

The Mystery of an Anatomy

By Andrew Warner

Reverend Warner preached at the Congregational Church of New Canaan, Connecticut, as part of the “Circle of Friends” sermon series. Preachers in this series reflect on a work or personal spiritual question as part of a several days engagement with the congregation.

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south-[a] 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, the 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?”[b] He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip[c] 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.

Acts 8:26-40

Traveling one day, I stopped in at a Starbucks and placed my regular order: a coffee and a pup cup. The barista looked up at me, paused, and said, “Do you want a spoon for that pup cup?”

Confused, I said, “why would my dog need a spoon?”

In that awkward moment we both realized she thought I was going to hop in my car and stuff the pup cup in my mouth. She just wanted to save a fat man some dignity.

We can’t control how other people will see us. But how do we see our own bodies?

The question of how I saw my own body took on new importance when I received a diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis, a progressive auto-immune disease that affects the nervous system and muscle control. It began for me with numbness in my feet and tingling in my legs and arms. A series of tests—blood work, MRI, spinal tap—confirmed the diagnosis. Many people learn they have MS in their 20s or 30s, but I found out relatively late, just a few years ago. As MS progresses, it causes lesions on nerves, places where the myelin sheathing around the nerve cell thins. My MRI showed both active lesions but also past damage; MS had affected my body long before I became aware of it. Hearing that news, I felt out of touch with my own body. How could something so big be going on without my perception of it?

Diagnosis felt very disorienting. What would my future be? How might the disease progress? During this time, I turned to my brother, who also lives with an auto-immune disease. My brother offered an observation and a question. First, he cautioned against seeing MS as my body attacking itself. “No good comes from that narrative,” he said. And then he wondered: coming out as gay shaped my spiritual journey. So, he wondered, “How will MS become a new part of your spiritual journey?”

Our story of the Ethiopian Eunuch helps me think about my body in new ways. Normally we tell the story from the perspective of Philip—a story of Philip embodying the inclusive spirit of the Jesus community. But I want to think about this story from the point of view of the Eunuch. What did he experience? What did he learn? How did he change?

Scripture described him: “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.”

In just those few lines we get a sense of this man, someone both important and impotent. He appears wealthy—the banker of the great queen of Ethiopia, riding in style. But also a person enslaved, a person who experienced sexual violence. Wealthy people like the queen forced castration on young slaves because they believed men unable to reproduce would not threaten their dynasties.

He bore the marks of this in his own body—a higher voice, a softer face. People saw him and joked, “In charge of the queen’s jewels—no jewels of his own.” And he faced this when he traveled home to Jerusalem. Because this man probably identified as Jewish, part of the diaspora community, refugees who sought protection in Ethiopia.

But this descendent of refugees was enslaved, separated from his family; now he could finally return to Jerusalem, return to his people. But what happened? Rejection.

As a Eunuch, he could not enter the Temple; the Law of Moses prohibited eunuchs from the sanctuary (Deut 23:1). This prohibition was part of a larger set of rules against damaged bodies. The lame, the blind, the blemished—scripture contains many stories of bodies that were seen as problematic. Problematic because they were not perfect.

Scripture opens with the grand tale of creation that culminates in God creating humanity in the divine image, the *imago dei*. It can be beautiful to think of humanity as a reflection of divine perfection.

But people didn't see the Eunuch as perfect. No, he seemed damaged. And so they pushed him outside, outside the sanctuary, outside the bounds of community. What happens when our body doesn't appear perfect? Often our culture measures perfection in how close we come to our origins—how young, how intact, how strong, how well we match the sex assigned at birth. But what happens when our bodies fall short of some ideal?

Lee Mokobe, a transgender poet, named their feelings in a poem. They began:

*The first time I uttered a prayer was in a glass-stained cathedral.
I was kneeling long after the congregation was on its feet,
dip both hands into holy water,
trace the trinity across my chest,
my tiny body drooping like a question mark
all over the wooden pew.*

The Eunuch knew what it meant for his body to be a question mark. Riding from Jerusalem into a wilderness of rejection, he turned to scripture for consolation, the Prophet Isaiah for a word of hope. Philip approached at this point, asking, “do you understand what you are reading?”

The Eunuch read a few verses to Philip:

“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.”

And he asked, “Is the prophet talking about himself or someone else?” The Eunuch saw himself in these verses—they echo with the experience of someone who suffered profound violence to his body and the loss of an ability to create children—“who can describe his generation?”

Philip told him about Jesus. We don't know what he said. But I imagine Philip talked of the ways Jesus gathered in all sorts of bodies. The blind. The lame. The

lepers. All the people told they didn't fit in society found that they could belong to the Jesus movement. And Philip certainly told of all Jesus experienced in his body, like when Jesus sat at table with his disciples, saying, "this is my body, broken."

