

The Law Bender and The Law Transcender
By Reverend Katie Hambrick

How many of y'all are aware that I did not take an introduction to preaching class? Yes, it is supposed to be required, and yes, somehow I managed to not take one during my time at seminary. I brought this up to the senior staff at my former church, and they agreed to help me. One summer we did a preaching lab. This was where I was required to pick a scripture, write a sermon, and preach it in front of the five members of senior staff.

The scripture I picked was none other than today's passage. Around this time, many celebrities were taking their own lives, so I really felt drawn to the idea of somehow tying mental health into this sermon. I myself had Generalized Anxiety Disorder. I had a childhood friend who was lost to mental illness. I felt that I could somehow portray this story as a metaphor for how the church should approach mental illness, as opposed to my upbringing in church, where mental illness was seen as a taboo thing we don't talk about.

And all I can say about that sermon was at least I tried. This sermon was so bad that it was even brought up at my ordination. My mentor and senior pastor at Myers Park, Ben Boswell, said at my ordination that he had

never met a seminary student so brave as to try to tackle such a complex issue as mental illness in their first sermon.

I know this was his polite way of referencing my ambitious yet failed task, but I will accept it. And do not worry, that is not what I am preaching today. Today's scripture is about overcoming cultural and social boundaries to love in the manner that God has called us too. We could talk about all the different divides in this story- racial, socioeconomic, sexual, religious, and so on and so on. All of the rules that should have kept this interaction from happening.

That is why when I was looking for what scripture to preach on today, I picked this one. Not to redeem my reputation from my first sermon. Y'all would not have even known about that if I didn't tell you...

But because young Katie wasn't exactly wrong. Though, as extremely ambitious as she was, the purpose of this story is to remind us that loving God and our neighbor with no bounds is more important than anything.

This includes society's laws, cultural laws, religious laws, and so on.

We know according to the Old Testament that there was a law established by God. This law was meant to help keep the covenant between God and the people holy. One of these laws stated that a castrated man could not come into the Temple and worship God. Keep in

mind that includes eunuchs, who most likely were taken as young boys or teenagers and had this done to them against their will. They were seen as unclean and almost as if they were freaks.

Yet, in today's passage we see that the Ethiopian had gone to Jerusalem to worship. Most likely he was only allowed so far in the temple due to his race and being a eunuch. He probably knew that as well before going, but wanted to go and worship. The bravery...

Then, Philip finds him on the road and the man is reading from the scroll of Isaiah. He is reading about the servant of the Lord, the one who suffers for good, and he is reading it aloud. Philip approaches him and asks him if he understands what he is reading. To which the Ethiopian replies, "how can I unless someone guides me?"

Philip and the Ethiopian should not have this interaction. There are so many social and cultural barriers that should keep them from being able to engage beyond the surface level, yet here we see them both extending hospitality to each other and engaging in potentially life changing dialogue. This is a sacred moment. A kairos moment- kairos is the Greek word Paul uses to describe sacred moments of time. Times where the spirit of God is able to do some of its best work. I wonder how many times we let moments pass that could be kairos to us?

The interaction between Philip and the Ethiopian reminds us and teaches us that:

“If God is the law-maker, then God is also the law-bender, the law transcender, who both places limits on the faithful and inspires them to challenge those limits when right relationships with God and neighbor are at stake.”¹

Our rules and laws that we put on each other as a society does not matter as much to God as how we love people. Time and time again, we see Jesus setting the model for us by breaking down barriers and reaching out to those who society rules as unworthy. We even see Jesus' model for us going against the religious laws and legalism that the Pharisees hold so tight. Mike mentioned that in his sermon last week.

The first story that came to my mind when thinking about the example Jesus set by doing the very same thing Philip is was the lady at the well in John 4. Jesus is traveling, but taking a slight rest at the well. A lady comes up and she is gathering water from the well. Jesus asks her to get some water for him as well. She is stunned because not only is he a man talking to a woman, but she is Samaritan and he is a Jewish man. On top of that,

¹ Brown Taylor, Barbara. Feasting on the Word, Year B volume 2. Page 459

she had been married multiple times and was considered a shameful person and an outcast for that in society.

Jesus asks her for water, and tells her in return that she will receive the everlasting water. He even reveals to her that he knows all about her and her past, yet is extending to her the same invitation to the everlasting water as he is everyone else. There is no social barrier, cultural barrier, or creed that can keep anyone from the water. The water is not ours to give. She then goes and tells other people about Jesus and the amazing things he had said— it could be argued she was the first female preacher of our faith.

Normally when today's scripture from acts is preached, we see Philip described as an exceptional person in this moment. However, Philip is not an exceptional person, christian, or jew. He is simply doing good ministry. He is simply following the example that Jesus set out before us.

He does not shy away from the man because of his status or him being a eunuch. He is not condemning the Ethiopian. Philip is not telling the Ethiopian everything that makes him unfit according to cultural laws. Philip is not judging him. He is not telling the Ethiopian that he better shape up and change his ways if he is to be a part of the faith.

Philip is simply listening to that little nudge in his gut and asks the man if he understands what he is reading. A simple question to the reader, but how many people would take the time to ask the Ethiopian a question like that? Much less engage with him in dialogue?

When Philip was talking to the official about the passage in Isaiah that he was reading, Philip knew that three chapters later, that Isaiah would write, “that the day will come when there will be in the house of Israel a place for the foreigner as well as for the eunuch.”

This dialogue between the two men leads to the Ethiopian wanting to get baptized. They see water and he says what is to keep me from being baptized and then went right away! Philip baptized him right then and there, thus creating a place in the house of Israel for the foreigner and the eunuch.

This story has always been intimidating to me, even before writing the bad sermon. I think the reason is because we really see an example of what it means to be a Christ follower in Philip's actions. He is not exceptional as I said earlier, however he is following an exceptional path, as we all are when we decide to become Christ followers.

This path asks us to lay aside our biases and embedded cultural beliefs. This path asks us to get uncomfortable. This path asks us to love

beyond barriers and to engage in right relationships with each other. By doing this, we grow. We grow personally, we grow closer to God, and we grow closer to each other. This path is the one where there is room for the foreigner and the eunuch. All of us have a seat at the table.

This Summer as we hear from our sisters and brothers in Christ, many from very different Christian traditions, may we keep an open mind. May we see how God uses different tools and beliefs to talk to each of us in unique ways.

This Summer, may our hearts be renewed in love. May our hearts fill with the love of God, who limits us and inspires us to break the boundaries and laws set on us- to love harder and deeper. May we continue to be a Philip people. May we embrace the path that Jesus set before us and continue to be known for our love. Amen