

Community Church of Issaquah

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How Big Is God's Family?

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Before I even begin, I think it wise to remind us of a very important scriptural passage from the gospel of Matthew. It goes like this: "Judge not, lest ye be judged, for wherein you judge, so shall you be judged." Now, that has little to do with this morning's message, but I wanted to preface my introduction with that reminder. You'll see why in just a moment. You see, as a teenager, I left the Catholic Church and became a Protestant – not only a Protestant, but a Southern Baptist. In my own defense, I grew up in Mississippi, and Southern Baptists is about all there is. If that were not enough, I should reveal that I was ordained when I was 18 years old, fresh out of high school. But wait, there's more. I also graduated from a Southern Baptist university and seminary. Now you see why I hope you will be slow to judge. Fortunately, I was asked to leave the Southern Baptist Church because "I didn't fit in." That was 1978. The religious right had taken over the denomination and rebels like me weren't welcome anymore. At that time, I was devastated, but looking back, that was one of the biggest blessings I have ever received. And you will be happy to know that I am doing well in my recovery, aligned with the American Baptist Church, and most comfortable in the Congregational world.

During those days as a Baptist college student, I recall vividly that during the civil rights movement of the 60's, my home church of about 2000 held several business meetings to discuss the plan of action should some Black person attempt to enter the sanctuary. We would bar and lock the doors if they were spotted in the parking lot. No one took me

seriously when I kept saying that no Black person in his right mind would want to be a part of that uptight church, but it was literally true. With that personal history of witnessing racism in my own church, I decided then and there that I would join Dr. King's movement for rights and equality. I have prided myself on believing that I am indeed free of prejudice and bias toward any person of color. That pride came to a screeching halt in February of this year when I attended a conference in Memphis of African American church leaders. There I was, one of 20 white persons in a sea of over 1000 Blacks. There was no intention to ever make me feel uncomfortable, but uncomfortable I was. Listening to story after story of inequality and hate, I realized for the first time the depth of my white privilege. It permeated every aspect of my life, and though I was reluctant to admit it, it was present in my church life as well.

It reared its ugly head when I read the passages from Acts that we have as our base for today's sermon. Here's a heartwarming story about an Ethiopian eunuch trying to figure out what in the world the prophets were talking about. The writer says that this man was travelling from Jerusalem over to the coastal area of Gaza on his way home to his job as the court official to Queen Candace. Out of nowhere, Philip gets a message from the Holy Spirit telling him to go up to the eunuch's chariot and see how he can help. Being an obedient disciple, that's what he does. "Do you understand what you're reading there from the prophet Isaiah?" he asks. The poor guy must have been frustrated when he replied, "How can I unless someone explains it to me." And that's exactly what Phillip did. That's a good story, isn't it? Let me read that story for you again. Here it is – from the Book of Acts chapter 8, verses 26-40.

Perhaps you might be like me, bringing my own ignorance and bias into this very important passage. Even with my university and seminary degrees in religion, I was so far out in left field about the reality of this story, that it's embarrassing to confess that to you now. Reading the word, "Ethiopian" the image that popped into my head was of a Black man. When I saw the word "eunuch," I assumed it was some sexual punishment. When the man asked, "How can I..." I assumed he must not be the wisest fellow. When he asked, "Who is it the prophet speaks about?" I thought to myself, "Dude, you just came from Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead. Didn't you read the newspaper!?" Like I said before, ignorance abounding. Here are the truths about this story.

First of all, Ethiopia at the time of Christ was not a land occupied or ruled by Black Africans. Like other countries in the Arabian Peninsula, it was a land mostly of middle eastern descendants, and ruled by a queen of like ethnicity. Second, the man being a eunuch more than likely had nothing to do with sexuality. It was, for all practical purposes, a political move. Young boys and men were often castrated not because there was a fear of sexual misconduct, but because becoming a eunuch guaranteed that you would have no heirs and would represent no threat to building a tribe to oppose the ruling family. Third, the eunuch had indeed been to Jerusalem to worship, and it probably won't surprise you to know that he was almost assuredly Jewish. And perhaps as important as any part of the story, the fact that he owned a very expensive scroll of the prophet Isaiah and could read it meant he was not poor and was not illiterate. Surprise! He was capable of reading and was simply struggling to identify the object of the passage.

