

Last week I opened with this saying, “The more things change, the more they stay the same” and I shared how that felt like a major bummer to me. My thinking was that the way things are, is not how God intends them to be so real change — and not keeping things the same — puts us on a trajectory to bring about greater good, greater justice in the world. Then of course, the events of this past week took place, with the jury’s verdict being announced in the trial of George Floyd’s death. And for me, along with countless millions of our brothers and sisters in the faith and throughout the world, there was a new glimmer of hope, that real change is possible, that the life of a black man does matter.

And in the reporting of the news I heard someone comment that perhaps we have reached an inflection point. Now for those of you like me, who do not study differential calculus or differential geometry, this may be a term that threw you a bit. For our purposes, I will just share a portion of the Wikipedia definition which is, “it is a point where the function changes from being concave (concave downward) to convex (concave upward), or vice versa.” Now, in mathematics, an inflection point is very normal and of course, not at all threatening. But, in our lives, when we reach an inflection point, it can be viewed positively or negatively. When we *choose* to make a decision that will alter the course of our lives, it can be filled with positive feelings — words like hope, adventure, and opportunity come to mind.

On the other hand, when we reach an inflection point that is thrust upon us by events that are beyond our control, we still do have the freedom to choose but our choices are limited to how will we respond to this *disruptive* inflection point. People do not choose to receive a diagnosis of serious illness, a significant injury, the death of a loved one, get fired from their job, have to live through a pandemic, and/or live through times of great social upheaval. These all leave us feeling a deep sense of loss as these sorts of inflection points force us to go through significant life transition that we didn’t sign up for. These kinds of challenges are disorienting and seldom do we appreciate them in the moment. But we also know that when we are able to meet these disruptions with

resilience, we find that God has been there with us all along and though we are still scarred, we are stronger for having lived through them.

Now if you are wondering where I am going with all of this, let's turn to our story today from the Acts of the Apostles. In this sequel to the Gospel of Luke, we hear the story of the expansion of the Church. In Acts, chapter two, thousands of Jerusalem-based, multi-ethnic Jewish people choose to welcome this message and be baptized. This is a wonderful inflection point that we call Pentecost, the birthday of the Church. Last week in chapter six, we heard another story of how the Church was growing and leadership grew to include Hellenistic (Greek) Jews. Among them was Stephen, who chose to take a knee for his belief in Jesus Christ and was martyred by stoning for doing so. Today, we hear about another of the deacons who were selected in Acts 6 — a man named Philip.

Philip has been busy proclaiming the Messiah to the people of Samaria and doing amazing works among them and bringing them great joy. But sure enough, even though he was having great success, when we choose to follow Jesus, life will not always go according to *our* plan. As we pray in the Lord's prayer, "*Thy* will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." What we hear in today's story is Philip's disruptive inflection point. "Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go toward the south toward... a wilderness road.' So he got up and went." Like so many faithful people in the Bible, he doesn't try to do a Jonah and flee, nor does he question or make excuses like Moses initially did; he simply gets up and goes. Does he know what it is store for him? It would appear not, given the details that we have. But does he trust that God is Emmanuel, that he has faith in God who is God-with-us? That much seems certain.

Now perhaps the fact that he was called by God to a wilderness road, he had some clue that God was up to something but I highly doubt that he could have foreseen this. Luke (somewhat thoroughly) describes the person in the chariot as a man, an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official over the treasury, a pilgrim leaving Jerusalem, and a reader of the prophet Isaiah. So what we learn from this is that he is both a person of wealth and education and power and he is also described five times as a eunuch, a

castrated man, making him very much a person forced to live on the margins. By this description, we cannot simply ascribe to him a single story as we so often tend to do. Whether or not we like to admit it, we like people to fit into neat and simple categories. And the media generally does that really, really well for us. Depending on what you watch and what you read, typically everyone is described as either this or that, for many news outlets, everything is black and white to them — there's not a lot of gray. So, just who is this unnamed man? Well, it's complicated. Just as you and I are. No one wants to be labeled and put into a tidy box as though a couple of things about you describes all of you. God has created us all in God's image and that's a complicated image — because it incorporates all of us with all of our differences... and similarities.

Yet when the Spirit tells Philip to, "Go over to this chariot and join it" did you catch Philip's response? He breaks into a run! Something that was almost never done in this culture. But Philip gets there and hears him reading from the prophet Isaiah. A detail important enough that is mentioned a second time (in case you missed it). See, most Jews would read the Torah while the prophetic writings were studied far less often. Now for Philip's part, he immediately does something that attempts to be helpful, kind, and invitational. He asks a very basic question of this sojourner. It isn't 'You're not from around here, are you?' Or 'What are you doing out here?' Or anything remotely judgey. That's one of the many gems in this story.

And upon hearing Philip's question, the man is likely a bit surprised by it being so open to the possibility of dialogue that he responds with a question of his own. And while from my own place of privilege and education, I have often read this as revealing the eunuch's scriptural ignorance, it need not be heard as such. Professor Margaret Aymer of Austin Theological Seminary says, "More generously, these questions could be read as an invitation to dialogue between the two men in the tradition of *havrutah*, the Jewish practice of study in pairs." I find that to be another delightful little gem of insight. How often have I assumed that I know more than someone else? But in so doing, I can easily dismiss the wisdom and insight that God has given to someone else and diminish them as somehow lesser than me.

Now what is next described is the actual passage that the eunuch was reading. These are verses that highlight how Jesus' death on the cross was an injustice, and a fulfillment of these very verses. Jesus is the lamb that was silent and had justice denied him. Now, another gem here is to try to imagine (if even for a moment) how the eunuch's own experience, an experience of forced emasculation, might help to explain his fascination with these verses. And when the eunuch asks an insightful question, "About whom... does the prophet say this?" The door has been opened for Philip to share his own understanding and testimony, namely, the Good News about Jesus.

At this point on their journey, as their conversation continued for we don't know how long, we are told that they come to some water and the eunuch says, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" I love how this question is phrased. Because doesn't it sound just like how someone who is both powerful and wise yet also marginalized might ask it? He gets it, he really seems to get it. But then he supposes that there's got to be some strings, something that will prevent him from being able to receive the gift of God in Jesus Christ. While it sounds as though it's for everyone but I am prepared to hear that it's actually for others and not for me. Because I have been told all my life that I am only this, or that I don't truly belong, that I am not deserving because of (fill in the countless blanks).

But thanks be to God that Philip does not throw up any barriers, he does not see reasons to prevent the eunuch from being baptized. So the two of them went down into the water together, and Philip baptized him. And then, almost as a way to seal the deal but also leave room for mystery, we hear how, "When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more..." This tells us that indeed, God's Spirit was truly present! But even so, the story ends so beautifully, with the phrase, "the eunuch went on his way rejoicing." May we experience God's love so thoroughly that we too, at any and all of our own inflection points, whether we choose them or they are thrust upon us, can go on our way rejoicing. Amen