

April 29, 2018

TEXT: Acts 8:26–40

TITLE: Unexpected Grace

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

There is an art to asking good questions. It is a skill practiced by teachers and reporters and detectives and parents on a regular basis. But anyone can do it—and probably should.

Asking the right questions can stimulate creativity, curiosity and connection. Questions can dismantle assumptions, critique systems that harm, and even save lives.

Glennon Doyle Melton writes of a conversation she had with her son’s math teacher after meeting with her to learn the new way he was learning division so she could help him with his homework. During their conversation, the teacher shared that:

Every Friday (she) asks her students to take out a piece of paper and write down the names of four children with whom they’d like to sit the following week. The children know that these requests may or may not be honored. She also asks the students to nominate one student who they believe has been an exceptional classroom citizen that week. All ballots are privately submitted to her.

And every single Friday afternoon, after the students go home, Chase’s teacher takes out those slips of paper, places them in front of her and studies them. She looks for patterns.

Who is not getting requested by anyone else?

Who doesn’t even know who to request?

Who never gets noticed enough to be nominated?

Who had a million friends last week and none this week?

You see, Chase’s teacher is... looking for children who are struggling to connect with other children. She’s identifying the little ones who are falling through the cracks of the class’s social life...And she’s pinning down—right away—who’s being bullied and who is doing the bullying.¹

With the belief that “All violence begins with disconnection,” she asks a few simple questions to forge, hopefully, lifesaving connection.

The “right questions” play a central role in our text for today. The whole story unfolds through a series of questions—the first of which makes an introduction, the second of which invites relationship, the third brings the proclamation of the gospel, the fourth leads to the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch and the consequential spread of the gospel into Ethiopia and beyond.

¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/glennon-melton/this-brilliant-math-teacher-has-a-formula-to-save-kids-lives_b_4899349.html

The meet up in today's text was orchestrated by the Holy Spirit between two men from very different backgrounds. The eunuch—a man who had been castrated so that he could serve in the courts of the queen and not be seen as a threat—is a man of wealth, power, and education. He is also a man of faith, reading scripture as he travels home from a pilgrimage to the temple. But he is also an outsider, or an “other” based on his sexual identity, which is the primary manner by which he is identified in our text. He is one who may be wondering where he fit into God's economy, finding solace in Isaiah's welcome even as he would have heard Deuteronomy's prohibition of eunuchs in the temple of the Lord.

And Philip, one of seven Greek-speaking apostles, is credited with carrying the Gospel outside of the bounds of traditional Judaism into Samaria. He is an itinerant preacher, the father of four daughters. Barbara Brown Taylor likens this unlikely encounter between Philip and the eunuch to that of “a diplomat in Washington, D.C., inviting a street preacher to join him in his late model Lexus for a little Bible study”.²

Philip approaches the chariot as instructed an unlikely exchange takes place. The conversation advances not through a forced agenda or hostile proselytizing. Rather, the exchange gently advances through the asking of questions, each one opening up a new layer of possibility and promise. From introduction to invitation to instruction to inclusion, questions set the tone, advance the spread of the gospel, and affirm the welcome of the eunuch into the family of God.

So what were the questions?

Philip's first: Do you understand what you are reading?

But the rest come from the eunuch. With his next question, “How can I if no one guides me?” The next, “About whom does the prophet speak” compels Philip to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ—starting with this scripture, but then moving beyond.

And then the eunuch sees some water and asks his final question: “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Rather than getting tangled up in purity codes or differences in race, ethnicity, sexual identity or class, Philip answers with God's radical welcome and baptizes the eunuch on the road.

Introduction to invitation to instruction to inclusion. Each question asked lays out a model for discourse, for relationship and even for evangelism through this brief but life changing exchange between Philip and the Eunuch. By asking the right questions, both Philip and the Eunuch advance the gospel, manifest hospitality, exhibit justice, and witness to the broad reach of the kingdom of God.

² Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

So what does this text hold for us today?

If we look at this text from the vantage point of questions, it gives a model for evangelism that builds relationships, listens to the stories, and favors the needs of those to whom we are proclaiming the gospel. Too often in the history of the church has evangelism brought out the worst in us, bringing out the imperialistic tendencies of Christendom rather than emphasizing the love of Christ. This conversation shows us another way, paved with humility and care and welcoming love.

If we look at this text from the vantage point of questions, it gives us a model of inclusiveness. The text teaches us that when we encounter someone who is different from us, we are charged with asking questions, listening, and learning. This approach helps to build relationships across dividing lines rather than reinforce society's caste system that ranks people according to race, class, gender, age, identity. This model values those who are different, shares leadership,

But I also think that if we look at this text from the vantage point of the questions, we are invited to ask more questions. It can become, even a spiritual discipline: in church, at home, in the grocery store...Questions slow things down. They create dialogue (rather than monologue). They are inclusive. They form community. They advance the conversation. They introduce possibilities. They forge connection. They delay reaction. They foster learning. Questions have a lot to offer.

If we trust that asking questions can be life-giving, bridge building, relationship forming, truth telling, and the redemption offering, then we might want to make a practice of asking questions a bigger part of our lives. What might that work like?

Let me give you two examples:

At Club One Sixteen, our Wednesday evening ministry for children and youth we realized that we were making a lot of false assumptions around gender identity—especially with regard to the pronouns we use to address each other. And so, a few months ago, we started the practice of asking people to share their preferred pronouns when they introduce themselves, so that we are moving forward as an informed, loving and welcoming community. It's working. The community is growing, and is an increasingly safe space for youth.

ELPC launched a series last night inviting people to participate in the tough conversation about the oppressive history of race in our country—intentionally asking dynamics that breed racism in our culture, communities and selves. What if we engage these tough questions? What if we listened to the experience of others? What if we continued to become a community that was willing to grow in knowledge and in love?

So go forth and ask questions. May the questions you raise be extended in a spirit of hospitality, humility and love. And may our questions be fodder for good news—for, as Philip answered the Ethiopian Eunuch on that desert road—God's love is for all.

Amen.