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Baltimore, Maryland

Acts 8:26-40 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

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.

This summer I have been working as an intern at The Center, a mission of this presbytery that hosts groups for week-long mission experiences. We pair each group with one of our partners, like this church, and they work together for the week. We also do programs with the groups in the evenings. Our curriculum, developed by the

amazing Kate Foster-Connors, centers around the theme of crossing boundaries. And I can tell you from my first-hand experience, this summer has been full of boundary crossing.

My second group of the summer was comprised of teenage boys from two Catholic schools. We were partnered with Dickey Memorial Presbyterian Church to help with some manual labor on the property and to be mentors at their annual summer camp for kids. For those of you who don't know, Dickey Memorial Presbyterian Church is in a quaint little neighborhood on the outskirts of Baltimore city. The pastor is the Rev. Jennifer Barchi, who is the chair of the Steering Committee for the Center. When our group of Catholic school boys visited Dickey Memorial, Jennifer took us on a walking tour after the service. We walked up a dead-end road, admiring the houses with their little green lawns and their front porches. We came to a stop where the road ended at a white picket fence with a small walking path leading beyond.

Jennifer invited us to move beyond the fence into the grass on the other side. As we walked through, we saw an apartment complex with few people milling about. Jennifer asked us what we saw on this side of the fence. The boys mentioned the obvious first - that, rather than single-family homes, this was an apartment complex. Jennifer prompted them to notice who lived in the apartment complex. The answer, from a quick look around, was obvious: the apartment complex primarily housed people of color. Jennifer explained that the very same road we had walked up to get there continued on the other side of the apartment complex. However, these apartments just a stone's throw away from the Dickeyville neighborhood had no direct route into the neighborhood besides the small walking path through the fence.

So we turned around and walked back through as Jennifer explained that Dickeyville was mostly home to white people. As soon as you walk through the fence into the neighborhood, you can see a crime watch sign - not pointed down the road - but pointed at the apartment complex. We then learned that most of the kids that come to the camp live in the apartment complex. Many of them used to walk the short way to the church for camp. That is until they heard about Trayvon Martin, a black teen who was killed while walking through a white neighborhood. Their fear was reinforced when Brennan Walker, who had missed the bus, knocked on a white man's house to ask for directions to school and was then shot at with intent to kill. A lot of the kids no longer feel safe walking by themselves down the road from their home to the church.

For the group of mostly white teens from the suburbs, this was an introduction to what it means for people of color to cross boundaries as simple as a white picket fence dividing

two neighborhoods. But the real work of crossing boundaries began when the kids showed up to the camp. The beginning was a little awkward, the mood in the room a little tense as my group watched the unfamiliar kids arrive and greet Jennifer and the other volunteers who work with the camp and the after-school program they do during the year. With a little nudging from me and their group leaders, the boys slowly started to mingle and play with the kids. The first day of camp involved getting to know one another. Each teen from our group was paired with a kid. The kids went through the laid-back activities of the day's camp with their mentors, still getting to know one another.

But the end of each day of camp ends with something very familiar to the kids: water games. While the kids change into their bathing suits and grab their towels, Jennifer fills a little kiddie pool with water. The pool of water is then filled with sponges that get soaked through. Now, most of camp is structured with a choose your own adventure sort of style, just mentors and mentees hanging out together. But when it comes time for water games, it's a free for all. I don't think the Catholic boys were adequately prepared. The kids had the upper hand. Jennifer counted down as the boys looked around at each other and on, "Go!", the kids rushed for the pool, grabbing sopping wet sponges to throw at the boys. The goal of the water games is to get people as dripping wet as possible and the kids are pros. It was quite a sight to see, these cool Catholic school boys sliding on the slippery grass, being chased by laughing and smiling kids with soaked sponges, ready to take aim. During those water games I forgot for a moment that the kids and these teenage boys came from different worlds. All I could do was smile as they chased each other around, hurling dripping sponges and shrieking with laughter. Water was the great equalizer.

Which leads me back to our text for today, full of its own sorts of boundaries being crossed in the equalizing and transforming waters of baptism. So imagine this scenario: you've been commissioned as a missionary - called to spread the good news about your pal, Jesus. And you get an order from your boss upstairs to head south, so you hit the road. And you're walking along when you see a stranger - someone who does not belong and is so unlike you - and then the Holy Spirit is like, "Go hop in their car and see what all the fuss is about." I don't know about you, but I was raised not to get into vehicles with strangers. Stranger danger, right? But you do it anyway and you see that this person, the last person you might expect to have a bible in their hands, is reading scripture. And they are mystified. "Who is this talking about?" they ask. "Because I identify with this and I have got to know more."

