

OAK GROVE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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June 27, 2021

Galatians 3:26–28

Acts 8:26–31, 35–38

Let us pray.

Startle us, O God. Crack open our hearts and minds to what you would say to us this day. Shake us from complacency, challenge us to new understanding and insight to see beyond ourselves and to where you would lead us in new ways. In Jesus Christ, Amen.

We have spent the last several weeks looking at the nature and attributes of the church, those things that we are to do, and those ways in which we are to be. We have talked about how God calls the church into being and how God sends the church out into the mission field where we are planted. I have discussed the changing circumstances that the church finds itself in, where the culture has shifted from a churched culture that supports the Christian faith to a culture that no longer does so. The mission field is no longer in distant lands but is right outside the doors of where we worship, work, and play.

We have described how God has gifted us to be the church in service for the common good. If God creates us, and sends us out, God also gives us the gifts and talents we need to accomplish the piece of God's mission that we are assigned. This giftedness is not for pastors or leaders alone but is given to all of us for everyone and every church to do their part. There is a reason you are here, and there is a reason that Oak Grove is here, to do the ministry that God has called us to do.

In order to fulfill the mission that God has given the church, using the gifts God has given us for the common good, it is necessary that we

understand and cultivate those gifts. We do not come to the faith fully mature, and we are implored to continually transform ourselves to be more and more Christ-like. We now need ongoing training and the life-long journey of faith.

We cannot, however, become fully mature in our faith alone. We cannot be practicing Christians all by ourselves. Instead, we must have a community that nurtures and cares for each other, that supports us and challenges us – a community that, to paraphrase the words of the New Testament, “one anothers” each other.

We will finish next week with this sermon series. So far, I think, what we have discussed has been all very neat and orderly, we are created by God for service, gifted by God, and nurtured and cared for in the faith by the church. However, God is not always so neat and orderly, and so, this week we turn to a challenge for the church.

Our first lesson today may be familiar to some of you, it is a favorite to many. I think that many people love it because it demonstrates the wideness of God’s love. It is three short verses, but they pack a lot of power.

Galatians 3:26-28

²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

The second reading comes from an experience from the early church. From the book of Acts.

Acts 8:26-31, 35-38

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... 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.

There are times when God just doesn't behave well – God doesn't always follow the rules – God doesn't do what we expect God to do, and it throws us for a loop.

As a general rule, we humans, we like order and structure. We like things to be in their place. We like to be able to label and sort and know the difference between us and them. We want to know the good and the bad. Who's in and who's out. But God simply doesn't work that way. The gospel, the Good News, if it is truly good, doesn't work that way.

The gospel challenges us to see all people, including those not like us or who do not hold similar values or understandings, as our neighbor. In as much as possible, we are to love and welcome everyone.

There are many different stories and words from scripture that highlight God's inclusive love. But the reading from Galatians may be one of the shortest and most illustrative examples of just how radical God's inclusive love is.

When Paul writes in Galatians that because of Jesus there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, no longer male and female, this is a glimpse of the breadth and depth of God's love. It's not about dismissing difference, it is about putting our self-worth in the correct place, it's not in our gender, our nationality, our orientation, our status, or any other label we might try to use to diminish the worth of someone, but rather it is the fact that we are all children of God and that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. There is a rabbi who once said that when we look at humanity, all humanity, we should say: "Make way, make way for the image of God!"

When I think of the stories of Jesus' life and encounters with people, it is full of him reaching out to those that were excluded. He purposefully reached out to those who others wouldn't, people like the Samaritan woman at the well, lepers, tax collectors, and the woman caught in adultery.

Jesus talked to people others disregarded, he touched people he shouldn't have, he ate with the wrong people, he welcomed children...

Jesus demonstrates the love of God in love that is unconditional, He reflects what I think God calls the church into again and again – an ever-expanding circle that is transformed for the good as it welcomes more and more people – even the people, maybe especially the people who many think don't deserved it.

And it isn't just Jesus that expands the circle of inclusive love. At the beginning of Acts, Jesus leaves his disciples with the charge to make disciples in Jerusalem, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, to spread the good news in ever widening circles.

Philip is preaching in Samaria and the Spirit compels him to go even further, into the wilderness. Into the margins. Philip goes away from the central activity of the church in Jerusalem. He is sent out not knowing what he might find or what he is even looking for.

And when he happens upon a stranger, the first thing he does is listen. He listens to someone not at all like him. The men couldn't be more different from one another. Different race, ethnic group, language, and status. And then there is the fact that this stranger that Philip encounters is an Ethiopian Eunuch. A black sexual minority.

In his time, the Ethiopian Eunuch, who is coming back from the temple in Jerusalem would not have been permitted to step foot in the temple to worship. Not because of his race, nationality, gender, or status, but because of his sexual identity.

