



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: May 3, 2009

God's Boundless Mercy, Robert B. Culp

Acts 8: 26-40

Fred Craddock describes in an arresting way his very first failure as a parish pastor. It occurred when he was still a seminary student, and was serving a small church in East Tennessee, about 20 miles from Oak Ridge. He writes,

Oak Ridge had gotten into place, the atomic energy thing was booming, and folk were coming and constructing that little town into a city. Folk were coming from everywhere, hard hat types, in tents and trailers and little temporary huts, and all kinds of lean-to's. And they covered those beautiful little hills with temporary quarters, wash hanging out on the fences, and little kids crying through the muddy places where all these things were parked. And my little church, aristocratic little church white frame building, beautiful little church ... was nearby.

Oh, it was a nice little church that had wonderful people, and I called the Board together and said, 'We need to reach out to those folks that are here. They just came in from everywhere, and they're fairly close, and here's our mission right in front of us.'

But the Chairman of the Board said, 'No, I don't think so.' And I asked, 'Why not?' 'Well,' he said, 'they won't fit in. After all, they're just here temporarily, living in those trailers and all.' And I replied, 'Well, yes, they're here temporarily, but they still need the Gospel. They need a church. Now why don't ...' 'No,' he said, 'I don't think so.'

The upshot of it all was a resolution. The resolution was offered by one of the relatives of the Chairman of the Board. And the resolution basically was this: 'Members will be admitted to this church only from families that own property in the county.' It was unanimous, except for my vote, and not only was I reminded that I couldn't vote, but I was told by everyone, 'They won't fit in. They just won't fit in.'

In our scripture passage this morning, we meet a man who doesn't fit in – a man excluded by the rules of religion. He is a Gentile, he is a foreigner, he is a man with black skin, and – most offensive of all – he is a eunuch. In the days of the early disciples and within the Jewish world of the first century, Scripture makes it clear that eunuchs are not allowed in the Temple. The text tells us that this particular eunuch has been to Jerusalem, attempting to worship and hang around the Temple, trying to fit in. But he was pushed out.

The obvious question is, "Why?" Why is he wasting his time with an institution, with a group of religious people, who simply don't want him?

The answer comes later in the story, when we find the eunuch reading the Bible. With great courage and

curiosity, our friend has followed the hunger of his heart. Since the institution won't feed him, and since the religiously devout won't acknowledge him, perhaps he can find what he is looking for somewhere else in the Scriptures. Sure enough, after patiently plodding through the Torah and the prophets, the eunuch is rewarded. He stumbles across an obscure passage in Isaiah that reads: "Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter ... by a perversion of justice he was taken away ... he was cut off from the land of the living ... although he had done no violence and had no deceit in his heart."

Here is someone else who has been denied a full life, someone else cut off from God and God's people, someone else condemned to have no generations to follow and remember him. And so the eunuch is curious. Who is this man who is being described? What has he done? What is going to happen to him? Of course, what he really wants to know is what is going to happen to himself, the eunuch. In those moments, it is as if the Scripture has become a mirror, and the eunuch recognizes his own face in the glass.

Now, it "just so happens" that Philip, one who has been commissioned to spread the Good News of Jesus, is riding by when the eunuch has his revelation. But, as is often the case when events in our lives "just happen," we sense that it is the Spirit of God that has brought these two individuals together. The eunuch insists that Philip explain to him the meaning of the Scripture. And Philip, who is responsive to the urgency of that moment, teaches the eunuch all that he knows. He explains that the Suffering Servant described by Isaiah has been fully embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, and that Jesus' death and resurrection has led to new life for all people.

We can almost see the eunuch's ears perk up. All people? All people? Does Philip really mean that? New life for all people? The eunuch impulsively jumps up and with great excitement, he proclaims, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" What is to prevent me from becoming part of this living, welcoming body of Christ? What indeed ... except that the eunuch doesn't fit in.

At this point we need to remember what the religious law says. No foreigners, no Gentiles, no black men, no eunuchs are to be included within God's exclusive people. So, what is Philip supposed to do? Well, he ends up doing what Jesus would do ... in fact, what Jesus did. Philip baptized the eunuch. He touched the untouchable, he accepted the unacceptable, he showed compassion to one whom society scorned and ostracized. Indeed, Philip embraced the spirit of the law, and thereby he transformed the letter of the law.

