

Baptism and Belonging – Ben Wayman

Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

In May of 2013 I was introduced to a Chinese student named Brian who had recently become a Christian, and so wanted to be baptized. Brian's birthday was approaching and he thought it would be meaningful to be born again on that day. The problem, as it was presented to him, was that Brian was romantically attracted to men and women. Brian's mentor was concerned Brian misunderstood both baptism and sin and insisted that until he was corrected, Brian was not fit for baptism. Like the Ethiopian eunuch, Brian wondered *What is to prevent me from being baptized?!*

Today we are introduced to one of the church's most instructive stories about baptism. Baptism is all about belonging. And swirling around the waters of baptism, we find three things: boldness, the Bible, and belonging. Let's start with boldness.

Boldness

Both Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch show us that baptism requires boldness. Philip shows us this by expanding God's family. The Ethiopian eunuch shows us this by joining a new family. Through baptism God expands our family. Through the church, God embraces more and more people, inviting strangers and friends alike. Baptism stretches our imaginations to see and welcome all of God's children, and it shocks us to find that God shows no partiality. God wants **everyone** in the family. It takes boldness for us to be an adopting people and a people who can be vulnerable with a new family, to be in a constant posture of welcoming strangers to our tables and into our lives. It's risky.

Philip knew this because he had just come from Samaria. Just before that, Philip was appointed by the twelve disciples to be a table waiter: to make sure people at the margins were getting a place at the table, and so he went to the people that had long been excluded from Israel's table. Jews and Samaritans were estranged family members. They had parted ways several centuries before and time had only pushed them further apart. They didn't believe the same things or worship the same way or in the same place, and they did not share the same table.

Philip knew the risks of going to Samaria, but he also knew how radical Jesus was and wanted the church to be. At the beginning of the book of Acts, Jesus told his followers they were to be his *witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth* (Acts 1:8b). So Philip went to Samaria, and now, he finds himself with an Ethiopian eunuch. For ancient writers, Ethiopians signified the people at the ends of the earth—as far from the Jerusalem table as possible. What's more, eunuchs were regarded by Jews as unclean and so unfit for table fellowship regardless of their race or ethnicity. Every Jew knew from Leviticus that no one with *crushed testicles* could offer food as an offering to God (Lev. 21:20), and they knew from Deuteronomy that eunuchs *could not be admitted to the assembly of the Lord* (Deut. 23:1).

So the Ethiopian eunuch was a social outcast in two significant ways. And he knew it, because he had just been to Jerusalem to worship God but was prohibited from entering the Temple due to his race and sexuality. Worshiping God from the outer court, the Ethiopian eunuch was locked out by God's people. Did this mean God had rejected him too? By asking to be baptized, the

Ethiopian eunuch was bold enough to challenge all of his previous experiences with God's people. If Philip belongs to God's family, and if God's prophets spoke of Jesus as a suffering outcast with whom the eunuch could identify, then it seemed possible he belonged in God's family after all.

Philip and the eunuch would have been aware of Israel's official position on foreigners and eunuchs, yet they entered the waters of baptism together anyway. God was at work. We know this because an angel, then the Spirit compelled Philip to reach out to the eunuch. The Spirit vindicated the eunuch's baptism just as they came up out of the water. God is all over this business of adopting into his family a man from a faraway land who had been excluded from the Jewish table. Baptism marks something new, something bold, that the Jews could not imagine. Whereas circumcision was for men alone, baptism is for everyone. Whereas participation in the Jewish assembly was for the ethnically pure, the ritually clean, baptism is for everyone. *What is to prevent this man from being baptized?*

The Holy Spirit gives us the courage to become the baptismal people we are called to be. When I met Brian that May, I had just been offered a position at Greenville to teach theology. My involvement with Brian put me in a tough position and I feared I'd lose my job before I even began. But the Holy Spirit gave me courage, reminding me from John's epistle that, *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear* (1 Jn 4:18). To be sure, baptism requires boldness for everyone involved—for how could getting involved with God require anything less than complete courage? I cannot imagine what it was like for Brian to be told by his mentor and then his home church that he could not be baptized, and then to ask for it anyway. Brian's boldness reminds us of the radical boldness that comes with following Jesus.

Bible

Our second discovery related to baptism concerns the Bible and how it points us to God and God's family. Here we find that Scripture is a resource for our discipleship that requires guides. Luke likes to remind us that reading the Bible well is hard to do and is best done in a community. After all, how could someone who insists on a simple, literal reading of the Bible take Jesus seriously when he says *I am the true vine*, and then goes on to talk about his *branches*?