When Philip encounters the Ethiopian Eunuch reading scripture, he listens and engages with him. Philip doesn't preach at him. He doesn't make him pass a test, doesn't ask him for credentials. He listens and he enters into a conversation. Philip doesn't dismiss him or ignore him or diminish him. Philip waits until he is invited into conversation and, quite literally, joins him where he is. He sees him. He hears him.

And then miraculously, in the midst of the wilderness, there is water. The Eunuch asks, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Until recently, I had always seen that question as a joyous thing, the culmination of Philip and the Ethiopian discussion where I thought the Ethiopian wanted to fully join the community of faith. But a pastoral

colleague has helped me see this question in a different way. “What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

My colleague talks about how she hears this question from the Ethiopian. She says, “I hear in it the pain of someone who knows that bringing his authentic self, that coming as God has made him or circumstances have impacted him has left him on the outside of something he desperately wants to belong to. ‘What prevents me from being baptized?’ is the question of a person who has been prevented from being welcomed in faith communities enough times that his default assumption is that he will not belong this time. Even after an angel brought Philip to this desert place. Even after this apostle has walked alongside the chariot, climbed up inside, and heard the eunuch’s question. Even after they have read Scripture and talked about it together. Even after he has heard the good news about Jesus who welcome all in his presence, in his love, in his mission. Even after all of that the eunuch still has had enough experience to assume he will probably be prevented from full inclusion in the faith.”ⁱ

The church has done great harm. For too long, and in our current day, race, gender, gender identity, and sexuality have been used to restrict or bar people from full inclusion, affirmation, and engagement with faith communities. They are either barred explicitly or asked to not be fully honest or bring their full selves in order to be welcomed or let through the door.

This is why it is so important that we be explicit in inclusion and welcome, and why we cannot ever assume we have arrived at a place where we can stop being explicit about this welcome. We might think we are welcoming, but it is important to remember that for many still, the first question that comes to mind when they think of church is, “What is to prevent me from worshipping here, what is to prevent me

from being baptized here, what is to prevent me from being in leadership here, what is prevent me from being loved here?”

This passage and experience of the Ethiopian is just the sort of passage that should hold up a mirror for us. This story tells us that we better be careful whenever we put limits on God’s love, we better be careful about naming anyone unworthy. To be fair, I think that Oak Grove does a pretty good job of recognizing the expansive and inclusive love of God. It’s one of the reasons I was so excited to receive the call here. I want very much to be the pastor and be part of a church that has a wide view and understanding of God’s love. I want to be a part of a community that understands that to be Christian is to be about breaking boundaries, about crushing barriers that stand in the way. I want to be a part of a faith that calls me outside of myself and pushes me to examine my own prejudices and calls me to account, that tells the truth about our history, that calls me to learn a wider perspective, and that sometimes might even compel me to break rules, norms, and conventions.

I imagine that many, if not most, of you feel in a similar way. That one main reason you are a part of this church is because we try our hardest to live into this reality every day, an ever expansive, open, welcome, inclusive, and diverse church. We believe that when God says that Jesus came into the world for the whole world – that God meant exactly that – for everyone, no exclusions.

And, at the same time, I wonder, before we get too complacent, or self-congratulatory, I wonder what the Spirit might be doing with us. How are we getting in good trouble? How are we being challenged by our commitment to inclusivity? What wilderness might we being called into? What stranger might we be asked to listen to? And see? I wonder how the Spirit is calling us to a new understanding, I wonder to where and in what ways the Spirit is calling this church to be even more

radically hospitable in its understanding of God's inclusive and expansive love for all.

It's great to know we are created by God, and called by God to be in service, to know that we are gifted, and that we have to practice our faith, and to care for one another, but mostly, we can do all of that and remain safe. But we are called beyond being safe. We are called outside of ourselves – outside of our preconceptions and our prejudices, so that all may feel the wide welcome of God. It's one thing if we know these things, but how can we ensure that others will know this as well?

And I'll be honest with you. Sometimes that's scary. I am often quite happy to stay comfortable in my own world, with people that I know, and who think and act just like me. I am content to not have to face my own prejudices and hate. Most times I am comfortable with not breaking the rules and getting in trouble with my superiors, my congregation, my peers, or my family. Sometimes it's scary to rock the boat. However, and this is a big however, our God truly shows no partiality and our God is a God of reconciliation, and we have been called into a ministry of reconciliation where all people are made in the image of God, where all people have worth, where all people have dignity, where there is no stranger, and we are called to action to help bring about that reality.

I believe the church should be a sign and foretaste of the kingdom of God (as I said several weeks ago, a demonstration plot) where there is reconciliation and a new community where all are valued for the people who God made them to be.

My hope is that we never take this for granted. That we continue to be explicit with this welcome and inclusion. That we are intentional about how we live that out.

ⁱ <https://revstephanieanthony.com/2021/04/25/are-all-welcome-a-sermon-based-on-acts-826-39/>