

Acts of the Apostles
Tenth “Think About”
St Philip’s United Church of Christ

Reading for the week: Acts 8:26-40

This week’s story is about the odd encounter between the newly authorized deacon-turned-evangelist Philip and an Ethiopian (actually a Nubian African) slave of the Queen of Candace. The man is described as a eunuch, which may mean that he has literally had his sexual organs removed or possibly simply that his “manhood” has been stolen from him by making him a slave.

The man himself is a study in contrasts: though a slave, he is obviously wealthy, seated on a chariot, and literate, since Philip finds him reading. He is reading from Jewish prophetic Scripture, probably translated into Greek. He is in appearance African. So many images that one would not expect to find in a single individual.

Why do you suppose Luke has chosen to tell the story of this extraordinary person? Why does he tell us about the question he asks Philip? It is a question that makes a critical connection in Luke’s story of how the early followers of Jesus understood their mission as a fulfillment of the promises of their religious heritage. In several ways, this Ethiopian represents the newness of the Gospel and the breadth of its outreach in radical ways. The Prophet Isaiah had promises to give to people from foreign nations. See what Isaiah 56:6-8 has to say about this. He has promises for eunuchs and slaves as well. See Isaiah 56:3-5 and 58:6.

the man was reading from a scroll the words of Isaiah 53. You may want to take some time to read this chapter. It is one of the mysterious passages in Isaiah’s prophecy that describe a figure known as God’s Servant, who is pictured as one who suffers for the salvation of others. The Ethiopian wants to know who this person is, who would suffer in this way, and Philip responds to his interest by connecting the ancient prophecy with the good news that Jesus, who suffered and died, did so for the salvation of all people.

The idea that God enters into our human experience of suffering, notably the suffering of a slave, in order to draw all nations into the community of redemption and the life of mutual compassion must have powerfully affected the slave of Candace. He immediately asked Philip to baptize him – a sign of his devotion to Christ as a lifelong passion. So also his story moves us to remember the precious gift that we have received in the life-affirming story of Jesus.

This week, think about the Gospel promises to those who suffer and are oppressed. As members of the Christian fellowship, how are we responding to our calling to share the gifts of God’s love and justice with those who urgently desire that the message be true?

(This weekly “think about” is printed as an attachment to our Sunday bulletin at St Philip’s United Church of Christ, 10708 Lavinia Drive, St Louis, MO 63123. It may also be found on our website. We encourage you to make comments and also to share the page with any one you feel may enjoy seeing it. We are a congregation of the United Church of Christ, a progressive Christian denomination that is committed to inclusive ministry in the spirit of Christ’s prayer “that all God’s people may be one.” Allen M. Fluent, Transitional Pastor)