

Unexpected Guests

1 John 4:7-21 and Acts 8:26-40

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When you know an old house well, there aren't many sounds that surprise you. That's how Jillian Dunham began the account of her 3 a.m. interruption:

I was certain that the barely intelligible click that woke me was the sound of the storm door being opened. There's someone downstairs. Matt was barely awake when I headed down the staircase. Through the small octagonal window next to the front door, I saw two men standing awkwardly in the dark. They didn't knock or ring the bell. They just stood there. I couldn't see their faces. I grabbed the phone, then returned to stand next to the door silently. I did not call the police. The two men did not move. I hesitated and then flipped on the light. They were young, squinting, swaying a bit in jeans and long-sleeved shirts. They stared straight at the door, as if waiting for instructions. I didn't really know what to do. I certainly didn't know what I was doing when I opened the door to two strange men standing on the porch at three in the morning. "Are you all right?" I asked. They looked at me, blinking, dumbfounded. I remember the eyes of the man on the right twitching. His hands were pulled behind his back. As I followed the direction of his arms, something caught my eye, dangling between his knees: a crowbar. "Are you O.K.?" I asked them again, even though I had already seen the crowbar. When I repeated the question, the faces of the two strangers softened slightly. The man on the right nervously shifted the crowbar in his hands, as if taking it back. They said the name of a nearby small city and nothing else. I gave them directions. They thanked me, bowing their heads slightly, and headed back to their car. Before he got in, the driver opened the back door, and I watched as he tossed the crowbar onto the seat.¹

I know at least two things that are true about the Church of Jesus Christ in twenty-first Century America: Lots of people are afraid that strangers with crowbars are poised at the church's door, ready to break in to change what we most value; And, we are all in desperate need of people who love God who will *not* call the "church police" for protection but rather will ask anyone we think has that crowbar, "Are you all right?"

When Irving Berlin revised God Bless America in 1938, folk singer Woody Guthrie found it unrealistic and complacent to the suffering he witnessed in a nation still in the grip of the Great Depression. Guthrie wrote "This Land is Your Land" in response. I'm pretty sure you know it:

This land is your land, this land is my land
From California to the New York island;
From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters
This land was made for you and me.

Subsequent verses include,

As I was walking that ribbon of highway,
I saw above me that endless skyway....
I roamed and rambled, and I followed my footsteps
to the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts....
This Land was made for you and me.

But those are not all the verses Guthrie wrote. Also in his original version are verses left out:

As I went walking, I saw a sign there,
And on the sign it said "No Trespassing."
But on the other side it didn't say nothing,
That side was made for you and me.
In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people,
By the relief office I seen my people;
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking,
Is this land made for you and me?²

As the song's popularity grew, those verses were conveniently omitted. You see, we human beings love identifying ourselves as part of a tribe—"this land was made for you and me." And we are very suspicious of immigrants—anyone who is *outside* the tribe, crowbar in hand...or not. We go to great lengths to patrol the boundary of our tribe and to keep non-tribe members...somewhere else.

In the era of the "Big Sort," we are living nearer and nearer people like us: Fox News watchers over here, MSNBC down over there. Democrats live here, Republicans there.

As a recent study noted, from grade schools to senior villages, we now spend much of our lives on separate generational islands. In September, grown-ups return to work, where they'll toil alongside other working-age people. Children go back to their schools, neatly separated by grade. Millions of young adults pack their bags for college, where they'll live and work almost exclusively with their exact peers. We sort ourselves out by how old we are.³ All this sorting—ideologically, politically, generationally—conveniently lets us avoid those who don't look like us, act like us, believe like us.

