

## **Opening the Doors of the Church**

**Acts 8:26-40**

**Sunday, May 3, 2015**

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In the book of Acts, things happen fast, and change comes rapidly, and in surprising ways. The church is growing rapidly, and the new members are not what the disciples expect.

In the story before today's in the text, a Samaritan is baptized. A Samaritan. Samaritans were people who keep Torah, who don't understand or accept that the Temple in Jerusalem as the place where God speaks to God's people, who are ethnically mixed, and who the Jews understand as fakes – pretenders – who actually part of the faith

So the story before today's includes the baptism of a Samaritan – a faker – a pretender—who joins the church.

And in the story after this one, Gentiles are baptized. Gentiles: not the children of Israel, not the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not the chosen people. Gentiles: those who are outside the covenant, who do not observe Torah. Gentiles are being baptized and joining the church!

So things are shaping up in unexpected ways.

So let's turn to today where a eunuch is baptized. Eunuchs, and all others who had physical blemishes, could not enter the Temple. This eunuch is an official of the court of the Ethiopian queen. This eunuch is a God-fearer. He is studying scripture as he journeys. Philip appears and runs alongside, and is invited in to instruct the man, and he does his job. He proclaims the good news. At a certain point, they come along a stream, and the man requests baptism, and Philip accedes to his request – and vanishes.

There are a few things we need to recognize here.

The protagonist of our story today is not Philip, and it is not the Ethiopian court official. The protagonist is the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God is the one who makes things happen in this story. The Spirit brings Philip there, and gives Philip the words to say, and moves the Ethiopian toward joining the movement, and then takes Philip away to Azotus, where he will go on, sharing the good news.

There is a tradition in much of the Black Church, called Opening the Doors of the Church. It is part of the Sunday liturgy, a regular part of worship. It is also known as an altar call. It happens when people feel moved by the Spirit to make a commitment to Jesus, and they present themselves for prayer and baptism. You Open the Doors of the Church to welcome new people into the Body.

In this story, and in many others in this book, it is the Spirit of God – not Philip, not Peter, not John -- who is Opening the Doors of the Church.

The same is true now as it was then. It is the Spirit of God who is Opening the Doors of OUR Church – this church – our congregation.

In Acts, the disciples were surprised when the Spirit called, when the Spirit moved, when the Spirit opened the doors to Samaritans, a eunuch, Gentiles.

So the question for us is: Who is the Spirit calling in our time?  
In our community?

And how do we come to agreement on this?

You know, the book of Acts is a good news story. The disciples preach and thousands of people are converted. The disciples do miracles and hundreds join the movement.

There is very little disagreement in the narrative.

But there was disagreement.

Peter and Paul often disagreed. I had a New Testament professor in seminary who suggested that Peter and Paul had times they couldn't be in the same room. They disagreed so much about how the church should go – they couldn't stand each other.

Can you think, can you bring to mind, two Christian leaders who disagree so much they can't stand to be in the same room?

But at the end of the day it wasn't about Peter and Paul – and it's not about us either. It is the Spirit who is driving this movement. It is God who is calling people to come and who is growing the church.

In the early church, the disciples struggled keep up when God said GO. And that might be the same for us at times.

It might feel inconvenient. We might feel tired. We might feel like there is too much going on. We might think next year, or the next, or when the new associate pastor is installed, or when we get our act together on a variety of ministry plans, or when...or when...or when...

But when God says GO, we have to Go. When God says, NOW is the time, we are called to agree and submit to God's plan. When the Spirit of God opens the doors of the church, it is our task to work with the Spirit.

Today we come to the table, that we might be nurtured, strengthened, equipped, to open ourselves to the Spirit's work – to Go when God says GO. To discern with the Spirit who is being called to come, and to whom we are called to open the doors. Who is out there, looking for an opportunity to come? Who is in our community, in need of the good news?

We are called to work with the Spirit and to open the doors of the church and welcome those whom the Spirit is calling – even here, even now, to join in the ministry to which God has called us and for which God is equipping us even now