

Water Thicker than Blood

[Acts 8:26-31](#)

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We sometimes speak of the church as a family. It's made up of singles and marrieds, children and seniors, who are all brothers and sisters in the family of God the Father. Right. That's what the church is. But we have to remember that this family is unlike any we have ever had. For example, the Father keeps bringing home strangers. ***

Professor Stanley Hauerwas, theologian at Duke Divinity School, frequently reads to his students a letter written by concerned parents to a political official. The parents are complaining that after their son received the best education, at the best schools, he has now become involved in a weird religious sect. The members of this sect call upon him continually, they have given him a new set of strange friends, strange new vocabulary, and, well, he's just different. Worst of all, he keeps squandering his money on their projects. After reading this letter, Professor Hauerwas then asks his students to identify the cult. Some say the Moonies, or Khrisna, or another group. No, the letter was written by third century Roman parents, worried about their son's conversion to the Christian Church.

From the time that Jesus first asked, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers and sisters, but these who do the will of my Father in heaven?" the church has always existed as the other family in our lives. In this other family, we are bound together not by blood, but by the waters of baptism.

One of the important roles of this other family is to challenge some of the things you heard in your biological family. If you heard that you were not good enough in your family of origin, then you have to keep coming back to the other family called the church to hear that you are the beloved of the Father who is so pleased with you. Even if the family in which you grew up was wonderful, you will still be challenged by some of the values in this, your other family.

When I was in graduate school in Chicago, our little family lived in a high-rise apartment downtown. Our daughter, Lyndsey, was only four years old at the time, and we had been trying to teach her that difficult lesson of not trusting strangers. When you're four, you expect everyone to be as loving and careful as your parents. So we had to keep saying, "Don't trust people you don't know, honey. They may hurt you. Don't even talk to strangers." One day as she and I entered the apartment elevator, in which a distinguished gentleman was already standing, she looked up at him and said, "I'm not supposed to talk to you because you're strange."

These days it is a tragic necessity for the family of origin to teach children not to trust strangers. That is good, responsible, parenting. And that is exactly why we need the other family to teach us to love the stranger. Actually, throughout history we have always mistrusted the stranger. That is why the early church needed a lot of help from the Holy Spirit in learning how to make room for the person who seemed strange to them. As we have continued through the series of sermons on Acts, we've noticed that one of the first great struggles of the Jewish church in Jerusalem was to accept Hellenist Jews who were not from Israel.

About the time they figured out how to do that, the church was persecuted, and its members fled Jerusalem. Philip, one of the Hellenist Jews, went to Samaria. The Samaritans were not Jews but distant cousins. Far removed. They didn't worship right or read all the right parts of the Bible, and were religiously syncretistic. So the Jews despised the Samaritans and typically would not even walk through the country, which is exactly why Philip thought he would be safe there. While he was there, he figured he might as well do some preaching. And crowds of Samaritans believed, were baptized, and joined the church. Now the body of believers included not only Hellenists, as if they were not hard enough to assimilate, but even Samaritans.

As Deacon Phil was trying to figure out how to explain this to the church board back in Jerusalem, an angel of the Lord told him to hit the road again. So he stood along the wilderness road that led south from Jerusalem to Gaza, waiting for God to show him the next person to whom he could give the gospel and baptize. While he was there, he saw an Ethiopian eunuch being driven in a chariot. He was coming from Jerusalem, where he had gone to worship. Apparently, he is now on his way back home, where he served as the treasurer for the queen of Ethiopia. So this is an important man. We would call him the Secretary for the Treasury. But we are not given his name and are forced to see him only as Philip did. By categories: he's black, he's a foreigner, and he's a eunuch - not even close to an Israelite. So I'm thinking Philip was saying, "Oh my, Lord, are you sure about this? If they had trouble with the Samaritans, they are really going to flip out about this." The text tells us specifically, that the Holy Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to the chariot and join it."

