

“How True It Is”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Acts 10:27-48
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
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Our Bible story from last week about the Ethiopian eunuch is an amazing tale that concludes with Philip being whisked away by the Spirit and magically appearing in another location, which feels a little far-fetched, even for a Bible story. Either God was in a big hurry that day and felt like showing off, or the writer embellished the story just a bit. That, or Philip was not a muggle.

This unusual ending to the story in addition to the fact that the whole thing took place on a lonely wilderness road with no eye witnesses might compel us to be dismissive of this story and suspicious of whether God really does want to save Ethiopians and eunuchs with any regularity. This was a one-time event, so fanciful in nature it stands out as an anomaly, unlikely to be repeated. Like in the Old Testament when God spoke to Balaam through the mouth of a donkey . . . you don't have to deny it happened to believe it's unlikely to happen again.

I've been told before that well, perhaps God could call a woman to preach. After all, God even used a donkey. So, sure, maybe, in extreme and unusual circumstances God might endorse the baptism of an Ethiopian eunuch . . . but we shouldn't start to like, expect it as a matter of course.

We don't know whether the apostle Peter had heard about Philip's Spirit-led encounter with the eunuch, whether he chalked it up to one of God's rare mysteries, or whether he was oblivious to it. We do know that it took some convincing before he himself was willing to go to the Gentiles.

When we pick up the story today in Acts 10, Peter is already at Cornelius' house. You may remember God had to send Peter a vision to get him on his feet and out of the house. In fact, Peter needed to see the vision **THREE TIMES** before he understood and accepted it as a word from the Lord. In fact, he still hadn't quite got it worked out in his own mind when there was a knock at his door, and the Spirit said this to Peter: “Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.”

“Without hesitation” can also be translated “without distinction.” The root of the word in Greek means “to make a distinction” between two alternatives. Luke/Acts scholar and Baylor professor, Mikael Parsons, notes that “[t]he primary connotation is for Peter to go ‘without hesitation,’ but the sense of ‘without discrimination’ cannot be far from the surface.”

Peter was having the discrimination purged out of him, AND he wasn't supposed to take his sweet time about it. He was just supposed to go and be with. He may have needed that vision three times, but once there were human beings in front of him, no more hesitation. He didn't tell his visitors, “Wait a minute. I've got to go consult my commentaries on the Scripture passages about Gentiles.” No, the text says he invited them in to be his guest.

What happened when Peter arrived at the house of Cornelius proves that the thing with the Ethiopian was not just some spectacular, unrepeatable fluke. Because Cornelius' house is *full* of people and the Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit in clear view of many surprised witnesses. Peter's words echo that of the eunuch's when he says, "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water."

This is the reoccurring miracle of the book of Acts and the post-resurrection age: God keeps pouring God's spirit on *all people*, without hesitation or distinction. As Peter said to the large gathering at Cornelius' house, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right."

Peter began his sermon to them like this: "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection."

I wonder, if you and I were to examine our hearts, where would we find that we still harbor objection? In what area of our lives do we still feel entitled to our judgments, as if the self-righteous withholding of love will be viewed by God as an act of religious savvy rather than an act of bigotry?

I received a new foster baby this week, and I was holding her tiny body in my arms, I was praying, because I didn't want to lose another baby. I wanted to somehow secure her in my arms forever with my prayers. But then I was reminded—I think by the Spirit—that there is another mother in this story—the biological one—and she also doesn't want to lose her baby, and God our Mother also loves *her* and wants her to succeed. God loves me and doesn't wish for me to experience more loss or more grief, but I'm not the only child of God in this scenario and God does not show partiality. God is always rooting for us both. Birth mom, foster mom, God loves us all.

This is hard because it means I can't cling to this baby as only mine. I have to accept multiple people as part of the unfolding story. I'd feel safer if it was just the baby and me.

It usually is fear that keeps us from seeing another person as God's beloved. We are afraid that if we let them in, we will lose something.

Countries worry. If we let in the refugees, what will happen to our jobs, our safety, our resources, the comfort of having everyone speak our language?

Congregations worry. If they become open and affirming, will the gay people take over the church? As if that should be a cause for concern rather than celebration, that gay people finally have a church.

We worry about accepting the poor into our midst—will they take advantage of us? Will they manipulate the system? Will they misuse my five dollars?

We worry about the young people and their new-fangled ideas. We worry about that the old people and their attachment to the way things are. We worry and we worry and we worry until we forget that this Christian life is not about holding on to what we have or getting what we want. This community of Christ is always about love—giving it, receiving it, and having the prejudice purged out of us on a regular basis.

It's uncomfortable to remember that God loves the other person just as much as God loves me because it means I might not get what I want. I might have to share. I might even lose something. Of course, there is also much to be gained, but in order to receive the blessing with open hands, that means I have to loosen my grip on what I think is mine and only mine. Why would I ever let go and be open, unless the very Spirit of God convert me into love?

My friends, love doesn't grab. We often mistake our clinging for love. We love it so much we try to hold on. This is how we trick ourselves into thinking our fear is righteous. We cling because we think we can preserve and protect things, like we are doing God a favor, by erecting these walls and keeping out change. All the while the Spirit is knocking on the door, saying, "Open. Open. Invite us in to be your guest."

It's important to add here that love is allowed to be discerning and allowed to set boundaries. Being open doesn't mean you have to tolerate what is toxic. You don't have to accept abuse. You don't have to accept injustice.

What would have kept Peter from accepting the Gentiles was a preconceived notion of what was clean and unclean, pure and impure. He had based these judgments on Scripture, so of course he thought he was right. But the Spirit of God had other plans, and thank goodness, Peter had the wits or the heart to listen and be transformed.

Here is your invitation for today: take that person you are silently judging and carve out a little space in your heart where they can rest. Take that thing you are so afraid of losing and loosen your grip as an act of trust. Find yourself led by the Spirit into a love you didn't know was possible. With the clutter of your certainties cleared away, find yourself at home in God and God at home in you. Amen.