One of the great hymns of our faith is the one we will sing at the close of our service today, "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy." I understand that the word "mercy" in the Hebrew Bible comes from the word *hesed* ... which is often translated as "loving and steadfast kindness." Mercy also has the same root as the word "womb." So, mercy, in a way, is like God's womb ... a place where the promise of full life is protected and can grow in a soft, rich environment of "loving and steadfast kindness." Mercy is a womb where even a eunuch can be cherished and treasured. But if God's mercy is wide, and, as the hymn puts it, the "love of God ... broader than the measure of man's mind," what are the parameters of such wideness? How wide is God's mercy?

The answer to such a question is supplied by Jesus in memorable ways – through his storytelling and his healing touch, through his stooping low to embrace the outcasts and his relationships with those who draw near his side. How wide is God's mercy? As wide as a shepherd's heart that risks the lives of the 99 in order to find the one lost sheep. As wide as a vineyard owner who pays the one hour workers (the disabled and the homeless and the losers) as much as he pays the full-day workers (the vigorous and successful ones). How wide? As wide as those startling teachings of Jesus that invite us to turn the other cheek, to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us. How wide? As wide as the compassion that leads Jesus to eat with despised tax collectors and women with tainted reputations, and to share bread with outcasts rather than the power brokers in the community. How wide is God's mercy? Far wider than our own hearts have ever stretched.

But what about today, within our own society? For many years the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington D.C. has engaged in an extensive ministry to the urban poor, not only because of their downtown location, but also because of the compassion of their leaders through the years. They have an industrial kitchen with 9 staff people, and they run a feeding program every single day, including Christmas Day.

Some years ago, the leaders decided to open up their Sunday morning fellowship hour to the homeless in the area, and the congregation began an intentional program to invite these souls into their church parlor ... the same parlor that Lincoln used to visit when he worshiped in that historic sanctuary. Dozens of homeless now come most Sundays, drinking coffee and joining in impromptu hymn sings. From time to time there have been some bumps along the road, but the coffee hour ministry to the homeless continues. For that particular congregation, the wideness of God's mercy requires it.

It is not always smooth-sailing, by any stretch of the definition. I heard recently of another church that decided to sponsor a refugee family from Liberia. The unresolved issue had to do with where the family would live as they adjusted to life in America. The church owned a small parish house on its property that once served as the parsonage, but had been converted into office space and a small upstairs apartment used occasionally for youth fellowship discussions. To many of the church members, it seemed a rather logical choice that this house could serve as a temporary shelter for this Liberian family of five.

But others disagreed. They argued about liability and safety issues, and they raised other objections in which deep-seated prejudices and fears were thinly disguised. In the midst of this rather angry and bitter squabble, a woman who was an inactive member of the church – disillusioned by the hypocrisy of the institutional church – heard about the dispute and stepped forward. She offered rent-free the third floor of her own house as a temporary home for the refugees. To her way of thinking, to welcome strangers and foreigners is a pretty concrete form of God's mercy. And she said that the wider she could open her doors, the better.

One of the special joys that is mine every week is the fellowship hour that follows our worship service. In some of the churches I have served in the past, after the benediction was given, there was a pattern of most worshipers heading out the door immediately and going elsewhere for Sunday brunch. But here, most worshipers stay and linger around the central table in the parlor ... greeting one another and welcoming visitors, engaging in animated conversations and laughter-filled stories, helping in serving and cleaning up afterwards, and signing up to meet the Sunday morning needs of our church family. Now, sometimes we may slip up and fail to reach out to those we may not know.

But for the most part, it is gratifying to step back and see you all in action – making new friends, stooping low to greet little children and sharing with them some goodies from the table (where they belong), and deepening existing relationships with a tenderness and love that is wondrous to behold! But, you know, it is important for us in our gathering to celebrate not only all those who are present, but also to note those who are not with us, who are missing from our midst ... homebound or homeless, healthy or ill, nearby or far away or estranged ... and to ask ourselves what we can do to invite them to our sides and share the good news of God's love in Christ? What can we do to reach out to them, to make them feel welcome and accepted and at home?

This morning, Philip responds immediately to the eunuch, just as the scripture suggests. What does the Lord require? To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. We need to see how Philip responds not because the eunuch is different, but because the differences don't matter. Philip responds to the eunuch's excitement, curiosity, and hunger for God, and ... setting aside the narrow confines of purity ... he opens wide the doors of God's mercy.

How wide is God's mercy? As wide as it is necessary to make everyone feel welcome in the heart of God.