

## THE CHURCH WE NEED TO BE

### *The Imperative of Inclusion*

Acts 8:26-40; Isaiah 56:1-8

May 17, 2026

Let's be clear from the very start. This was never supposed to happen. Nearly every piece of this story is all wrong.

The place—all wrong. A wilderness road between Jerusalem and Gaza far from anywhere the apostles expected the gospel to go.

The people—all wrong. After all, Philip was a deacon. He was supposed to be serving tables back in Jerusalem, not leading Bible studies in the desert. And as for this outsider, his name appears on no approved list of baptism candidates.

The process—all wrong. There is no committee. There's been no session vote, no statement of faith carefully reviewed in advance.

And yet here they are. Philip and this unnamed Ethiopian official, sitting together in a chariot on a road to nowhere, reading Isaiah out loud and asking what these ancient words mean for them now. And then, on this wilderness road in the middle of the desert, behold! There is water. A stream flowing through the desert. As if someone knew they were coming.

Theologian Justo González calls Acts the fifth gospel—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit, in the ancient church as in ours, is a disruptor, a kind of holy menace. The Spirit often sends us places we would never choose to go.

The Ethiopian is powerful, a treasury official serving in the courts of the queen of Ethiopia. He has gone to the right places and asked the right questions. Still, it is not enough. The laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy are explicit on this point. He is categorically excluded from membership in the community of faith. Not because of

his beliefs. Not because of his character or his spiritual practices. Not because of his personal piety. But because of who he is. His body is the border. People like him stay outside.

Which means that what Philip *should* do, good deacon that he is, is clear. What he should say here is carefully prescribed. If faithfulness means guarding the boundaries he's always known, he should gently, pastorally explain that the grace of God has its limits, and that this stranger on the road—as well-meaning as he might be—falls outside those limits. That is what the institution would require. But just watch what the Spirit does.

The passage he is reading when Philip catches up to his chariot is Isaiah, Chapter 53. We call it "the suffering servant" passage. *Led like a sheep to the slaughter. In his humiliation, justice was denied him. His life is taken from the earth.*

Philip asks *the man*, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

"Well, how can I understand it unless there's someone to explain it? To guide me? About whom does the prophet write these words? Is he talking about himself? Or about someone else?"

The Ethiopian eunuch is asking what the text means. But underneath, he is asking something deeper. He is asking whether this story—about one who is humiliated, denied justice, excluded—whether he could belong in that story. He is asking, "Is there a God in the universe who knows what it is like to be me?"

Philip begins to tell him about Jesus—God in flesh the world would reject. And there on that desert road, with the scroll of Isaiah unrolled before them, something

cracks open. He does not wait to be invited or examined. He does not submit a proposal or a statement. He sees the water—that stream that has no business being on a desert road—and says, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

I find it the most direct, urgent, and vulnerable question in the entire Book of Acts. There’s such a tenderness to the question. *What is keeping me out? What wall separates me from the grace I now understand?*

And here’s the truth. The technical, legal, institutional answer to his question is: everything. The list of barriers separating him stretches a mile long. Philip—well-versed in the ancient texts—could recite them all. He could list them one by one. *What is preventing you? How much time do you have?*

But something in Philip has cracked open, too. And so, this deacon, this servant of the Lord, wades into the water without pausing to consider what the apostles back home would think. The Spirit has gotten there first. Now Philip knows. But you should know that God was not improvising there on the desert road. God was already on record. If Philip had turned three chapters further in the book of the Prophet Isaiah, he would come to these words in Isaiah 56, words that name the eunuch specifically—name the ones the law excluded—and promised them a place within the walls.

*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people. I will give them a name better than sons and daughters. The foreigners shall come from the north and the south and the east and the west. My house is for all people.*

In other words, the Spirit on the desert road was not changing God’s plan. The Spirit was fulfilling God’s plan. The Spirit was not breaking the Bible. The Spirit was teaching Philip how to read it through the lens of grace.

Over the years, I’ve heard sincere, well-meaning people I love and respect say, “I want to be more inclusive. I really do. But the Bible...” If that’s where you are, you are not alone. Many of us were taught that taking scripture seriously means drawing lines that limit the reach of grace. Letting go of that—even questioning that—can feel like losing your footing.

