

Many of you know about our current culture's preoccupation with "stranger danger." It's what you were taught, or perhaps what you taught your children. Strangers are potential dangers. Kids, in particular, need to watch out for strangers. To not do so is to risk great harm. It is the right message. We want our kids to be safe. We want them to be protected. But like most all messages, this one does not grasp the truth fully, especially if it ends simply by saying "avoid strangers." The Bible isn't going to be particularly happy with that conclusion.

In our first lesson for today we have this marvelous story about Philip, a worker in the early church, and his little journey toward Gaza, an area south of Jerusalem. This journey is said to take place on "a wilderness road," (i.e., a wild, potentially dangerous traveling route). While on this route, Philip encounters a stranger, a man from Ethiopia, a big wig, a guy who has a huge responsibility in the queen's government. And this man is said to be a *eunuch*.

Most of us men cringe even when we hear that word. Generally, a eunuch was a man who had some of his male parts removed in order to make him less of a challenge to the women in the king's court that he was in charge of. But eunuchs also could have been men who were simply celibate or unable to father children. Or maybe, some think, effeminate. What is significant to know about eunuchs, especially those who were physically altered, is that they were not welcome in the temple. The Bible says that directly in the book of Deuteronomy. Eunuchs were thought to be ritually unclean. Ancient Jews believed it was not right to mess with the fluids that bring life. That was a matter of going to a place that humans shouldn't go. Life came from the fluids. To mess with the fluids is to mess with something sacred.

So in this story we not only have a stranger—a man from a foreign nation, Ethiopia--but we also have a marginalized man, a man who was part of a sexual minority, a man thought to be on the fringes, a man

who was not truly welcome. But the Spirit of God had a different idea than did religion. The Spirit of God sent Philip to this stranger. And this stranger, this marginalized man, becomes in the Book of Acts, the first of the converts from outside of the city of Jerusalem to the People of the Way, as the church was called at that time.

Stranger danger is not a bad message. We want to keep our kids safe. Trust me, I, as a pastor, am very committed to making sure that this environment here is safe, especially for our children. But religion that grows up, religion that matures is religion that is not satisfied with a view of the world that identifies the stranger simply as a matter of danger. If we are going to grow up, especially in the faith, we will not be satisfied with a life that keeps us away from the other, the different, the odd, the unusual, the stranger. If we can trust the Book of Acts, and I think we are called to, the Spirit of God is much bigger than us, much larger than our little confined worlds, very dissatisfied with our living in a little cocoon that protects us from the world and from others who are different.

We talk a lot around here about *all* being welcomed. That is, without a doubt, the right sentiment. But let's be real clear. That sentiment is not proclaimed because we are such nice people. Truthfully, many of us are. Yet all of us frequently feel within us limits to the welcome that we are willing to extend. The limits, by the way, are often individually determined. All are welcome, we say, except the people who mess the carpet. All are welcome, except the families with noisy kids. All are welcome, except the people with felonies, except the people with green hair, too many piercings, too many tattoos, too effeminate, too masculine, too Republican, too Democrat.

All kinds of people test our sense of welcome. But the message of Acts is not how wonderful Philip is, and as a servant leader in the early church he was probably wonderful. But the message is that the *Spirit* of God is way ahead all of us in providing welcome. The *angel of the Lord* told Philip that he should get up and go to Gaza and travel on a

dangerous road. The Spirit of God led Philip to strange people and to a strange land.

The interesting thing about the eunuch is that he really wasn't as strange as many might have thought. When Philip comes upon him, the Ethiopian is reading the very book that Philip was well acquainted with. He's reading the Bible, the book of Isaiah. Here's the deal, folks. Strange people are often interested in the same things we are. Strange people can be just like us strange people. They have the same questions. They have the same struggles. They are after the same things. They have the same emptiness with them that we do. Just because someone comes from a different country, speaks a different language, looks different, is a member of a minority group, has a different sexual identity, doesn't mean that he or she isn't looking for the big picture in life, isn't longing to be loved or cherished, doesn't want to be in a place where everybody knows their name, isn't seeking a role to play in the community.

The eunuch was searching for something. That's why he was reading the Bible, and in this case, reading from Isaiah, reading about a suffering man, one who was rejected, one who was placed on the fringe. Now Philip wants to know if the eunuch knows who this man is. "How can I," he says, "unless someone guides me?" Wow, this stranger is really wise. Yes, he obviously has lots of money. Yes, he obviously he has lots of power and influence. But the bigger deal is that he is wise. He knows that he needs someone else to help negotiate this thing called life and faith. He needs a mentor. This stranger has a lot to teach us, as strangers often do.

If we want to make it in life, if we really want to grow up, if we want a faith that is deeper and bigger, we can't do life and faith on our own. We need mentors; we need teachers. We need one another. Life and faith are not solo acts. Nadia Bolz-Weber says that Christianity is a "lousy religion for the do-it-yourself set." We're in this together-- interwoven, our theme says. We need to sit by each other, as Philip and the man from Ethiopia sat next to each other. And together we

need to explore the depths of life. Philip and the Ethiopian did it by reading and studying the Bible together, the Ethiopian learning much from Philip who had been in this Christian journey longer than he had.

We not only need *each other*. And as the story from Acts suggests: we need books. And for the church, the book that is at the center of our life is the Bible. Oh, it's not an answer book. It's not a book that predicts what is going on right now. It's not a book that is without errors or should be read only as literal history. But it is a book that we study together in order to take us to the deeper places. It's a book that leads us to Jesus, the suffering servant, the one who traveled the way of the cross. It is a book that leads us out of death and into resurrection, a book that takes us to the Christ, the love that brought everything into being, the love that sustains life, that love that will bring this life to a great conclusion. "Love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God, for God is love." The Christ, love, not money, not popularity, not power, not even knowledge, is the key to understanding what life is all about.

To get this, you need to hang in there with God's people. Regularly worshipping with them, studying with them, sharing the meal with them, living within the love that they have for you and you have for them—all of these things are so vitally important. Remaining connected to the Christ, to the vine, as the Gospel of John puts it, is a matter of being hooked up to the source. Many of your electronic devices don't work if you don't plug them in. We don't bear good fruit when we are not plugged into the source.

When we aren't plugged into the source, we often don't work well. When we don't remain in the love that gives us life, pretty soon we are producing some stinky fruit. We start thinking it's all about us, that life is all about making more money than other people, having more toys than someone else, or being able to control others. When we are not connected to the vine, we start living out of fear, punishment, judgment. We start viewing strangers as problems, nothing but a matter of danger to you. We begin to view the world as "them and us."

We forget that we all are woven together, that all things and all people are connected. This kind of forgetfulness, this stinky fruit is worth disposing in the garbage. It is better if it is “gathered, thrown into the fire and burned,” because it doesn’t bring sweetness to life, doesn’t make life more abundant. It doesn’t nurture our relationships, expand our horizons, bring us hope or healing.

To remain connected to the vine is to tap into the love that God has for the world. It is to tap into the work of the Spirit of God—work that is always bigger than our work, always inclusive of people we would rather exclude. To abide in love, to remain rooted in the Christ is to be taken by the Spirit to the dangerous road that leads to Gaza, a route on which you will meet strange people. And strange people will meet you, yet another strange human being. And life will never be the same again for you or for the stranger. You, as together you are connected to the source, to the vine, to love, will be made new, as will the world.