So they invite you into this conversation about scripture. They extend this invitation to *you*, the one who is supposed to be doing the inviting and evangelizing. This opportunity just falls in your lap. (Thanks, Holy Spirit.) So you talk about the scripture and you're driving along and you come upon some water. Now, we aren't told what kind of water they found. For all we know it could have been a drainage ditch. But it doesn't matter. The Eunuch, someone who has been on the outside for their entire life, is craving belonging. They identify with this Jesus character and they want to become a part of this Jesus movement. "Look! There is water!", they say, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

This story of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts is commonly seen as a turning point in the history of the Jesus movement. An evangelist (Philip) meets an Ethiopian Eunuch on the road and converts him, beginning God's mission to Africa. At first glance, this interpretation makes this particular conversion story seem fairly simple. But when I read the text again, this line stands out to me - "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" This line is important because it is a question that is answered only by action. Philip could have responded to the question in any number of ways. First of all, this Ethiopian Eunuch is someone we know only by his identity markers. He is Ethiopian, which is a general term used back then for someone who was a dark-skinned black person. As an Ethiopian, he is outside the bounds of the Roman Empire and viewed as mysterious and even deviant. Blackness was also associated with a negative moral character.

"What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Not his blackness. Neither his race nor his ethnicity could prevent him from the waters of baptism.

Ok, but there are other things at play here, right? This Ethiopian is also a Eunuch. A sexual and gender minority. He is one who is trapped in between identities. As a Eunuch, he is trusted in the women's private spaces and in the men's political spaces, but he can never fully belong to either group. While Eunuchs could hold some power, they were still not fully accepted by society and they were definitely not allowed in the temple.

"What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Not his body or his social status. Neither his sexuality nor his gender identity could prevent him from the waters of baptism.

This text makes it clear: nothing can hold people back from baptism, the sign and seal of God's grace extended to us. This grace is not reserved for the people who make it into the church pews. It is not kept away from the people we don't welcome into our

churches. God makes a way to claim God's people - to welcome them into the fold. And we are invited to participate in that inclusion and grace.

Philip is not the perfect disciple, but he follows the Spirit's call to cross boundaries in this text. While the eunuch is crossing boundaries of gender, race, and geography, Philip is crossing his own boundaries. Of comfort, of race, of religious affiliation. He takes the risk - daring to enter into relationship and conversation with someone very different from him - all for the sake of the Gospel. Philip had the extraordinary opportunity to bear witness to the life-changing Word of God - the grace and inclusion and love of Christ. What an incredible gift. And the eunuch isn't the only one who went away changed: they both went down into those holy, transforming waters.

This, my friends, is what mission looks like. It looks like getting out of your comfort zone to cross boundaries and build relationships. It means allowing those relationships to transform you.

I, myself, am leaving this place changed. Baltimore has given me more than a farmers tan and bug bites. I have had an incredible summer of boundary crossing. Chasing kids across the grass at camp after camp. Eating meals with strangers who welcomed me into their neighborhoods and into their homes. Having hard conversations about race and violence and beautiful conversations about grace and acceptance. Boundary crossing is difficult and divine work. And the Holy Spirit is calling us forth, beckoning us to join in what God is doing in the world. You don't have to travel a wilderness road to find what you're looking for - God is already at work here in Baltimore. And if we take the chance to join in, we might just come away transformed.

Prayers of the People:

To begin our time of prayer together, I would like to begin with a prayer from Jill Duffield for this anniversary of Charlottesville. Please pray with me.

Lord, what difference does a year make? After hundreds of years of oppression, countless days of hate, an endless swath of violence over the course of human history, what difference does a year make? Are we wiser? Kinder? More just?

God of grace, I can only hope you are working in ways and through places and people I cannot always see. God of promise, I can only hope you are at work in me. God of creation and gathered fragments, I can only trust you are making all things new.

Lord, as we mark a year since the horror of the culmination of the summer of hate unleashed in Charlottesville, we pray your peace for those for whom these days bring forth unspeakable pain, unyielding fear and a relentless sense of loss. Comfort those who mourn. Protect the most vulnerable. Help us to uphold the fainthearted.

Lord, as the government officials enact a state of emergency and the police presence grows and hospitals have all their personnel on call, may people of faith and goodwill show up no less visibly and ready to respond to those in need. Pour out your Spirit upon those longing to demonstrate love of neighbor, justice for the least of these and care for the hurting. God of transformation, bring about a change of heart and mind in those who perpetrate violence and perpetuate hate.

Lord, as we mark this grim anniversary in Charlottesville, use these painful memories to motivate us all to relentlessly work for your will of unity, justice, peace and love. May your mercy abound in Charlottesville and for all your beloved creation. Amen.

Charge & Benediction:

Go out into the world to cross boundaries, claiming your own belovedness and baptism, so that you might share the transformative grace of God with everyone you meet. And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.