

The Water that Calls Us to the Ends of the Earth

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Texts: Acts: 8:26-40

Will you please pray with me, this womanist adaptation of the lord's prayer by Rev Yolanda Norton?

Our Mother,
Who is in heaven and within us,
We call upon your names.
Your wisdom come, your will be done
In all the spaces in which you dwell.
Give us each day
Sustenance and perseverance.
Remind us of our limits as
We give grace to the limits of others.
Separate us from the temptation of empire,
And deliver us into the community.
For you are the dwelling place within us,
The empowerment around us,
And the celebration among us,
Now and forever. Amen.

When I was growing up and learning how to fit in with my step mother's family I would go and visit my step grandparents for a couple of weeks during the summers. They lived on the south shore of Massachusetts in a town called Hull, a place I had never been to before. Those early days of getting to know the people who would become my family were not the most comfortable and I think my step grandfather, Stanley noticed that I didn't really know what to do with myself. One morning as I sat down with my cereal at the table with him he looked up from his paper and asked me, "do you want to see my favorite place to go around here when I'm not sure what to do?" I hesitated but took him up on his offer and off we went in his car to this place about a 10 minutes' drive away called "World's End." It's a large peninsula dotted with wooded islands in Hingham, the next town over. The landscape changes from suburban

sprawl to four and a half miles of tree-lined carriage paths, saltwater marshes, meadows, and shoreline overlooking views of the harbor and the Boston Skyline.

This place is not only a beautiful oasis nestled within a largely populated area of the south shore, it also has an interesting history. John Brewer acquired most of the peninsula in 1856, building a farming estate that raised horses, cattle, pigs, chickens and sheep. In 1889, Brewer asked landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead to design 163 house plots connected by tree lined roads. The paths were cut, and the trees planted, but the development never became a reality. Driving through these traversed, but still wild spaces gave Stanley and I something to talk about. He was able to share the history of this place of his and I was able to begin to understand who he was, what he valued, and how I might fit into his world. And as we got out of the car to take in the view at the edge of the water it felt like we were on our little adventure together, breathing in the salt air and a taste of what being a part of this new family would be like.

Our scripture reading for today comes from the book of the Bible called the Acts of the Apostles. One commentary notes that it could more aptly be called the Acts of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Apostles as one of the themes of Acts can be summarized by Jesus' statement in Acts ch 1 verse 8: "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Our reading for today captures an interaction between a deacon, Phillip and an unnamed Ethiopian eunuch. In the Greco-Roman world of literature Ethiopia was a word that signaled that a place was far away, existing on the fringe of the inhabited world. The inherent xenophobia of Greco-Roman literary tropes aside, this was a place that readers of Acts wouldn't expect Phillip to be. This unexpected journey fits well with the stories in Acts, as the book is often described as a

narrative fantastical history of the adventures, signs, and wonders that the apostles experienced in the early days of the formation of the church.

As we have been discussing in our Wednesday night bible study group, the author of the Gospel of Luke and Acts makes it very clear through the people portrayed in these portions of our scripture that Jesus is very much concerned with the particularity of people's lives and the narrative of Luke-Acts is continually concerned with showing us new expanded ways of thinking, with turning our understanding of the world upside-down. The story of Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch certainly qualifies as a story in Acts that fits into the larger than life events and unexpected encounters that are typical for the genre. Phillip, a deacon among Jesus followers in the region, is called by God to travel on a wilderness road toward Gaza from Jerusalem and runs into an Ethiopian Eunuch on his way home from worship reading a portion from the prophet Isaiah in his chariot. In the course of events, the Ethiopian Eunuch gets baptized and Phillip goes on his way to tell of this news to all the towns on his way to Caesarea.

When we first encounter this passage, we might have many questions about who this unnamed eunuch, or castrated man, is and what his place probably was in the broader society. In some ways that is difficult to answer. His status as someone outside of a traditional masculine role as what sociologists call an un-man and his status as a member of a queen's court holding considerable power and wealth creates an identity that defies easy categorizations in the context of the empire. As Matt Skinner in one commentary notes, "All of the ambiguity that this character radiates has an effect. From the perspective of the dominant Greco-Roman culture that Acts represents, this joyful convert does not conform to the rules set by standard boundaries. He is powerless yet powerful, strange yet impressive, ignorant yet knowledgeable. He—indeed even as inscribed on his own body—projects a sense of liminality.

That doesn't mean he is by definition oppressed or an object of pity. It means he might represent surprise, subversion, and expanse."

