

GRACE MADE REAL
A Sermon by Rev. Victor H. Floyd
July 3, 2022



Acts 8:26-31, 35-38

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go towards the south 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, 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. / 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?’ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

Even as a child, I was clear that following Jesus was my choice—my choice to go to church, my choice to believe, my choice to pray, to forgive. I chose yes and was baptized. Baptism, the sign and the seal of God’s covenantal promises, is the method by which we initiate members into the household of Christian faith.

The Protestant Reformers insisted that baptism was best done in community, as a act of worship. It can’t be a private affair. When we baptize babies, we acknowledge the love that forms us, chooses us and holds us close before we are even aware. We all agree to help raise those children. That’s visible grace. Likewise, when older children or adults are baptized, the water on the forehead affirms that God has been sustaining us all along. We die to the old ways, and are reborn into a new creation.

Now, I was baptized by Methodists, but I'm sure the Southern Baptists of rural Georgia tried to dunk me at some point. Presbyterians do not believe that one church's baptism is any better than another. Presbyterians do not believe that baptism is essential for salvation, but it does allow us to sense eternity while still in this world.

In the passage Rev. Marci just read, did you notice the giddy, almost-reckless way the Eunuch and Philip pull the chariot over next to some water, and bam, Mr. Eunuch is baptized? Longtime Protestants should find this troubling. I mean, did Philip never hear about the required membership class? No pledge card? On whose authority was Philip acting? Philip and the Eunuch talked about Jesus. The Eunuch was ready to take the plunge.

The eunuch's social status was that of a dark-skinned foreigner *and* a sexual minority. Some scholars wonder if the term eunuch was applied to gay men in biblical literature. Perhaps the eunuch represents the I in LGBTIQ+. We could hypothesize all morning, but the undeniable Good News is this: the gospel of Jesus Christ crosses boundaries. It does not respect our imaginary divisions and rules.

The sacraments are open to everyone, all the whosoever in this world, no matter what anyone says, and that includes what the church says. I once attended a Protestant service where I was instructed to cross my arms and let communion pass me by if I had not been baptized in the congregation's tradition. Really? Seriously? How about let's ask Jesus. Who is welcome at the Lord's table?

Luke 14:15-24

One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to Jesus, 'Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!' Then Jesus said to him, 'Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his [servant] to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for everything is ready now." But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, "I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies." Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies." Another said, "I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come." So the [servant] returned and reported this. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his [servant], "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." And the [servant] said, "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room." Then the master said to the [servant], "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner."

God Words Made Flesh

No matter who you are or what you've done, God wants nothing more than to love you and to be expressed through you. God wants to welcome you home. And if you are someone the world calls a lesser-than, God loves you especially. That's the basis of a lot of our shared theology. What is theology anyway? Theology, theo=God, ology=words. God Words. What are your God words? How does Jesus, the Living Word, become real for you?

The Theology of an American Tragedy

Back in 2007, when I was in seminary, on the first day of theology class, our professor, Dr. Fumitaka Matsuoka showed us a film called *Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero*, a graphic examination of how Americans found meaning after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. (Trigger warning? In describing this film, later I will talk about watching people die.)

I still wonder about the symbolism of those two planes, one bearing the word "United" and the other "American" commandeered by extremists. Are we still under attack? No one thinks our nation is united, and, as extremists take over courts and school boards and attempt cripple democracy just enough for their purposes, we are less of what we used to call American.

In the video's most troubling scene, we watched newsreel of the towers beginning to fall, random documents billowing on smoke-filled air, flames dancing in windows.

On one high floor, the wall had been ripped away. In that opening people walked and signaled, vulnerable and helpless. One of them walked to the edge determined to jump, and someone came to his side. A coworker—a friend? a stranger?—took his hand, and they jumped together. We watched as two as people holding hands leapt from the burning building and into the next world. Some averted their eyes. Others cried. Most were stunned. It felt horribly intimate, sacred.

Fumitaka stopped the video and addressing the class, he said, "These images haunt me. They are terrible. I cannot shake them because there is something else here, something spiritual, transcendent." After a pregnant silence, he added, "When you understand why all those people jumped together, holding hands, that's when you will begin to understand theology." Class dismissed.

Inclusion Saves Lives

Where were you on 9/11. I had lunch plans with a wise friend who greeted me at her door saying, "The world has forever changed. This is uncharted territory." Later, she wondered, "Maybe they attacked us because we called it the *World Trade Center* and then excluded so much of the world from it."

Pretty soon, the nation learned that the chaos and pain of 9/11 had religious underpinnings, not unlike the chaos and pain from this week's Supreme Court rulings. Radical religious underpinning. Theologian Karl Barth said "If the State has perverted its God-given authority, it cannot be honored better than by the criticism which is due to it in all circumstances." Barth's context was Nazi Germany, but he could've been talking about the Roman Empire in Jesus' time or our country today. Whenever the state and church become one, extreme authoritarianism, violent masculinity and coercive religion are not far behind.

Do Not Tolerate Intolerance

Reflecting on this week, I realize so much can fall apart in a very little span of time. It seemed like we had been on a path that resembled Mary's magnificat. The humble and meek were getting a little exalting. The hungry were getting a little more to eat. Love seemed to be winning. Perhaps so much has gone wrong so quickly because we have put up with bullies and unbridled greed for too long. We have tolerated the intolerant. I'm calling you to stop doing that.

Karl Popper wrote in *The Open Society*, that "If we extend unlimited tolerance to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them."

We must stop idolizing bullies and, instead, love one another enough to defend one another from oppression and violence. This will necessitate, to paraphrase the Magnificat, sending the super-rich bullies away, empty for once. They'll be okay not running everyone else's lives for a little bit. The ruling that allows teachers to impose prayer on unwilling students is antithetical to the gospel. Jesus sought to reform his own religion. And ours. He didn't proselytize the pagans. During forty days in the wilderness, he didn't even once try to pray with the devil. He sent the devil away.

Broken & Poured Out

When things fall apart, Jesus calls us together in this upper room, where women are trusted, where little children shall lead, where grace is made real. Real religion lies in weakness. Broken bread and cup of juice are humble symbols. They offer inward food. Simple elements that transform ordinary people for revolutionary acts of love.

So those poor people on 9/11, why do *you* think they held hands before jumping? For me, they were living faith in something stronger than death. They had hope in something more powerful than just me and my interests, going it alone. At the end, they were transformed by the love that connects us, we call it God. They came together and loved one another. In the sacraments, grace is made real, and when things fall apart, we are never alone.

Praise God.

