

Sermon from May 18, 2025. Pastor Lara

Grace to you and peace from our risen Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The book of Acts is a screenshot of the history of the early Christian church. And its history still has plenty to teach us.

In the first chapter of Acts, before Jesus ascends into heaven, he tells the apostles, “You will be my witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The story we hear today takes place on the road to those outer circles.

Philip is one of the deacons that was chosen to help care for the widows in the early Christian church in Jerusalem. We read about that a few weeks ago. After serving in that role, he went to another city to preach about Jesus there.

Peter and John eventually joined him. There was some drama with the local people. But a lot of them came to believe in Jesus and were baptized, and that’s where our story today picks up.

In the Bible, anytime we hear the word “wilderness” it almost always means a desolate place. So, at the Holy Spirit’s command, Philip left ministry sites where he’d been surrounded by people and went toward a place where there normally wouldn’t have been anyone.

Except that there was. And it was someone completely different than Philip had ever met before. But instead of keeping his distance, Philip kept listening to the Holy Spirit and went closer.

It’s important that the writer of Acts tells us the person in the chariot is a eunuch. Because, in this context, a eunuch is a man that has been surgically neutered – castrated.

¹In order to work for most monarchs in the Ancient Near East and North Africa, men had to be surgically neutered. Because the monarchs didn’t want their top-level employees trying to pass on power to their children and establish dynasties of their own, or otherwise undermine the government. And it was illegal for someone who was a eunuch to rule as a monarch.

More often than not, this procedure was something that was done to certain classes of men by people in power. It isn’t a situation of someone identifying as transgender and

¹ <https://www.wilgafney.com/2012/05/04/black-jewish-and-queer-the-ethiopian-eunuch/>

voluntarily taking steps toward fully living into that identity. It's an act of violence that was inflicted for the sake of preserving the power structure.

²In the second century, people began to give the eunuch in this story a name, so that his sexual status doesn't become his sole identifier. Current biblical scholar, the Rev. Dr. Wilda Gafney, names him Abdimalkah, which means "Servant of the Queen" in the Hebrew language.

I will refer to him by that name in the rest of my sermon. Because, as we hear in this story, Abdimalkah was more than his sexual status, he was the treasurer for the Queen.

And as the Queen's treasurer, he had a lot of power. He was educated. He had resources. But outside of that power structure, he was a second-class citizen at best because of what had been done to him.

And what he learns from Philip, is that he is valued by God as he is. That the good news of Jesus is for him, too. That baptism is for him, too.

Because baptism is initiated by the Holy Spirit. People do the actual speaking and pouring of water. But baptism itself, doesn't start with us. It's our response to what the Holy Spirit is doing in and through us. Philip knows that.

And in the moment of Abdimalkah's baptism, his anatomy, sexuality, gender status – all of it – is simply part of who he is as a baptized child of God. Philip never questions whether this identity is proper or fitting for inclusion in Jesus' movement.

He doesn't try to convince Abdimalkah to renounce who he is, and he doesn't shame him for his sexual status. He doesn't ask any questions about whom Abdimalkah loves or how he lives. The invitation to baptism doesn't come with any conditions around his life choices or existential being.

When Abdimalkah asked what is to prevent his baptism in a wilderness oasis, Philip simply baptized him. And that was enough for the Holy Spirit – because, remember, that's who started this whole encounter.

² Ibid

³And what it teaches us, and helps us remember, is that when we listen to the Holy Spirit, we discover that God values and has a place for the people that empires maim and discard.

Next Sunday, May 25th, marks the 5yr anniversary of George Floyd's murder. If you don't remember who he was or how he died, please look it up.

In the days that followed his death, the Holy Spirit shouted as loudly as it ever has – compelling us to act. To go beyond the walls of the church. Compelling us, again, to speak out against racism and the systems humans have built that perpetuate it. To dismantle those systems because of the hate and fear that they spread, and the harm they cause to anyone that doesn't fit a specific idea of how people ought to be.

Those systems are still in place, and the Holy Spirit is still shouting at us about them. We just don't hear it as clearly we did 5yrs ago because there are so many other voices drowning it out. Voices that distract us, that tell us to be afraid. That tell us to constantly look over our shoulder – to be suspicious of people who are different from us.

Voices that make us forget what Jesus taught us about loving God and our neighbor, and how that shapes and guides our identity as church.

When those other voices and their narrative dominate our lives, we don't hear the Holy Spirit. We can't. And when that happens people like George Floyd, and Abdimalkah, get ignored. Or worse.

But God's Holy Spirit frees us from the fear that the world works to create and perpetuate, and wants us to live in. The freedom of God's Spirit compels us to listen to its voice.

To go to the places it calls us – the places we wouldn't normally just go on our own. To encounter the people who are there and discover that God is already there with them – waiting to show us the next steps on the road. Guiding us to the life-changing ministry we're capable of.

Every story in the book of Acts is about the church going out and doing ministry in Jesus' name wherever the people happened to be. But somewhere along the way, we stopped doing that. We like to think we're in control, and so our tendency is to stick with what we know so that we feel safe.

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/627-ethiopian-eunuch-baptized-may-11-2025>

But the Holy Spirit's function is to blow through our lives and break things open and send us out. Sometimes to faraway places like Tanzania, sometimes to a protest march or to speak at a legislative session, and sometimes just outside our door to imagine and work toward the life-changing opportunity of affordable housing on the other side of our parking lot.

The Holy Spirit frees us to do that.

When Philip went to that deserted road, he didn't keep his distance from Abdimalkah. He kept listening to the Holy Spirit – and taking the next step, and the next, and the next.

When he baptized Abdimalkah, he didn't ask him to change anything about himself. He didn't ask him to come back to Jerusalem and join the church there. He didn't worry about any of that.

Philip poured the water and said the words. And then Abdimalkah went on his way, and the Spirit took Philip to wherever he was needed next.

The work of the Holy Spirit didn't only happen in the first century – it's constant and for all time. And when we listen, it teaches us over and over again that God values and has a place for everyone, especially the people that empires maim and discard.

And make no mistake, we are living in an empire time right now. People are being discarded at a record pace.

But God's Holy Spirit shapes and guides our identity as church. It works in and through us. It opens our hearts to the people that God values. It reminds us of what Jesus taught us about loving God and our neighbor.

It frees us from the fear we've been taught to have, and sends us out in that love.

Alleluia and thanks be to God! Amen.