We see this invitation into expansive ways of thinking after Phillip tells the eunuch the good news about who the prophet Isaiah is speaking about in the text he is reading. We don't hear exactly what Phillip says about Jesus to this Ethiopian Eunuch, but whatever he did say compelled the Eunuch to exclaim to Phillip as they passed some water on the side of the road, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" In this moment, he experiences inherent inner knowledge about his place in God's movement in the world without prompting, without permission from anyone other than God in the presence of a witness. It was debated whether eunuchs were allowed to participate in some worship activities at that time. After perhaps years of having his relationship to religion and to God talked about without him, for the first time he was claiming the authority to say something about how he was going to relate to God and to his worshipping community. He heard Phillip's words, saw the water before him, and claimed that he belonged. And what did Phillip do as he witnessed his new friend and recent stranger share his experience of his life and of his faith? Without a question or a thought, he gets up out of the chariot and baptizes him. He listens to someone who in all likelihood had a very different experience of this life than he has had, and he trusts him, he believes him and does what he can to help him get what he needs to live out his faith in community.

This relationship and interaction were not without risk, I would imagine. Claiming something about God or doing theology rarely is without risk. Witnessing someone else's experience of their faith and choosing how to respond to it is equally vulnerable in some respects if we consider the profound impact that the responses of those within our own communities to what we share of ourselves have on our sense of belonging and sense of self-

worth and our sense of who God is. When we take risks when talking about God, our relationship with Christ and with one another, when we choose to express our needs, to share that we desire to be seen, known, and feel like we belong, we want it to happen in a safe space, but most often what is required is a brave space.

I would like to share with you a poem called an “invitation to brave space” by Micky ScottBey Jones, A womanist, contemplative activist, and nonviolence practitioner. It goes like this:

Together we will create *brave space*.
Because there is no such thing as a “safe space” —
We exist in the real world.
We all carry scars and we have all caused wounds.
In this space
We seek to turn down the volume of the outside world,
We amplify voices that fight to be heard elsewhere,
We call each other to more truth and love.
We have the right to start somewhere and continue to grow.
We have the responsibility to examine what we think we know.
We will not be perfect.
This space will not be perfect.
It will not always be what we wish it to be.
But
It will *be our brave space together,*
and
We will work on it side by side.

It seems to me that when we choose to enter into that brave space, to sit beside one another as strangers in the same chariot, and hold each other’s needs as important as our own, we are following Jesus’ charge to us to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth: to the ends of our worlds, to the ends of our comfort zones, to the ends of our understanding of where God can show up and do something unexpected.

Some have said that what the Ethiopian Eunuch was doing when he claimed baptism for himself at the sight of water was a sort of constructive theology, in other words using the theology of the good news of Jesus Christ to meet a material need in the world, his full

inclusion in religious community and in a new kind of family. This person who existed on the outside of the outside of the outside after hearing about Jesus claimed a truth about God, that the good news of Christ is good news for everyone to the ends of the earth. This has been the work of people who have not fit the narrow definition of acceptable within the theological worlds of kyriarchy and patriarchy but have claimed their faith and their place in the basileia or kingdom of God despite the world's discomfort. Black, queer, trans, fem, fat, and disabled folks, and so many more people's bodies who have been deemed "not enough" by the centers of the earth where power resides, bodies who have not fit into the neat confines of what makes the world comfortable, have seen the gospel of Jesus as subversive, as something that flips the world upside down, as water on the wilderness road, as a window into a way of conceiving a world that makes space for the incomprehensible grace and love of God. If this notion of the gospel as an invitation to not only brave space, but to stepping outside of our usual frameworks of thinking and into the liberation of all excites you, Jaz Buchanan, Taj Smith, Karlene Griffiths Sekou and I will be leading a 9:30 adult formation hour series on queer, womanist, and feminist theologies that starts this coming Sunday. Will you climb into the chariot beside us? We hope to see you there on zoom in a virtual version of the ends of the earth.

Speaking of, for a moment I'd like to return to that quiet peninsula that helped my step-grandfather and I bond in the early days of getting to know each other. At the time of its acquisition by the protectors of the land in 1967, the peninsula called World's End was one of the most threatened landscapes on Massachusetts' entire coast. It had survived a 1945 proposal to construct a new United Nations Headquarters and a 1965 proposal to build a nuclear power plant. This fight to keep World's End a nature reserve reminds me that the places that are marked as the ends of the earth, the places where we stretch our hearts into

ways of being and thinking that help us grow together, the places of creation of the lifegiving theologies that help us envision a world of inclusion and belonging of all- these are the places that are most fragile, that most need our protection and care. These are the places where the risen Christ resides, inviting us to say something about the healing waters of the kin-dom of God. Look, all around us, here is water! What is to prevent us from being baptized? Amen.