A mentor once asked me, “Do you think it is possible to overestimate the love of God?” And something in me cracked open.

Here is what years of careful reading have taught me: the Bible is not the obstacle. The Bible is the reason. From the moment God called a wandering people and promised to bless all nations through them, to the prophets who extended welcome to the discarded and the dehumanized, to Jesus gathering an unlikely group of followers to form a church with no walls, to a Spirit who shows up on a wilderness road—the whole arc of scripture bends toward a welcome wider than we imagined.

The Bible has held up this truth all along. The Church is still catching up to the wildness at the heart of its own book. And the Spirit keeps moving—whether we are ready or not. Sometimes the Spirit must move us out of the way.

John was a lifelong Baptist from the deep south. He taught Sunday school for thirty years. He was the kind of man who had the scriptures memorized, and he believed every word of them. I loved John. He lived close to the Presbyterian church I served in Atlanta, and he had begun attending just before I arrived there. As soon as he started attending the church, he also started a new Sunday school class. In a matter of months, it grew to be our largest Sunday school class. We called him John the Baptist from the deep south.

One Monday morning, John the Baptist asked to come and see me. It sounded urgent, so we met that afternoon. He sat down in my office, and he let out a deep sigh. He asked if he could pray for us. Then, after his prayer, he shared his concern. He said, “Pastor, I need your help. Two women have started coming to my Sunday school class. A couple. I don’t know what to do. This isn’t what I grew up with.”

I asked him, “Well, John, what do you think you should do?” I had no idea what John would say.

He sat with my question for a moment. He knew the scriptures. John the Baptist believed every word of them.

After what felt to me like an hour, he said, "I'm not sure what I think. But I'm pretty sure I know what Jesus thinks."

"What's that, John?"

"Jesus thinks they belong right here. In fact, he's probably the one who brought them. Maybe to change my heart."

The couple joined the class, and then joined the church. They were lifelong Presbyterians. They knew the scriptures. Lived every word. Together the class opened the words of scripture and listened to each other's stories, and over the course of years they built strong and faithful community together. In fact, two years later, the couple brought their daughter to be baptized in our church. We needed an elder to stand with the family at the baptismal font. The Spirit had been preparing for that moment all along. Every scripture we read. Every story we shared. Every step that was taken. And guess who stood at that font. John the Baptist. It was never supposed to happen. It was the most joyful baptism I can remember.

That's how this story ends. It ends with joy. The eunuch goes on his way rejoicing. The Spirit gives us his baptism as a charge to the church, a witness to what happens when the walls come down.

There are people in our city, and in our pews, who have spent years—some, decades—standing at the border of belonging. Religious voices have claimed Biblical authority to put their story, their very identity, outside the grace of God. Too often, these voices have sounded like our voice. Too often the church has not only witnessed those walls; it has built them, and it has defended them.

There are people in this space and who hear the sound of my voice who know what it is to ask the eunuch's question deep in the privacy of their own hearts. *Is there anything in this story for me? Is there a God in the universe who knows what it is like to be me?*

And the answer to that question is yes. This story belongs to you. You belong to this story. And the Bible is the reason.

This is the church we need to be—what it looks like when we follow the Spirit. There will be moments that make us uncomfortable and even afraid. Imagine Philip standing on the water's edge. *This was never supposed to happen.* When those moments come, listen deeply to each other. Trust that the God of the wilderness road is with us.

When we make space for those the world pushes to the margin *and* space for the ones who thought they knew where the lines were drawn, we are not going further than God intends, we are catching up to where the Spirit has always already been.

Our children are watching to see if we mean it. Our city is watching to see if it's true. The danger was not that Philip went too far, overestimating the love of God. The danger would have been staying on the shoreline. And as it was, so it is today. The risk is to resist the call of the Spirit.

There is an old spiritual the Black Church has been singing for generations, shaped by faithful souls who faced the worst of human power and held fast to the promise no oppressor can withhold.

*Plenty good room.*

*Plenty good room in my Father's kingdom.*

*Just choose your seat and sit down.*

Many stand at the border of belonging, wondering if we really mean it. We mean it. There is room in this place. Now, what is there to prevent us? Amen.