When Philip explained to him that this was the foretelling of the life and death of Christ, the message itself was so overpowering that the eunuch quickly accepted this pathway to salvation and asked to be baptized. This is the joyful outcome of one of the Bible's most beautiful stories – at least it's one of my favorites. But do you know what message resonates the most with me in facing my abundance of ignorance and misunderstanding? It is the realization that I am often guilty of framing the lives of others in the narrow boxes of my limited vision.

I began this journey of over-confidence in my knowledge of Scripture by overlaying my own Whiteness on top of a story that had nothing to do with Whiteness. As I have tried to analyze what this all means, it seems to me that what I had been doing is what many believers and even churches do – we make our belief structure or our house of worship a place where we practice exclusivity, not the inclusivity of God. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. often talked about “the World Home” as being a place where we all have a place. Sadly, that certainly is not reality for you and me today. Yet we so often naively think that an inclusive world already exists.

It is true that we do not have a plan to exclude any person or group from our houses of worship, or from our personal lives. But the truth is, we do that unknowingly more often than we would like to admit. My older sister attends a very large evangelical church in Birmingham, Alabama. The last time I visited her, she asked if I would go to church with her and I agreed. The church sits back off the road down a tree-lined drive and at the entrance below the name of the church are the words, “Everyone Welcome.” I asked my sister, Ann, if she thought I would be welcome if the pastor or worshippers knew I was a gay man, married to

a same sex partner, serving as chaplain to a Planned Parenthood. Her response was what I expected, “Maybe we shouldn’t say anything.”

This church and many others, not just UCC, often quote that phrase, “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” It resonates with inclusivity, and I believe that’s the vision of this church and more. What we don’t realize is that there might be unwritten exceptions based on how we as individuals and as congregations express our beliefs. These are not intended to be exclusive, but sometimes they are. Do the words of our hymns feel inclusive to our African American families whose songs and worship are rooted in the injustices they must endure and have endured from the times of slavery to the present? Does our style of worship service feel comfortable to a younger generation accustomed to social media, electronics, and music from their generation? Would we be comfortable with someone seated in the congregation shouting an “amen!” or “preaching it sister!” or standing with hands raised swaying from side to side during a hymn or prayer? These are just questions to ponder, not accusations.

I had approached this story of an Ethiopian eunuch subconsciously saying, “Isn’t it nice that the White prophet expanded the kingdom of Christ to this Black servant of a queen.” Nothing was further from the truth. Instead, I came to see that God’s door of inclusivity opened to a well-educated, well-to-do, diplomatic Jew. Maybe I was the one standing at the sanctuary door trying to be the one who decided who could enter and who couldn’t. Here I am standing in front of my own Philip, the Holy Spirit, who is asking me, “Do you understand what you are believing?” And I am ashamed and saddened to admit, “How can I unless someone guides me?”

We use the term “Christian” without sometimes fully understanding that the word itself means “little Christ.” If our faith calls us to follow the “big Christ,” then our discipleship or our commitment to that calling is the label we wear in life. Congregations that advertise themselves as Christian bear a responsibility to tell the truth and even more so, to live the truth. Certainly not all churches nor all followers fail to live in a disciplined and faithful way. The church of today must find itself a way to truthfully believe that the family of God includes everyone. We cannot post words that say “Everyone Welcome” if we limit ourselves to only those who are like us. Every color, every ethnicity, every gender, every human being is the recipient of the promise Christ gave us in his prayer he taught his disciples. “For God so loved the world. . .” There were no restrictions, no limits, no exclusions.

The reality of our world today is that some faith traditions and many congregations have standards of who they do and who they do not want as a part of their faith families. Just as I said in the beginning of this message, we are not to judge them. That will be God’s responsibility. But we are to judge ourselves and live in the strong belief that God’s family includes everyone. If we ever say, “All are welcome,” there can never been any restrictions. How big is the family of God? I hope you firmly know and believe in the answer to that question. Now what we have to do is practice that belief. There’s a lot of work to be done, so let’s get busy.