

Reflections on Core Value: *Sustaining Community*

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I was 12 years old in 1984 and, as a Catholic, I chose the confirmation name Philip. I chose Philip because he was a church leader in acts of compassion (in Acts 7), and he was the “First evangelist”. And so this cycle of stories in the book of Acts has always had a special resonance for me, and has provided an interesting touchstone for exploring my faith over the next 35 years. So I have a lot I could say; but, I will limit it to reflections on today’s Core Value: **Sustaining Community**: we are a compassionate, connected community that is respectful of our differences. I hope, at the least, to create space for our own contemplation and wrestling with scripture and lives forged in love.

--This man is an Ethiopian. He is the first recorded non-Jewish convert to this new Jesus movement. Remarkably, his blackness is unremarked, because Race was a much later construct in history—However his Ethnicity would have been remarkable to any early hearer of this story. And so, his non-Jewishness is underscored. The first Christians did not believe that this new allegiance to Jesus was open to non-Jewish people. This was in fact the driving force behind most of the New Testament we have today: how can this fundamentally Jewish religion be available to non-Jews; how can we have common table with people who eat pork, don’t have circumcision, and don’t honor the covenants of Moses? And yet, Philip is driven by compassion to overlook these very real questions, and find that Jesus’ love can bring unity in spite of all differences.

--The man is a eunuch. Now we are not entirely certain whether this means the man was a castrati, or whether he was a homosexual, or possibly both; each of these possibilities existed for people who served in positions of proximity to royal women. Either way, and this caused me much consideration as a conservative evangelical, he was not what we call CIS male heterosexual. Almost every religious system of the time would have marginalized this man from full participation in their rites, and yet, we have recorded for our edification and contemplation, for all time, this story. And not only that, this story, I may repeat, holds the honor of being the first such conversion of a non-Jewish person.

--So, there can be very real differences in our thoughts as to how we interact with the world in all sorts of ways—but in the church, in the kingdom of Jesus, our first allegiance is to love those around us. It is in this sort of compassion and fundamental re-identification that Jesus' Family of Believers are able to have unity where otherwise we might not. Are we shaped first and foremost by the Spirit exercising Jesus' love in and through us? Or are we shaped by some other thing? And if that thing causes us to reject those God has put beside us to love?

--Please realize that I was raised in 1970s and 80s conservative, christian, small town, America. Dealing with the “problem” of homosexuality and alternative gendering was not one of simply changing my mind. But I HAD to wrestle with the reality of scripture here, and I found that the motivating factor was compassion, love, and solidarity with another who was seeking to know God. I could have all manner of conclusions about the rightness or wrongness of this or that sexuality, but in the end, being motivated by compassion in close relationship with people,

being challenged to PERSONALLY be the love and care of God to those God put before me...well, that was no different than what Philip did here. Exercising compassion changed me, it made me see things in scripture that were always there, but I had not fully seen before.

--The early church was not quick to realize these things, so we need to be compassionate toward those who may be slow to change. It was quite awhile after Philip told this story to the home church that the consensus that non-Jews (Gentiles) could participate in this new Kingdom of Jesus. In fact, it took a terrifying dream, and Peter being in the presence of a Roman Centurion —the absolute worst kind of oppressor Gentile—who, un-provoked, began to speak in the tongues of the Holy Spirit, and then asks to be baptized. It took a convention of leaders to finally decide after this event that, if God so clearly put God's Spirit upon this man, who were we to say otherwise. And then another few years for this to be truly agreed upon at the Council of Jerusalem—and EVEN THEN, they marginalize the event and delegate this new upstart, Paul, to be assigned for these gentiles. And EVEN THEN for the next 30 years there was constant division in the church about how Jews and Gentiles could share the communion table together —not when these dirty gentiles ate pork, and dishonored holy days, nor when these superstitious Jews couldn't understand that there was no reality behind the “gods” before whom the meat at marketplaces was butchered. I speak of a lot of things here, but please hear: these differences were HUGE and lasted for the first

50 years of the church (and longer, if you are a student of history)--yet always God was patient and the church was challenged to find unity first in Love, and by the compassion of Christ who gave up all of his rights for the sake of love and the creation of a non-divided people. It is a fact that this issue, in particular, was the primary reason the New Testament exists in the form and content we have today.

--My final point of reflection: The passage of Isaiah 53, which the eunuch was reading, and Philip interprets for him, is about how through the Suffering of the Servant, healing will come to others. Or restated: Jesus' compassion, displayed in his suffering in solidarity with a suffering, marginalize humanity, brings healing and restoration to those of being shaped into his image. How fortuitous that a man who was so deeply handicapped by others: his sexuality taken, his body mutilated, and his spirit marginalized from all religious experience—that such a person should **just happen** to be hearing a message from the God who became like him, and was willingly marginalized and mutilated. And through this somehow conquers the oppression of empire and even of death itself, brings new life, healing, community, and TRUE religious experience.

The definition of compassion is “to suffer together, or, to suffer or feel with.” God's love reveals itself in compassion, and we are in made in the image of God. My hope for this church—and the Core value upon which we do well to consider—is that we look first to the unity we have been given in God's love, that we are motivated first from compassion, and that in this, we can maintain the respect, connection, and love for those who are different from us. Unity where such distinctions exist is surely a sign that God's love is among us.