

A NEW THING: New Margins

Acts 8:26-40

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I.

During the late 1980s, which seems like yesterday to some and Biblical times to others, First Baptist Church began discussing whether to nominate women to serve as deacons. Deacons are servant leaders set apart by the congregation to serve the congregation. Until then, only men were allowed to serve as deacons here.

Through prayer, the study of scripture and the Baptist tradition, and the work of the Holy Spirit, First Baptist concluded that the Bible sets the standards for the lifestyle and character of deacons. However, we determined that there are no standards for what gender a deacon should be. The Bible gives us at least one example of a woman deacon in Romans 16. Early Baptist ancestors, as early as 1611, accepted the practice of women deacons, and other Baptist congregations in Missouri and the US had women deacons when we were seeking to discern this for ourselves.

So, on September 29, 1991, the members of First Baptist Church voted to ordain its first four female deacons – Kathren Choate, Lory Feeler, Suzette Heiman, and Grace McReynolds.

Not everyone in the church agreed with this decision. The vote was 156 to 76 in favor of ordaining women deacons. After the decision, most continued to call FBC home, while some left. For some who had never considered women in this role, when they saw the names of the women nominated, it was clear these women were already serving this faith community in the ways deacons are called to serve. As 1 Timothy 3 outlines, they were respectable, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, and not greedy for money. They held fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. They'd been examined and tested as faithful followers of Jesus. They were, above all, servants to this body of believers, a helper of many, and a support to the pastoral staff. If a man or woman among us has these qualities, what prevents them from serving as deacons? This church said, "Nothing." It was our belief, then and now, as quoted from the minutes of that 1991 business meeting, that FBC "is an inclusive church that allows people who live a consistent life in their Christian pilgrimage to serve in every area of ministry, regardless of their gender."

Now, some feared this decision would be a slippery slope. Perhaps it was, but who's to say a slick slope might not be the only way the Spirit gets us from the fixed and lofty road we refuse to abandon to the place God is leading?

Twelve years later, in 2003, First Baptist ordained its first woman to Gospel Ministry. Twenty years after that, in 2023, First Baptist Church called its first female lead pastor.

Through the leadership of the Spirit and the discernment of this body, through the faithful study of scripture and obedience to the ways of Jesus Christ, we determined God was doing a new thing among us. In this Eastertide season, as we look at the early church in the book of Acts, we see story after story of the Spirit doing new things among those first followers of the resurrected Christ.

II.

It was on a wilderness road, a slope if you will, where we find our Acts 8 text today. On the wilderness road, a chariot tumbles along. The passenger, a respected and high-ranking official from the court of the Queen of Ethiopia, is deep in thought as he reads the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. We don't know how he got the scroll, but having his own scripture tells us he is a man of wealth and education. We know he was returning from the temple in Jerusalem, having traveled there to worship. Perhaps he was a God-fearer, one who loved the God of Israel, or at least was curious about this God. But he could not be a full convert to the Jewish faith.

You see, he was different. He was a man far from home, a foreigner, but that wasn't unusual in a city like Jerusalem, where thousands traveled from all over. He was a high-ranking official in a foreign royal court, so his clothes and style would have stood out as someone significant from out of town. But again, people of all means came to the Temple, so that would not have entirely excluded him.

The troubling thing, the thing that made this man indeed an outsider, was his sexual status. He was a eunuch. A eunuch was a castrated male, typically neutered before puberty. His sexual status was often not his choice. It was determined for him by birth or those in power so he could be trusted to perform social functions for royalty. Eunuchs were near power, but they were also stereotyped as sexually immoral and marginalized.

The temple in Jerusalem was a highly gendered space. Men were in one space, and women and children were in another. There was an outermost area designated for some foreigners, Gentiles, or non-Jews. So, it makes me wonder, as one who was considered neither male nor female by society and a foreigner, what space in the Temple would welcome him warmly? Most likely, no space.

Deuteronomy 23 of the Hebrew Scriptures reads that there are three kinds of people not welcomed in the temple – those from certain foreign countries, those born of an unlawful union, and those who are sexually mutilated. Eunuchs.

But on the long, dusty ride back home through the wilderness, the man isn't reading Deuteronomy. He is reading Isaiah, and the prophet gives a more hopeful word. Not only does Isaiah announce that God will "recover the remnant that is left of his people ... from Ethiopia" (Isa. 11:11), but God also promises that "eunuchs who keep my sabbaths" will be welcome in the house of God and will receive "a name better than sons and daughters" (Isa. 56:4-5).ⁱ

So, which is it? Deuteronomy or Isaiah? In or out? Is he welcome in the household or assembly of the Lord, or is he not? You can find a Bible verse for either side. Perhaps that is part of his confusion as he reads. Acts tells us he is confused about Isaiah 53, where he reads: "Like a sheep, he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation, justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."

Maybe he read these words and heard a bit of his story as an Eunuch. "Silent before its shearer?" Yes. "In humiliation, justice was denied him." Yes. Could this passage be talking about someone like him? And if not, who and what does it mean?

III.