Filled with the Spirit, Philip runs along-side the chariot. He gets close enough to hear that the Eunuch is reading from Isaiah. Philip asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The Ethiopian responds, "How can I unless someone guides me?" So Philip hops in the chariot and helps him understand the Scripture text.

The text he was reading was from Isaiah 53. He was like a lamb led to the slaughter. In his humiliation, justice was denied him. Who can declare his prosperity? "Who is this talking about?" That's the Ethiopian Eunuch's first question of Philip. Now why do you think he would be so interested in this passage about one who was humiliated, without posterity?

According to Hebrew law, as depicted in Deuteronomy 23, a eunuch was not even allowed in the holy places. Remember, he has just come from the temple. He went there to worship, but they wouldn't let him in! He couldn't even enter the court where the Gentiles could go. He traveled all that way to the temple to worship, but was stuck outside because he wasn't good enough.

Imagine coming to church one Sunday morning, only to discover that you are not good enough to get inside. There's something wrong with you. So you stand outside and ask people as they leave, what it was like because you're dying for a word from God. How

was the anthem today? What did they sing? What did the preacher speak about? Did he talk about depression? Did he talk about divorce, or failure, or disease? Or doubt? Did he have any word from God that will help me?

My hunch is that if we are paying attention to the hard truth of our lives, and to the reality of just whose house we have wandered into on Sunday, we would all wonder, "What am I doing here?" By law, none of us are clean enough, or good enough, or whole enough to join this family. When you look around at others who look so good, you think, "Well, she belongs here, but not me. I don't have a great family like they do in that pew over there. I don't even have anyone to love. Haven't for years. I'm not a eunuch, but I might as well be. How can I fit in here? I'm not even sure I believe all the things the church believes. I'm positive that I cannot make my life right, because I'm in too deep and there have been too many mistakes. If everyone knew the truth about me, they'd toss me out of here." Trust me on this. Everyone is quietly saying "Amen" right now. Everyone. No one is in the Father's family by rights, except the Son, Jesus Christ, and the Spirit who adopts you into his relationship with the Father.

As Philip begins to interpret the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, a chapter that describes the coming Messiah as a suffering servant, he relates Isaiah's description to Jesus Christ. We have heard this done so many times we are used to it. But this is the first time anyone does it in the New Testament. You can see the lights going on in Philip's own mind as he says, "You know, Jesus was also despised and rejected of men. He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon him, but with his stripes we are healed. And come to think of it, he had no children, no posterity. But as our Messiah, Savior, he created a new family that has room for us all.

The Eunuch was so thrilled to hear this, he wanted to join Jesus' family right there. Right on the road. "Look there's water right over there, what is to prevent me from being baptized?" Notice, Philip didn't say, well, you have to go back to Jerusalem and apply. Some translations of this text include Philip's only condition for baptism. "If you really believe with all your heart, you may be baptized." The Eunuch said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." (8:37) That is the only condition for joining for this church as well.

When Philip heard those words he and the Ethiopian Eunuch went into the water for a baptism. And when they came out, a black man and a white man became brothers, and a little more hope entered the world.

In the 56th chapter of Isaiah, the prophet went on to describe some of the changes that would occur in the house of the Lord when the Messiah came. In that day, the foreigner will no longer be separated. In that day, the eunuch who loves me shall have a name written in my house, and my covenant, which shall be better than a thousand sons and daughters, will be remembered forever. You belong in the family of God. Your name is written into the spiritual walls of the church. It has nothing to do with your limitations, sins, or hurts. It has nothing to do with the family you had, and it certainly has nothing to do with your righteousness. It has everything to do with the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, where he was dying to make you part of God's family.

The only question, according to Philip, is "Do you believe this?" Do you believe it with all your heart?

Lord God, we confess that there is both a believer and an unbeliever living within us. So we need your Holy Spirit to fully believe, with all our hearts, that we may enjoy our place in your sacred family, where at last there are no strangers.