I think of the Eunuch learning this story. It's one thing to hear of Jesus welcoming everyone, gathering up the hurt and the wounded. It's nice. So accepting. I love the inclusive Jesus. But it feels ever more profound for Jesus to present his own vulnerable body. "This is my body, broken."

Instead of perfection, Jesus presented his own body as a question mark. And wasn't that the whole reason for the incarnation? The reason for the divine to come among us a human being? To experience what it meant to live in a human body?

"This is my body, broken," these words from our most sacred ritual remind me that our bodies can be revelatory; that instead of seeking perfection, we can instead try perception. Jesus's broken body helped us perceive the extent of God's love. What will our bodies help us perceive? About God, about ourselves?

Years ago an older mentor developed Alzheimer's. A brilliant biologist who spent his life observing nature, now turned his attention to himself. He told me once, "I wasn't conscious of the process of growing from baby to child to adult; but now I'll observe it in the reverse." What I might have feared as loss and imperfection, he used as a reason to be observant.

Later, when the disease had taken away his ability to engage in conversation, we sat together doing art therapy, drawing birds. Example pictures filled the table. And while we didn't talk, Jim imitated the calls of the different birds. But what I remember most was the joy that filled his heart and spilled over into mine. "This is my body, broken; my joy, given for you."

I think about Jim now that I face my own progressive disease. Can I see my body as a means of grace instead of measuring it against an ideal?

A similar thought crossed the mind of Eunuch. As they passed a body of water, he asked Philip, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Such a poignant question. What is to prevent me? Asked by a person always reminded of his imperfections. What is to prevent me? Asked by a person prevented from entering the temple.

So much resounded in unspoken silence around his question. But—and it's a beautiful moment—Philip baptized the Eunuch. For a man treated like an untouchable, Philip stopped and blessed him with water. Touching his head, cradling his shoulders, lowering his body into the water; bringing him up, declaring aloud, "I baptize you in the name of the God, mother and father of us All, God known to us as Jesus our brother, and God present to us as the Spirit."

This transformed the exclusion of the Eunuch. In Jerusalem he heard, "no member, no membership." But now, with Philip, it was, "no nuts, no problem." But I think the Eunuch experienced the transformation differently.

People in the disability-rights movement point out that "disability," as a concept, is a socially created category. We culturally construct the meaning of bodies—male,

female, black, white, able bodied, disabled. The Eunuch lived in a society that considered castration anathema but celebrated male circumcision a requirement. His society determined the meaning of his body.

But when he went down into the water and came back up, reborn, he heard more than the messages of his society. Heaven spoke, “This is my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” No longer defined by how others saw him, he could begin to define the meaning of his own body.

Lee Mokobe, the transgender poet I quoted earlier, came to a similar point of proclaiming their own meaning in their body.

*I treat [my body] like a house,
and when your house is falling apart,
you do not evacuate,
you make it comfortable enough to house all your insides,
you make it pretty enough to invite guests over,
you make the floorboards strong enough to stand on.*

When people hear that I have MS, I usually quickly get questions about symptoms. Our society focuses on the problem of disease. But I ask myself a different question: what meaning am I finding in my body? What grace gets revealed to me?

I take medicine only recently developed. It’s a game-changer in the treatment of MS, made possible because so many people before me gave themselves over to experiments and trials. I feel my body connected to them, my MS ancestors, my MS community. Their generosity shapes my life.

And I’m taking part in a research study, led by John Hopkins. It will help identify the markers crucial to determining what treatments to prescribe. My body can be part of making someone else’s experience better. Instead of measuring my body against an ideal, instead of focusing on what’s not perfect, I find meaning in what my body can give. It brings me closer to Jesus, who taught me, “this is my body, broken, given for you.”

Friends, the Ethiopian went away with joy because he discovered a new way to live in his body. Joy not because he realized some ideal; but because he perceived his body as a means of grace, a revelatory body, broken, beloved, claimed, shared. May we discover such joy in our own bodies.

Alleluia and Amen.

Notes

1. Aymer, M.P. (2023). “Exotica and the Ethiopian of Acts 8:26-40: Toward a Different Fabula,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 142(3), 533–546.

2. Mashau, Thinandavha D. (2022). “Rethinking the use of disruptive pop-up encounters for transformation: A missional reading of Acts 8:26–40,” *Missiology*, 50(2), 184–195.

3. Mokobe, Lee (2015). "A powerful poem about what it feels like to be transgender," *TED Talk*.
4. Rosica, T. (1994). "The Road to Emmaus and the Road to Gaza: Luke 24:13-35 and Acts 8:26-40," *Worship*, 68(2), 117–131.
5. Solevåg, A. R. (2016). "No nuts? No problem!: disability, stigma, and the baptized eunuch in Acts 8:26-40," *Biblical Interpretation*, 24(1), 81–99.