

WHEN WATER IS THICKER THAN BLOOD

Sermon, April 29, 2018

Texts: Isaiah 56:1-8; Acts 8:26-40 (Matthew 12:46-50)

While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, His mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to Him. Someone told Him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to His disciples, He said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." -- Matthew 12:46-50

From the time Jesus first said, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers and sisters, but these who do the will of my Father in heaven?" the church has always been the "other family" in our lives. We have our biological family, and we have our spiritual family, our church family. It's always good when the first is also part of the second, but the sad and sometimes painful reality is that's not always the case. Unlike a biological family, members of the church family may have little in common with each other; it is made up of singles and marrieds, children and seniors and all those in between, differing racial and ethnic backgrounds, healthy people and not so healthy people, people who seem to have it all together and those who don't ... as our Lord tells us, all who are trying to do the will of His Father in heaven are His brothers and sisters, and thus brothers and sisters in the family of God. That's the church. You might say we are bound together not by blood, but by water, the waters of baptism. And in the case of this family, water is thicker than blood.

The early church needed help understanding that, and discerning what to do with all these different people the Father kept bringing "home" into the family, strangers and foreigners from differing ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds as the church experienced phenomenal and exponential growth in those early years. Changes needed to be made to accommodate these new members of the family. According to Acts 6, one of the first major problems of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem was getting along with all these Greek converts. The basic problem in this chapter seemed to be the Grecian converts were complaining their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. To really appreciate this one has to understand that two cultural traits Jews and Greeks have in common were also the potential source of this friction (*these traits were well displayed in the widely popular movie a few years back, "My Big Fat Greek Wedding"*).¹ Both Greeks and Jews love to show their love through food (*and lots of it!*), and to both Greeks and Jews grandmothers are pretty important! Jews call them bubbes, and Greeks call them yiayias. And apparently, the Greek yiayias who were widows were not being fed, but the bubbes were, so we have a double-insult being perceived by the Greek converts ... their yiayias were being neither fed nor loved!

Remember, the church had just come into being in Acts 2, the Day of Pentecost, so the church can't survive four chapters without having to make necessary changes to accommodate others as it grows and develops ... changes that needed to be made, however, without losing her Christ-defined identity as those who do the will of the Father in heaven. In Acts 6 the first "Board of Deacons" was established to better administer the church's efforts; seven were appointed who were "... known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom." It's interesting to note all seven appointees had Greek names; so it's evident that not only were Grecian converts being assimilated, they were being *entrusted* with positions of responsibility and service and leadership in the church. Shortly after, one of these deacons, Stephen, was martyred by stoning, and an intense persecution broke out; the church scattered, with many fleeing Jerusalem. Another of the deacons, Philip, fled to Samaria. You may remember that at the time, the Jews didn't care for the Samaritans and typically would not even walk through the region; so Philip probably figured he'd be safe hiding there. We see in Acts 8 that while Philip was there, he couldn't keep his mouth shut ... he preached, and we are told great crowds of Samaritans believed, were baptized, and joined the church. Now the Family included not only these Greeks, as if they were not hard enough to assimilate, but now it included these "despised" Samaritans. And this is where we pick up our New Testament reading this morning.

We're told an angel of the Lord came to Philip and told him to go to a desert road that led southeast from Jerusalem to Gaza. On his way there, he saw an Ethiopian eunuch being driven in a chariot. The Ethiopian was coming from Jerusalem, where he had gone to worship. Apparently, he is now on his way back home, where he served as the treasurer for Candace, the queen of Ethiopia. This is an important man, the Chairman of the Federal Reserve and the Secretary for the Treasury rolled into one, but we are not given his name. We are only given the categories: He's Ethiopian (*and probably black*), he's a foreigner, and he's a eunuch. Maybe Philip was thinking, "Oh, Lord, are you sure? The church leaders had enough trouble getting used to us Greeks, and now we have all these Samaritans ... they might really flip out about this!" The angel of the Lord said, "Sure He's sure. Go to that chariot and stay near it!" So, Philip runs up to the chariot, and he is jogging alongside and gets close enough to hear that the eunuch is reading from Isaiah. Philip asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The Ethiopian responds, "How can I unless someone explains it to me?" And he invited Philip to hop in.