Luke Powery of Duke Chapel recounts, "I once met a man at an Episcopal Church in Atlanta. His name was Clackston, but I didn't know that at first. I approached to greet him and asked him his name. He said, "Get out of here! Get out of here!" I was taken by surprise by this unusual greeting; I knew this wasn't normal protocol for Episcopalians. But then someone told me about Clackston's journey. He always

greeted people that way because he had come to believe that “Get out of here!” was his name. After all, that’s what everybody always said to him. It was as if Clackston had internalized the lack of welcome he had received throughout his life. He began to believe that his first name was “Get Out” and his last name was “Of Here.”⁴

The Ethiopian Eunuch in our text could have carried the name “Get Out Of Here.” One of the struggles of the First Century Church was between tribe and immigrants—between those who are in and those who are out. There is lots of struggle in Acts about ritual practices, worship practices, meal rituals, belonging rituals, purity rules, and tribal rules. Once in a while, Luke focuses on one of the outsiders—one whose fate is being debated in the church: shall we let them in or shall we not let them in? The strangest of the stories that Luke tells us is that of the Ethiopian Eunuch, in his chariot from Jerusalem to Gaza, to whom Philip spoke.

He’s an Ethiopian. There was an Ethiopia in those days, but the word *Ethiopia* since the days of Homer has been a sort of nickname for the end of the world. To say *Ethiopia* meant the same as, in my culture, “Timbuktu.” Growing up, we never knew if there really was one or not, but we’d say, “I don’t care if he goes to Timbuktu.” How far out, how distant can you be—he’s an Ethiopian.

And he’s a eunuch. A eunuch was a man who, by accident or by surgery, was rendered sexless. Usually such persons found gainful employment in palaces, especially in the service of queens. For, by being sexless, they were not derailed by their own private interests. However, as far as Jewish culture, they were outsiders. As far as Jewish religion, it was very clear, Deuteronomy 23:1: “The eunuch shall not be permitted in the assembly of the people of God.”⁵ Since the first century, the church has been quite adept—overtly or covertly—in making sure those we think “don’t fit in” never get to join our tribe. The list is too long and too painful to name. But through the years, up until today, it has encompassed race, ethnicity, gender, orientation, generation, theology, belief, and faith practices. And it’s always painful.

In this time in the life of Grace Covenant—like every other congregation I know—when we have lots of discernment to do about where God is leading us, we are going to spend the next month focusing on the Book of Acts and what it means to be the church today. “Ancient-Future Church” is a phrase being batted around these days: that we can gain guidance in the twenty-first century from what the early church faced in the first century. One truth seems to be that the church of the twenty-first century is increasingly shifting from tribal...to immigrant.⁶ (Which is exactly what the early, first century church faced.) That doesn’t only apply to immigrants on our border, but to all of us, which brings us back to the Ethiopian Eunuch.

The text about the Ethiopian Eunuch is filled with active words:

- The Lord to Philip: “Get up and go.”
- The description of this happening on a “wilderness road.”
- The Spirit saying to Philip: “Go over to that chariot.”
- And then Philip “ran up” to it.
- Together, “they were going along the road.”
- Later, “the Spirit snatched Philip away....”
- But the Eunuch “went on his way rejoicing....”

And in the middle of all this, the Eunuch’s “crowbar” question, “What is to pre-

vent me from being baptized?” When we think about it, there were actually quite a few roadblocks to prevent this baptism. The Eunuch had the wrong background, belonged to the wrong nation, held the wrong job; they couldn’t tell if he adhered to the “correct theology,” and he possessed the wrong sexuality.⁷ But Philip heard the voice of the Holy Spirit speak a new answer. “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” asked the Eunuch. “Absolutely nothing,” whispered the Spirit. “Absolutely nothing.”

So the Eunuch was baptized right on the spot. Walls of prohibition came tumbling down, blown down by the breath of God’s Holy Spirit, and one who felt lost and humiliated was found and restored in the wideness of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. “Are you all right?” You can put away your crowbar—the Spirit says: “Welcome!”

