s work, friends?

While we don’t have many eunuch’s in our society, there are still far, far too many people who’re kept on the outside... who are searching... looking... hoping for inclusion, but the community is not open to them. Sometimes intentionally, sometimes not. But still—they’re kept outside. So what will we say, TPC, when we’re asked... “What’s to prevent me?”

“What’s to prevent me, a transgender woman, from being fully welcomed and fully embraced here?”

“What’s to prevent us, an ethnic minority family, from feeling like we belong in this very Caucasian community?”

“What’s to prevent us—a Muslim community—from growing in love with your community?”

“What’s to prevent me, an impoverished single mother barely making ends meet, from being supported here?”

“What’s to prevent me, an undocumented immigrant, from finding a faith home with you?”

What’s preventing us from tearing down the dividing walls, Towson Presbyterian?

We claim we are an inclusive church. And in many ways, we are.

But there are still many walls we need to tear down around and within us to ensure the transgender woman can learn of God’s love for her... and the homeless man can hear once again that his worth isn’t measured in dollars... and the undocumented immigrant might see that in the kingdom of God the only citizenship that counts is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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“What’s to prevent me from being baptized?”

Personally speaking, had the eunuch asked me, I wouldn’t have cared about what country he called home or his sexual identity. But I’d have had a lot of thoughts running through my head.

“‘What’s to prevent me from being baptized?’ you ask.

“Well, I’m not allowed to just baptize you. I need Session permission for that.

“And as an adult, you’d have to go through our New Member program first.

“And even before attending that, you’d probably wanna be worshipping in our congregation for a while.”

So while my answer to the eunuch wouldn’t have been “No,” I wouldn’t have just popped out of the chariot and baptized him, either.

“What’s to prevent me from being baptized?”

So in addition to our personal and societal prejudices, the question also forces us, Presbyterians, to ponder how often we let church structure and polity stand in the way of spreading the kingdom of God. How we allow one month’s worth of meetings turn into two or three or four months of meetings in order to make sure that proper process is followed? And how often the kingdom suffers for it?

For the Spirit has shown us time and again that the kingdom of God grows farther and faster when we stop hiding behind walls of excuses and process and start boldly saying yes to God's call.

Which leads us to the last point I lift up from this question... this question you and I and disciples today are asked so much more often than we realize.

“What's to prevent me from being baptized?”

What's to prevent you from approaching your grieving co-worker with not just words of comfort, but words of prayer, as well?

What's to prevent you from inviting your friend to a small group so she might experience community in a way she needs to right now?

What's to prevent you from making faith conversations more of a priority in your own home... devotion time with your spouse, prayer time with your children?

What's to prevent you? What wall stands in the way? What are you propping up instead of tearing down in order to grow closer to God, and God's call on your heart?

Is it the wall of time?

Is it the wall of judgment?

Is it the wall of convenience?

Is it the wall of money?

Is it the wall of societal expectations?

What is preventing us, Towson Presbyterian Church, from growing the kingdom of God... here and now? From growing and becoming the church God is calling us to become?

The good news, friends, is that the only thing standing in our way... the only thing standing between us and God's call to grow God's kingdom are the all-too-manmade walls standing around us... and even within us. The good news is that these are all walls that, if we are willing, WE CAN TEAR DOWN. And when we do... when we tear them down so that we can get to know others and come closer to loving them... what we will inevitably find, friends, is our God of love waiting for us on the other side.

So whaddaya say, TPC? Personally, I think it's time to tear down some walls... in our ministries and in our relationships. Time to tear down some walls.