

WATER IS THICKER THAN BLOOD

Carl Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

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1 Samuel 16:1-13; Acts 8:26-40

“As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look! Here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’”

Acts 8:36

“Blood is thicker than water.”

You’ve heard that old saying, I’m sure. Those who study the history of English proverbs have traced it back as far as Germany in the middle ages. What it means, of course, is that family ties are among the strongest forces in the world.

Some say “Home is where you hang your hat,” but I prefer another definition, that of the poet Robert Frost:

**“Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.”**

Frost goes on to say:

**“I should have called it
Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.”¹**

Never mind what you’ve done or how far you’ve strayed. Home is that place where the porch light is always on, where your name is called out with joy as you cross the threshold, where they know that blood is thicker than water.

¹“The Death of the Hired Man.”

Not everyone, of course, has had that kind of positive experience with home and family. There is such a thing as a dysfunctional family. There are some who've had to leave their families of origin for their own health or well-being. There are others who never knew their birth-families, who were adopted and raised by others.

But these are the exceptions that prove the rule. For most of the human race, through all of human history, the kinship of blood — or, what we would call today “genetics” — is a powerful unifying force.

Beyond our immediate families, there is a larger genetic kinship. The old word for it is “race” — and we know, from the intense debate over immigration law that's taking place in our nation, and other nations besides, how powerful is that tie. Powerful also is the tendency to distrust the stranger in our midst, the person who looks different, the person whose genetic identity is obviously different from our own.

Today's New Testament lesson is a story of a man who can claim no family ties at all in Israel. The eighth chapter of Acts tells of “an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury.” Among his own people, this is a man of immense personal power: yet,

to the residents of Judea, he's an outsider, an alien.

The Apostle Philip encounters him, and in a very unique way. Philip is personally guided to this man by the angel of the Lord.

The angel directs Philip to get up immediately, leave the city of Jerusalem and begin walking south, on a road that heads through the wilderness. Philip's walking this lonely road on foot, when he hears the rumble of wheels and the footfall of horses behind him. It's a man, riding in some sort of wagon or cart. Luke uses the word "chariot," — which we know as a two-wheeled military vehicle — but it can't be like that, because this man is seated, not standing. He's also got a driver, because he gives orders for the vehicle to stop. This is obviously a rich and powerful individual. He's probably got an entourage of servants with him as well.

The man's holding in his hands a valuable treasure that no ordinary person would own. It's a scroll — a book, in other words. And books were exceedingly rare in that day. It's a book of the Bible: the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. As the Ethiopian's riding along, he's reading aloud from that book.

Philip hears the familiar words, and feels a sudden impulse to run alongside the cart (later he would come to realize that impulse came from the Holy Spirit). Before the man's bodyguards have a chance to push Philip aside, he shouts out a

question: “Do you understand what you’re reading?”

“Not unless someone explains it,” the man replies. He beckons to Philip to come sit beside him as he travels.

The man is truly a foreigner — as foreign as foreign can be, to the Hebrew mind. He hails from Ethiopia, in Africa. His dark skin instantly identifies him as one who is not of the tribes of Israel.

Not only that, he’s a eunuch — half a man, according to the Hebrew way of looking at things. At an early age, this man was rendered surgically unable to have children. It was done so he could carry out a special duty.

Luke tells us he’s a member of the court of the Queen of Ethiopia. He’s her Secretary of the Treasury: in charge of her entire fortune. It was a common thing, in some countries of the ancient world, to place a eunuch in charge of the treasury — and for a very practical reason. A man who was unable to father children would have no heirs to whom to he could leave his personal fortune. No heirs to provide for, less temptation to steal.

It doesn’t sound like such a thing would happen with this man, in any event, because he’s a pious individual, presumably a man of principle. He’s from Ethiopia, but he obviously has a deep affinity with Judaism.

There are, in fact, Jews from Ethiopia: black Africans who claim a very

ancient lineage. How their ancestors came to be Jewish is lost to history — and they were all but unknown to other Jews until the twentieth century. The modern state of Israel has honored them with the Right of Return: the right to emigrate to Israel. It's fascinating to think that perhaps this ancient traveler from the book of Acts is a member of that lost Ethiopian Jewish community.

The scroll he's reading, in the cart, is one of the famed "Servant Songs" from Isaiah, a passage Christians have traditionally considered to foretell the suffering of Christ:

**"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth..."**

The question the Ethiopian asks Philip is one that has fascinated Hebrew scholars down through the centuries: "Just who is this suffering servant of whom Isaiah speaks?" (I can remember debating that question in seminary.)

Philip, of course, has an answer readily at hand: the prophesied servant is Jesus of Nazareth, and the sufferings are his torment on the cross. Philip goes on to tell the Ethiopian "the good news about Jesus," which surely includes the resurrection as well.