But here’s the rub. Once baptized, the Eunuch and Philip did exactly none of the following: they didn’t inform the Session, they didn’t fill out the necessary forms, Philip didn’t test the Eunuch to make sure the Eunuch understood the experience, the Eunuch was not handed a time and talent form to confirm his willingness to be an usher, sing in the choir, and be a youth advisor. This baptism did not bring the Eunuch into an organized tribe—it set him on a new road. He was still an immigrant..., and the thing is, from that moment on, so was Philip! By this Spirit-led action, Philip found himself on the road as well.

The church of today is being called to be immigrants. We are on the road. We are not looking to conform new folks to our tribe, but to join them on the journey with Jesus. The problem with the story of the two guys on the porch with the crowbar as it relates to church is that increasingly folks are not eager to crowbar their way into church. In fact, if they have to use a crowbar, they will take their spiritual needs elsewhere. To meet them, it will have to be on the road, where the church is an immigrant, too.

An interviewer once asked Maya Angelou, “Do you read the Bible to get inspired to pick up your own pen?” Maya Angelou responded:

For melody. For content also. I’m working at trying to be a Christian and that’s serious business. It’s like trying to be a good Jew, a good Muslim, a good Buddhist, a good friend, a good lover, a good mother—it’s serious business. It’s not something where you think, “Oh, I’ve got it done.” The truth is, all day long you try to do it, try to be it, and then in the evening, if you’re honest and have a little courage, you look at yourself and say, “Hmm. I only blew it eighty-six times.” Not bad. I’m trying to be a Christian, and the Bible helps me to remind myself what I’m about.⁸

That’s a statement by a woman who never left the road, never stopped journeying down that wilderness path.

The shock of this text, and the implication for the church then and now, is that Philip broke liturgical and religious protocol and baptized the “Get out of here” Eunuch. But then, rather than bringing the Eunuch into the fledgling church “establishment,” both baptizer and baptized found themselves far from their tribe, on the journey of immigrants on the road with God!

It reminds me of something Barbara Brown Taylor once said:

Most of us are allowed at least one direct experience of God (within bounds)—something that knocks us for a loop, blows our circuits, calls all our old certainties into question. But, there seems to be a general consensus that life in Christ means trading in your old certainties for new ones. You are supposed to be surer than ever what you believe. You are supposed to know who's who, what's what, where you are going in your life and why. You are supposed to have answers to all the important questions. You have your Christian decoder ring, now use it! But what if the point is not to decode faith—but to enter into it? What if the whole Bible is less a book of certainties than it is a book of encounters, in which a staggeringly long parade of people run into God, each other, life—and are never the same again?⁹

For the church to move from tribe to immigrant is painful, just as it was painful for Philip and the Eunuch. But when the church is on the road, we run into a staggeringly long parade of people, some with crowbars, many wounded from being kept out for so long. Some will just start weeping when a tender voice asks, “Are you all right?”

When the church gets out on that road, in the best way possible, we are never the same.

Notes

1 Jillian Dunham, “The Unexpected Guests,” *The New York Times*, August 31, 2014.

2 Original manuscript republished in Elizabeth Partridge, *This Land Was Made for You and Me: The Life & Songs of Woody Guthrie* (New York: Viking, 2002).

3 Leon Feyfakh, “What ‘age segregation’ does to America,” *The Boston Globe*, August 31, 2014.

4 Luke Powery, “Reflections on the Lectionary,” *Christian Century*, August 20, 2014.

5 I first heard this summary description of Ethiopia and eunuchs in a sermon by Fred Craddock many years ago.

6 While these cultural and demographic shifts are described in many venues, my colleague Kristy Farber and I took this phrase and the overall structure of this sermon series on the Book of Acts at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church (Asheville, NC) from the recent work of Rodger Nishioka, to whom we are greatly indebted.

7 Thomas G. Long, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide, JKP, 2013.

8 Maya Angelou, *The Paris Review: The Art of Fiction* No. 119, Interviewed by George Plimpton, Fall, 1990.

9 Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Bright Cloud of Unknowing,” Day1.org, March 2, 2014.