Guides help us read the Bible better. They help us see that the Bible points to God and the family God wants for us. Just as Jesus had teach two disciples on the road to Emmaus how to read the Bible, so here Philip teaches the eunuch how to see Jesus in Isaiah, and then they both discovered the true nature of God's family. *Do you understand what you are reading?* is a question the church should keep asking. We must always be open to the possibility, as Philip and the eunuch were, that we do not understand what we are reading. The church's practice of slavery in the past and its treatment of women today are but two examples of ways in which the church has not understood what it is reading. We must be discerning about our guides and our guides must be humble in their readings of the Bible.

It's significant that the eunuch is reading from the book of Isaiah after worshiping in the outer courts at Jerusalem, because Isaiah was the prophet who offered a fresh word on eunuchs (Isa 56:3-5). Just three chapters after the passage cited in our Acts reading today, Isaiah gives hope to

eunuchs and foreigners, saying that they too belong in God's house of prayer on his holy mountain. Isaiah concludes: *Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered* (Isa. 56:8). Isaiah relays God's vision that eunuchs and foreigners belong in God's family after all. The Bible shows us who God is and what God's family looks like.

Today we read Isaiah as it sits in the hands of an Ethiopian eunuch and we see how God is gathering outcasts into the church. And, sometimes, these are people the church has cast out. We hear this text through a man who has been silenced and excluded from the assembly of Israel, who has been sheared, humiliated, and denied God's justice. Once the eunuch saw Jesus in this way, he knew he belonged to God's family. I wonder if it was at this moment that he became a guide to Philip. While the prophet Isaiah surely speaks about Jesus, it speaks as well about the eunuch himself, who fit the bill of a suffering servant and an outcast of Israel. It is telling that the eunuch, not Philip, suggested baptism.

We need guides to read the Bible well, but we also need students who sometimes see more than our teachers. We need Jesus, we need Philip, we need the Ethiopian eunuch, and we need each other not only to understand the Bible well, but to live out our baptismal calling. When we read Scripture with our church family, our interpretation and application of the Bible is always new because God is always inviting us to new things that are consistent with God's character. What is the new word for us in our reading of Acts today? Who is being excluded, silenced, humiliated, outcast, oppressed, and killed today? Whoever is like Jesus in these ways, Luke is telling us to welcome such people into our church family. The whole church, with the help of the Holy Spirit, helps us read the Bible, showing us God and what our baptism into God's family means.

Belonging

And finally, baptism is all about belonging. It's about being adopted into God's family, which is full of strangers and strange people—people like you and me, and people all over the world. God's family is the creation of the Holy Spirit who grows the church through baptism rather than biology. The Holy Spirit invites this new creation—our ever-expanding family—to go to new places, take new risks, embrace new people, and make new friends.

On December 1, 2013, the first Sunday of Advent, Brian was baptized at St. Paul's. That day he joined our family that extends to the ends of the earth. A few weeks later, Brian returned to China to care for his dad, who had been diagnosed with cancer. His dad died two months later. Brian wanted to attend university at Greenville but stayed in Beijing to care for his mother.

A year or so after Brian was baptized he sent St Paul's a postcard. Here's what it says:

Dear St. Paul's FM Church,

Thanks for baptism on December 1st. I am so happy to be a Christian.

St. Paul's is my family church. I will always remember you all. – Yixing Liu

Brian's boldness and sense of belonging is a gift to us here at St Paul's and to the church across the globe.¹

As you know, I kept my job. One hot summer morning after Prayer, Superintendent Lucia walked straight up to me—right here, in this space—and said, “I am taking ecclesial authority on this,” and I never heard another word of opposition to Brian's baptism. Thanks be to God who calls on the whole church to do his work of loving all people, including our brother Brian. And thanks be to God that Brian believed God enough to know that he belonged in the church.

It's good and it's news that God is making a holy family of misfits who abide in God by our love. God is more than enough for the whole world, which means there is more than enough love for one another. Each and every one of you belongs in God's family. You all have a place at the table. And there's more than enough room for many, many more. Thanks be to God.

¹ I am grateful to my friend Kristyn Caldwell for this insight. She read an earlier draft of this sermon and saw the depths of the gospel in Brian's story more clearly than I did.