Philip obviously made a deep impression on him. Looking at a small pond of water by the side of the road, the Ethiopian says to Philip, "What is to prevent me

from being baptized?” Which is exactly what happens.

So why would the angel of the Lord direct Philip to just the right road, at just the right time, to intercept this foreign traveler as he begins his journey home?

In all likelihood it's because here is a man whose heart is uniquely receptive to the gospel message.

How do we know that? Because of *who he is*.

We know nothing of the reason for this man's long journey to Jerusalem — whether it was an affair of state or a personal religious pilgrimage. But we do know he would not have received a warm welcome at the Temple. He was very likely returning home in great disappointment.

Now, maybe that had something to do with his race, but far more likely it was because of the fact that he was a eunuch. The law of Moses specifically prohibits a person of his physical condition from entering the Temple. The scribes and pharisees would have shunned him on the streets; the learned rabbis, with whom he longed to discourse, would have spared him little time.

He had the personal wealth to buy a scroll — a handwritten manuscript of the book of Isaiah — a souvenir of great price. But alas, he had no one to discuss it with.

This Ethiopian is one of the first Gentile converts to Christianity. Until now, the followers of Jesus have seen themselves as a reform movement within Judaism. Now it's beginning to dawn on them that they're called to a broader mission: serving God who, in Christ, is reconciling the world to himself. Not only Israel, but the world.

In the days to come, Cornelius the Roman Centurion will be converted, and Peter will have his famous vision of a great sheet being lowered down from heaven, filled with all kinds of food, clean and unclean. "What God has made clean," a voice from heaven will say, "You must not call profane." Yet it's Philip, who has the courage to approach the Ethiopian court official along the road, who really begins the mission to the Gentiles.

"Blood is thicker than water," they say. That's what the scribes and pharisees in Jerusalem believed: that you had to belong to the chosen race in order to be saved. Yet in baptizing the Ethiopian, Philip is proving the opposite to be true, for followers of Jesus. Water — the baptismal water of the gospel of Christ — is thicker than blood.

The early Christians learned this lesson rather early. It was no time at all before Paul was off on his missionary journeys, spreading the good news far and wide among the Greeks and Romans. He had a little trouble, at first, obtaining the

seal of approval from his fellow Apostles in Jerusalem, but soon Paul's vision of inclusiveness prevailed. Three centuries later, far more Christians would be Gentiles than of Jewish origin, and the Roman Emperor himself would be bowing the knee to Christ.

Down through the many centuries of the church, the good news of Jesus Christ has reached out to include countless groups of outsiders...the put-out, the put-down, the discarded, the set-upon of our world. The church at its best has reached out and ministered to all the children of God.

Not that this is always easy. It's not. The history of this congregation is evidence of that.

One of my jobs as a new pastor is learning that history, which includes the vibrant African-American community that was once located here. This church welcomed the members of that community into this Sanctuary — although, in those early years, they were expected to sit in the balcony: which, I'm told, was much larger than it is today, extending along the side walls as well as the back. The segregation continued even in death: members of the African-American community were buried in the separate Black Cemetery.

We need to repent of that aspect of our history. Racial segregation was — and is — wrong. It fails to honor the fundamental unity of the Body of Christ. At

the same time, though, I think it's a beautiful thing that this congregation continues to take responsibility for maintaining the Black Cemetery. We do so not as a monument to segregation, but rather to honor the memory of those who are buried there — who were, after all, a part of this church and community. It's my hope that we'll be able to raise sufficient endowment funds to properly preserve and maintain both our cemeteries.

The Black Cemetery has a role to play in reminding us of our history, and in fostering education and dialogue as we seek to move beyond racism, as a nation. We acknowledge the mistakes of the past, even as we seek to move forward into the future with hope.

By the grace of God, water is thicker than blood. The waters of baptism, through which we, as Christians, have all passed, are a potent symbol of the all-inclusive love of God. Through that love, human-constructed barriers come tumbling down. One day, we will all stand before the Lord; then it will not matter what degrees we've earned, what language we speak (or don't speak), what income level we've achieved, what ancestry we can claim. The only advantage we will own in that hour is the gracious intervention of the son of God: who will display the marks in his hands and his feet, to prove he died for us.

That's the way it's going to be. So, isn't it about time we started living, in the here and now, as though it were true?

Let us pray:

**God of justice:
we give you thanks that,
because of what our Lord has done for us,
we are accepted:
wholly, completely, unconditionally.
Help us, for our part,
to extend that acceptance to others.
Cultivate in us powerful gifts of hospitality:
that all your children may know they are welcome here.
In the name of Jesus we pray.**