

What is to Prevent Me from Being Baptized?

By: Meagan McLaughlin

May 2, 2021. In today's sermon we learn more about the story from Acts chapter 8 of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch — the foreign, dark-skinned person who does not conform to gender norms — and ask what is to prevent us or anyone from being baptized.

Readings: [Acts 8:26-40](#), [John 15:1-8](#)

*** Transcript ***

In the relatively new, but definitely classic Disney movie “Zootopia,” bunny Judy Hopps has always been... different. In a world that claims to be inclusive — where anyone can be anything — Zootopia is still largely divided into predator and prey, and you are expected to fit in to whichever group you are born into. So it is assumed that Judy the bunny will do what her entire bunny family has always done — farm carrots. But Judy knows she was born to be a police officer. Her passion for making the world a better place gets her into trouble with bullies, who want to knock her down, and her parents, who wish she would settle for the easy road and not make things so hard for herself and them.

In spite of the challenges, Judy does become a police officer, but finds that her colleagues don't take her seriously, and her chief relegates her to parking duty. As the story unfolds, Judy stumbles onto an unsolved case, and in trying to solve it, she becomes friends with Nick Wilde, a fox. Judy unwittingly hurts Nick deeply when her own tendency to see all predators as dangerous “others” gets the best of her. She realizes that while she has struggled to claim her place as a bunny police officer, Nick has been rejected his whole life because people didn't believe a predator like him could ever belong anywhere — and Judy herself wasn't as ready to embrace Nick the fox as she had thought.

In the gospels, Jesus often calls people to recognize the walls they have put up between them and others. He shocks by making an outsider, the Good Samaritan, the hero of a parable, and eats with all kinds of people seen as “other.” Jesus is always reaching to the margins and once, Jesus himself gets called out when he refuses to help the Syrophenician woman whose daughter is ill, and she tells him: even the dogs get to eat the scraps from the table. Of course, Jesus then heals the girl. And I have often wondered, was Jesus trying to teach us a lesson in what not to do, or did he in his humanity also need to be taught?

In the early days of what would become the Christian church, chronicled in the Book of Acts that provides our first readings in the Easter season, the followers of Jesus debated about who could belong and who couldn't belong, and what they had to do to belong. The Spirit kept showing them that all people are children of God and welcome into God's promises.

After the initial coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the Spirit anointed a group of gentiles, and that led to their baptism, if only because the Apostles could hardly deny baptism to people God had so clearly chosen. In the heat of debate about whether or not following Judaic dietary laws should be required, Peter had a dream in which God revealed to him that no one should be excluded from the fellowship for what they eat. Over and over, the gospel expands the circle, continually challenging us to welcome those who seem outside. The promises of baptism are for all people, but especially for those on the margins.

Today's story is no different. The Ethiopian Eunuch, although he was a Jew and he carried some power

and authority in the court in which he served, was an outsider on many counts. He was a foreigner, he was viewed as “exotic” because of his dark skin, and he'd been surgically altered — possibly by force — so that he was outside of gender norms. None of that prevents the Spirit from guiding Philip to head to the south, follow a deserted road, find a random chariot, and join the Eunuch as he studied Isaiah.

Philip shares the gospel with him, and it never occurs to the Eunuch that it might not be for him. They pass by water, and the Eunuch speaks a profound statement of faith: “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” What indeed? There was water, and the Word of God. And then and there, the Eunuch and Philip claim that the promises of God have no limits.

We don't know anything else of the Ethiopian Eunuch, except that he goes on his way rejoicing. It strikes me that, as an Ethiopian, dark-skinned, high court official, he is in the perfect position to carry the good news to new lands. The Spirit, I believe, didn't send Philip to the Eunuch in spite of who he was, but because he was uniquely equipped to embody the love, forgiveness, and faithfulness of a God who knows no boundaries.

The Eunuch knew without question that God's promises were for him, in all his uniqueness. Judy Hopps knew without question that she was uniquely equipped to make the world a better place as a bunny police officer, no matter what anyone else thought.

As colleagues and I gathered this week to reflect on these texts, we wondered, what would it look like if we lived the truth that all people really are fully included in the gospel? We realized that we pray for this every week, in the Lord's Prayer, asking that God's kingdom and will be done on earth... not just for some, but for all creation. It means letting go of needing to understand, needing to gate-keep, needing to have some control over how things look and how they are done. It means letting go of our own vision and embracing God's vision instead. We humans will never fully be able to grasp it in this life, but we do get glimpses, and it is the gospel nevertheless.

My colleagues and I recognized the power of the gospel to heal and transform us and our communities, no matter how imperfectly we embody it. We shared from the witness of our own lives and those we care for that when God's expansive love is embraced and embodied in people around us, it can actually reduce the depression, isolation, and even risk of suicide that comes from being systematically cast out.

The challenge of all this is that, for those of us who “fit” easily in different ways, embracing the expansiveness of the gospel, allowing the Spirit to remove the walls and barriers that leave others outside, means being willing to be uncomfortable. Judy was really uncomfortable as she faced her own prejudices and saw the harm that she had done, and she and Nick had to have really hard conversations. In the end, the walls within them and between them that kept them from being who they were created to be fell apart as they claimed their truth.

And as easy as it seems for Philip to seek out the Eunuch and baptize him, that was clearly the work of the Spirit, sending and snatching and sending again. And we know from all of the stories of the early church just how much conflict, confusion, and even anger had to be worked through as the Spirit revealed herself to them. Like Judy and Nick, and the people of the early church, we today continue to come up against our own walls and barriers, and the Spirit continues to blow through and take them down because she will not be contained.

Today we celebrate the good news of a God so expansive that she embraces a foreign, dark-skinned person who does not conform to gender norms, and connects us all to one another and themselves as

surely as branches connect to the vine to receive life and nourishment. Like Mr. Jesse pointed out, we are connected to God, and to each other, and all of creation. The gift of this is that we can help one another feel the expansiveness and connectedness of the love of God when we can't sense it for ourselves. Beyond anything else, it is what we were created to do.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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