

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL-CHURCH, UCC  
Sermon for Sunday, July 7, 2024

In the deserts of Arizona, there is a place where the fence stops. The barrier erected at the border of the U.S. and Mexico falls away and the land lies open. It is reservation land, and tribal leaders have forbidden the construction of any fencing. So it is a place where many immigrants desperately attempt to enter.

The desert stretches on and on, and water is non-existent. Many immigrants fall victim to dehydration. The human body cannot exist beyond 3 days without water.

Because of this, Lawn Griffiths puts out water in the desert. His water stations are clearly marked, a sign not only of life, but of compassion. The word gets passed on – ‘there is a place where you can find water – it will help you – look for the flags’ – this news is too important not to share. This water will nourish and provide strength – water is life.

The image of water in the desert is a message of good news. A biblical metaphor used to speak of the blessings of God – there is a God who loves you as you are. There is a faith that can nourish your spirit and sustain your soul. This news, this water in the desert, is too important not to share.

Philip certainly thought so. Phillip the outsider that is. Not to be confused with Phillip of Bethsaida, one of the apostles – the Phillip we heard of from the book of Acts, is a Greek living in Jerusalem. His job is waiting on people. He was one of those assigned to run the food pantry, clinic and hospice programs in Jerusalem, so the apostles wouldn't need to tend to such concerns as food and drink. But then Stephen was stoned to death, and the persecution of Jesus' followers intensified. It was especially directed at Greek speaking believers in Jerusalem. So, Phillip left Jerusalem along with many other Jesus followers of Greek ancestry.

Phillip was an outsider. He wasn't an apostle. Being Greek as well as of a 'different' religious group – he was targeted. Targeted both for race and religion. Leaving Jerusalem he journeyed to Samaria, hoping for safety there. But instead of securing safety through silence, Phillip couldn't keep quiet. He had good news. Wonderful news! News too good not to share. News of healing, grace and love. News of a God who had come for all people.

Phillip traveled all over Samaria, sharing the news of God's love, and many who listened came to believe. Lives were transformed and nourished, enriched by the message he shared. So, when Peter and John came to take over the ministry, Phillip moved on. After all, he had tremendous news. News too important not to share.

Which brings us to today's scripture – If Phillip was an outsider, he was sent to meet the quintessential outsider – a person of color, of different heritage, a man who had been castrated.

In the case of this Ethiopian eunuch, we are clearly told that Phillip was specifically directed to this man, to this meeting place, to this remote location in the desert.

It is interesting to note, that the divine direction given to Phillip, came both through the angel of the Lord and through the Holy Spirit. The angel of the Lord is God's primary way of guiding humans in the Hebrew Bible. The Holy Spirit is the predominant instrument used in the New Testament. Coming together, they lead Phillip to this isolated spot. There is no question that God intended to reach out to the particular individual Phillip met there.

This man was an outsider, not only among the Jews, but even in his own land, because castration marked him as 'other' for his whole life. This is the man God sought out.

Phillip approached the chariot and saw the man was reading the prophet Isaiah. When he asked a question, it seemed rather rude – 'hey, do you understand what you are reading?' The Ethiopian invited Phillip into his chariot where they had a long conversation about Jesus. Philip shared the good news of God's love.

Then something really interesting happened. They passed water in the desert of all places – the Ethiopian

shouted – ‘look, there’s water – what’s to prevent me from being baptized?’

There in the middle of the desert, Phillip baptized the outsider - He is loved, cherished. The God of the outsiders has come for him, has come to invite him to be part of the realm – Great News! The water of love and grace and acceptance in the midst of a dry, scorching desert.

This is good news, you know. Maybe it’s news we’ve heard hundreds of times and doesn’t seem very good or exciting to us today. God loves us and loves all people. God calls us directly, inviting in whomever is outside. We are called to invite any outsider in, to declare that all people are beloved, to break down the barriers that divide humanity. God has come to say that we are all welcome at the table, that we are all to be included in the circle of love.

Maybe we’ve heard this over and over, but there are many who haven’t heard. There are still people in the desert thirsty for nourishment and wholeness and love – and we have water to share.

We all know there are people who believe they aren’t welcome in the church – there are people who don’t believe God loves them – there are outsiders who do not know God invites them in.

It is wonderful serving a church such as this - one which openly proclaims that all God’s people are welcome here,

no matter where they are on life's journey. But there are many people whose spirits are dry and their souls parched. Others are confused or alienated.

This church, this congregation – you my friends – are water in the desert. You provide a place where all are welcome and loved – how do we let people know about the good news – let outsiders know have the water?

Let's invite the outsiders in. Let's share our water and feed them at God's table. If we don't, who will? Thanks be to God. Amen