¹ See <https://www.kveller.com/6-ways-jewish-and-greek-culture-are-similar>

He was reading from Isaiah 53, words like, *"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter. In his humiliation, he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants?"* The term "eunuch" generally refers to a man who has lost his male parts (and usually not through elective surgery!), typically early enough in his life for this change to have major hormonal consequences, in order that he might go on to perform a specific social function. This was a grisly and brutal practice all too common in many ancient societies, especially in the far East and parts of the middle east (*I learned it was especially brutal in Vietnam*).² Quite often the specific function for which these unfortunate young men were being groomed involved proximity to important females, such as guardians of women, protectors of the harem ... or officers of the queen of Ethiopia. Having neither offspring nor in-laws, eunuchs rarely had families of their own, and were thus seen as less of a threat to a regime, less interested in establishing a private 'dynasty' of their own. Now think about it ... why do you think a eunuch would be so interested in this Isaiah passage about one who was humiliated? About one who had no hope of having descendants? About one who remained silent before his shearer? About one who was deprived of justice? This is most likely HIS story! The first question the Ethiopian eunuch asks is, *"Who is this talking about?"* He's probably thinking, *"I can relate to whoever this is! Is there a message of hope here for me? Who is this? Tell me, I need to know! How can I understand this unless someone explains it to me?"*

According to Jewish law, as spelled out in Deuteronomy 23, eunuchs were not allowed in the Temple. It was forbidden, most likely because God wanted to clearly condemn the practice of this cruel and irreversible bodily mutilation all too common in pagan cultures. Remember, though, this Ethiopian has just come from Jerusalem, where we are told he had gone to worship. But if by law he wasn't allowed in the Temple, he could only go into the Temple area known as the outer court, known as the court of the Gentiles. He wouldn't be able to go further in because he wasn't, well, whole enough. Maybe it bothered him that he couldn't go into the temple; we don't know ... but it is apparent that he is still drawn to worship.

I have a hunch born out of thirty years of ordained ministry that some who come here to worship on a typical Sunday morning can relate to this. You, too, are drawn here, but you at times have this aching feeling that you don't really belong, because you are not whole enough, because you are not good enough. Be assured: by law, by God's holy law, none of us are whole enough, or clean enough, or good enough to be part of the family of God. None of us! My hunch is that some who come here to worship on a typical Sunday morning look around at others, others who just look so good, and you're thinking, *"Well, she belongs here, but I don't."* Or, *"I don't have a great family like they do in that pew over there. My family's a mess. Has been for years."* Or *"How can I ever fit in here? I'm positive I cannot make my life right. I'm in too deep and there have been too many mistakes."* Or *"If everyone knew the truth about me, if anyone knew all there is to know about me, they'd probably toss me out of here."* Trust me on this. Just about everyone here at some time or another has had these thoughts. Everyone. Including your pastor. No one here is in this family of God because we deserve to be here. No one here is in this family because we are whole and perfect. No one is in this Family by rights except the Son, Jesus Christ. And the Holy Spirit adopts us into the Son's relationship with the Father, as symbolized in the family waters of baptism. This water is thicker than blood, binding us together as we all seek to learn how to do and live out and practice the will of God our Father in heaven.

Back to our Ethiopian. Even out there on the fringes of the Temple, outside of the center of worship, he must have heard words that caught his attention. He must have heard words that gave him hope, words he wanted to understand better. So, he secured a scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and here he was poring over it, trying to ponder its meaning. So Philip begins to interpret the prophetic words in this 53rd chapter of Isaiah, a chapter that describes the Messiah as one who knows first hand about unjust suffering and abusive treatment. Imagine Philip saying to his new friend, *"You know, Jesus was also despised and rejected of men. And come to think of it, like you he had no children, no posterity. But as our Savior, He did what it took to create a new Family that has room for us all!"* Perhaps Philip even pointed to other passages in Isaiah, like what we read from chapter 56, *"Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.' And let not any eunuch complain, 'I am only a dry tree.' For this is what the Lord says: 'To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant -- to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off."*

The Eunuch was so thrilled to hear all of this, and he wanted to join the Family right there on the spot. *"Look, there's water right over there, what is to prevent me from being baptized?"* And Philip replied, *"Well, you see, the Session doesn't meet until the third Thursday and we'll have to get their permission ..."* No, Philip replied (in verse 37, a verse inexplicably omitted in some translations), *"If you believe with all your heart, you may."* The eunuch said, *"I do believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."* When Philip heard this sincere profession of faith, he and the Ethiopian eunuch went down to the water for a baptism, and our family got bigger. As Philip may have explained, *"You may have been a foreigner to the house of God, your body may have been abused in the past, you may have suffered any number of cruel and unjust things in days gone by. It doesn't matter. You belong here. You belong in the family of God if you believe Jesus is the Son of God. In Jesus Christ, we are made whole, we are forgiven."* That is the only condition for belonging to this Family, believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God with all your heart and, as that same Jesus explained, determine to do the will of His father. *"Who is my mother and who are my brothers and sisters, but these who do the will of my Father in heaven?"*

² See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eunuch>