

Acts 8: 26-40
Philip and the Ethiopian

Have you ever read a piece of scripture that gave you goosebumps? That just sweeps you along and leaves you in awe? I hope you have.

For me, this passage is like that.

I've read it many times, and each time, I either get goosebumps, or tears, or I want to stand up and cheer. It is a marvellous piece of writing, and a chapter in the life of the early church that is as fresh and startling today as it was then.

We've been reading along in Acts since Easter....and a read through the book is very exciting. It tells the story of the infant church from what happened right after Jesus' resurrection, right through to when Paul was in prison in Rome....the place where he would die.

It's the story of how the church grew; from a frightened handful of followers who had deserted their leader when he was put to death, from that, to a force that turned the world upside down. Growing in numbers, and growing in their understanding of the new and uncharted places where their Risen Lord was leading.

I want to begin by a quick sweep through the book until we land at this passage, but first I want to ask you: What are your limits? I mean by that the limits to your faith....if you were to express the Gospel as you understand it, put it out there and build a fence around it, saying "once you've gone outside of THIS, it is no longer the Gospel of Jesus Christ – DO you have limits like that? If so, what would that fence look like? The lines that you would draw, the fence you would build.... beyond which you are not willing to to, and the crossing of which is for you abandoning the gospel. Is there something that would make you say: "if you think this, or do this, believe this, you have crossed the line and are no longer Christian"?

What are the limits?

THAT is what the baby church is facing every day in this book. The church in ever age has had to ask itself the same questions.

And that's what the United Church has been asking itself for a long time now. DO we have limits? Are there fences, if not what does that mean, and if so where are the limits and who gets to say what they are?

It's one of the questions every generation has to deal with in some ways. For us, the UCC, it was 1936 by the time we decided that, in spite of what the Bible says, we would ordain women. That might seem like a no brainer now, but it wasn't then, and it's still a question in some churches.

And just when we think we have God's love all figured out it seems to me God says – ok what about THIS? And we're faced again with an issue that makes us think and pray it out all over again.

How far does God's love go? Are there limits to the Gospel of Christ? IS there a fence, and if so what is it and where

it's very exciting.

And my reading of Acts is that it's the story of the Spirit of the Risen Christ leading – moving the fence posts out and out and out again

So let me do my two minute synopsis of the book up until now.

It's written by Luke. The gospel of Luke and the book of Acts is a two-volume set. It begins with the ascension, that is, Jesus being taken up into heaven, and two angels promising his return. The disciples return to

In chapter 2 we read of the giving of the gift of the Spirit and how Jesus' followers, as a sign that they had received the Holy Spirit, spoke so that all people heard the Gospel in the language they understood best.

Peter preaches a sermon, the last line of which is this:

(vs 39)

And chapter 2 ends with one of Luke's famous summing up snapshots (43- end)

Chapter 3 tells of the healing of the lame man by Peter and John – this is Jesus' followers doing the things that He himself had done. Some controversy follows that, and that takes us through chapter 4...where the authorities, frightened and threatened by the disciples, order them not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus again.

They say: 4: 19&20

And at the end of that chapter, another of Luke's snapshots. (32-37)

Chapter 5 begins with the story of Ananias and Sapphira (read it later – it's good for lunchtime discussion)

then the apostles are put in prison, an angel lets them out and an uproar ensues....it's here we meet Gamaliel. Read about him too. One of my Biblical heroes.

Chapter 6 tells of the choosing of the 7 deacons because the work was becoming too much for the 12. It begins with a complaint of racial discrimination. This is one of their first challenges. One ethnic group, the Hellenists, (Greek speaking Jews) says that their widows are being overlooked in the daily distribution. The apostles respond. How? By appointing 7 men OF THAT ETHNIC ORIGIN - to respond to the needs they had, unawares, been overlooking. There are at least a couple of sermons in there. The deacons they appointed are: Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicholas.

One of the deacons appointed is Stephen. The next chapter highlights him. He becomes the first Christian martyr – stoned to death for preaching the gospel.

Chapter 8 begins by telling about Paul, who was persecuting Christians and how after Stephen's death, they all scattered into the countryside....and began to preach in Samaria. SAMARIA. Foreign territory. The land of their enemies. Outcasts.

It tells us about Simon, who tried to buy the Holy Spirit. He did that because he saw the people of

Samaria had been accepting the gospel and being baptized. (and it's at this point that the fence posts move out....because until then, no Samaritans had ever been included. Could a Samaritan be baptized? Many would have said no. Not the right religion, not the right race....but the Holy Spirit leads, the circle is drawn a little wider, the fence posts get pulled up and moved out a bit...

First, it was only Jews in the church. Then Hellenists, now Samaritans...will this never stop? Are they going to let ANYBODY in? Are there no standards? No limits? What's next?

Well...let's see.

First Jews. Then Hellenists. Then Samaritans. AND NOW

READ THE TEXT

This man is a foreigner. He is black. He is a God-fearer, an asker of questions – and a eunuch. A castrated man.

Deuteronomy 23:1 expressly forbids that a eunuch be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.

So.

Can you see what's happening here? The church has been struggling up until now with who can be part of it. What are the limits. They moved the fence posts out for the Hellenists. Again for the Samaritans.

And now

the eunuch says

WHAT IS TO PREVENT ME FROM BEING BAPTIZED?

And this is the moment that gives me goosebumps because Philip knows and we know the answer to that. There is MUCH to prevent him, including the outright statement forbidding it, in Scripture. His race, his religion, and his sexuality are all things despised by that culture and by the religious traditions of the people.

What is going through his head at that moment? There is no one to consult, no precedent, this is brand new territory here.

What is to prevent me from being baptized?

And as that question hangs in the air, and Philip and you and I know the answer

the story continues.

Verse 38

And another fence post falls

and the Spirit of God moves on, free and gracious, and the church recognizes a false boundary when it sees one.

May the same be said of us.

Amen.