Along that dusty wilderness road comes Philip. Philip was one of the first Greek-speaking deacons set apart by the church to serve the church. As the Spirit of God challenged previously held beliefs and laws about who's in and out, there were growing pains as diverse people were welcomed into God's family. So, seven people were set apart as deacons to help care specifically for the Gentile members of the church.

Amid all this, the Spirit of God prompts Philip to head out down a wilderness road, where he sees the chariot with the Ethiopian Eunuch sitting inside, reading the scroll of Isaiah. The eunuch welcomes Philip to sit beside and teach him. Philip doesn't give him hoops to jump through, and he says nothing about his sexual status. Philip shares with him about Jesus, the one to whom the Isaiah passage refers. Philip teaches that the prophecies in Isaiah have been revealed and fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and this is good news for Philip, and it is good news for this eunuch from Ethiopia. And after hearing about Jesus, the eunuch said to Philip, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him."

IV.

My pastor friend, Tyler Tankersley, told a story about when he got a call at his church on a weekday afternoon. There was a voice on the other end of the line, heavy with emotion, and he said, "Pastor, I have no idea if you can help me. I'll be honest: My family doesn't go to church anywhere. I googled the nearest church, and yours came up. My mother is in hospice care. She is dying, and she is afraid. When she was a little girl, she went to church, and one day, she went forward and walked the aisle, but she was afraid of water, so she was never baptized. We asked her this morning if there was anything else she wanted to do before she dies, and she said, "I want to be baptized." Pastor, could we baptize our mom at your church?"

Tyler met with the deacons that night and told them about the phone call. He told them that he looked up the rules regarding baptism in their church's governing documents, and the rules say that baptism is reserved for those seeking membership in the church. A few deacons said, "This is a tough situation, but those are the rules. We need to stick to our rules and what they say." That was until Jim spoke up. Jim was an introverted man who rarely said anything but had

grown up in that church. He got up, and all he said was this, “If we don’t baptize this woman, who are we?” With that, the discussion was over.

Tyler stepped out to call the man to tell him what the deacons had decided. The man asked Tyler if they could do the baptism early that next morning. Tyler said, “Sir, it takes a while to fill up the pool, and the heater takes three or four days to get the water to a comfortable temperature.” The man said, “I don’t think you understand. My mom doesn’t have three to four days. The hospice nurses have told us that it could be any time.”

Tyler returned to the deacons’ meeting and told them what the man said. Tyler said there was this moment he would never forget when the Holy Spirit nudged them to a wilderness road. There was a moment of silence. Then, without anybody saying anything, all of them stood up, and Bob went to turn on the water for the baptismal pool so it could fill up overnight. Carol started grabbing the towels they would need the next morning. Their resident farmer, Deacon Keith, went to his place and brought back two livestock water trough warmers, placing them in the baptismal pool. Becky went to the computer to print off an official baptismal certificate.

Early the next day, the family showed up. Three hospice nurses came with them. They all walked into the sanctuary. The nurses helped the woman into a white robe that barely hung onto her thin frame. A nurse had taped up the port where her medicine was being given for pain. Tyler waded into the pool as the woman’s son carried her into that warm water. And as her son gently dipped his mother into the water, Tyler told her that she was loved and that she belonged to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. And he told her that she was buried with Christ in baptism and that she would be raised to walk in newness of life.

That mom died later that day.

V.

Deacon Tom said, “If we don’t baptize this woman, who are we?”

Deacon Philip said, “If we don’t baptize this man, who are we?”

Philip hadn’t imagined baptizing an Ethiopian eunuch, but Philip obeyed God in the small things—like heading down a wilderness road for no reason other than the Spirit’s lead. These Christians didn’t initiate this. The early church wasn’t swayed or caving to culture. As Barbara Brown Taylor notes, “It’s not that there aren’t limits, but God can and will transcend them when it is appropriate and fruitful for the furtherance of our relationships with God and neighbor.” The Spirit led early Christians like Philip into the oddest situations with the most surprising people. They, and we, follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, and there are times when the Spirit leads us down wilderness roads beyond our rules of who is in and who is out. This is the story of the Book of Acts. The Spirit prompts and pushes to expand the gospel message beyond every possible boundary and barrier humanity creates. Because you see, the good news of Jesus is intended for everyone.

In our complicated, real world, it is tempting to keep out what we do not understand and those who are different from us and to say no when God prompts us down a wilderness road. But on that road, there may be a chariot. And in that chariot may be an earnest seeker who invites us to sit by them and tell them about the grace and love of Jesus. And if they are not included, who are we?

My family joined this church in December 1989, not quite two years before you said yes to women deacons. Not one of us, most certainly not me, would have imagined how God would weave our stories together 35 years later. How deeply grateful I am to serve a congregation with a long history of obedience to the Spirit, even when the Spirit leads us down wilderness roads. May we, with courage, faithfulness, and obedience, continue to follow wherever the Spirit leads for the glory of God and the good of the world.

Because if we don't, who are we?

Melissa Hatfield © 2024

All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*. Westminster John Knox Press: 2011, 456.