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Plymouth Congregational UCC

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Off the Beaten Path
Acts 8:26-40

This morning's reading centers around a man with no name.

A court official from far off Ethiopia; a man in charge of the queen's entire treasury.

In such a position, he would likely have enjoyed some financial security and social standing in his homeland. But, here he is, traveling a wilderness road near the holy city of Jerusalem.

The author of Acts explains, "He had come to Jerusalem to worship".

Here is where early readers of this text might pause, get tripped up, laugh even at the impossibility of *this* man, high-ranking as he may be in his country, worshipping in Jerusalem. How can he?

After all, this man with no name came with one descriptor that spoke volumes to early readers: the man was a eunuch.

Not only was he a foreigner, a convert and therefore suspect, but he was a *eunuch!* Castrated, not a whole man. Anyone who knew the Law would know that this man *could not* worship in Jerusalem.

Hear the words of Leviticus chapter 21: "No one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand" on and on the Law continues with descriptions of what makes you unworthy of entering the Temple, saving eunuchs for last. "None of these", states scripture, "shall...approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the Lord; I sanctify them" (Lev. 21:16-24).

It's not quite the Open and Affirming statement.

But it was Law, and so there's no way the eunuch could have worshiped in Jerusalem, and everyone – including the eunuch – knew it.

Still this man, whose name and even position are insignificant when weighed against his bodily imperfection, is a traveler on a spiritual pilgrimage; he is earnestly seeking to understand scripture and its meaning for *his particular* life journey, from his place of difference, and as an outsider.

What could this path possibly hold for him, considering his circumstances?

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The eunuch is no traditional pilgrim, for though he seeks, he is relegated to the margins of mainstream Israel, excluded by Law from full participation in the covenant community.

He is refused access to the resources that can illumine him in his journey: those who might interpret scripture are barred from him, as they are a part of the Law and uphold it.

God, through scripture, is what the seeker in our story strives so hard to understand and to know – and scripture is the very thing that has been separating him from God.

It's true today. People who long for a relationship with God through a covenant community come up against texts and interpretations that bar them from continuing that path.

They encounter preaching that disregards their life experiences and houses of worship that offer subtle or not-so-subtle unwelcome.

They experience a law that excludes their participation because you must hold one belief over and against another, or look or act in a special way...

Even in this place where we try to be open and affirming, we sometimes fall short – in our language, or our accessibility or many other ways that it's easy to pass over.

How do we surmount such road blocks?

Onto the path pops Philip.

You might view the intervention as a *deus ex machina* literary moment;

or the hero sensing danger and arriving in the nick of time;

or you might understand it as a right place at the right time opportunity for one person willing to engage another.

In any case, Philip suddenly knows he's needed and that he can be of some comfort to this non-traditional seeker.

Here is one who comes along and shares the good news that some laws, some *scripture*, need to be read in the light of a new story:

the path we walk can now be considered through the teachings and life of Jesus, whose commandment to love opened new possibilities for all seekers...not just the ones who seem "perfect" and fit in.

*The Message? You don't have to be a certain way to become a part of Christ's covenant community.  
There is no magical lottery, secret password, special dress code.*

But I don't know that the eunuch would have gotten that message without Philip's Spirit-inspired intervention.

"How can I?" he laments, "unless someone guides me?"

He needed that guide, that mentor. We all do.

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Who have been your spiritual mentors?

Perhaps one of the first was your mother – whom this day honors – or your father. They taught you prayers you can still recite by heart. Others may be a grandparent or certain family members who made sure you got to church at least once in a while. Then there were teachers of all types, friends who have taken the fast lane on certain spiritual highways that you've chosen to meander or tried the scenic route. So many people who have walked part of the way with us, sharing wisdom and offering hope.

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Who are your present spiritual mentors?

Not only friends, they are authors too – they are the Marcus Borgs and Thomas Mertons, Sally McFague and Elaine Pagels. They started movements like the *Taize* community in France or lived among people with disabilities in Toronto's *L'Arche* Daybreak community. They are a unique and dynamic group, ever changing.

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Who might yet be your spiritual mentors?

Does the person in the pew beside you have a "word" to speak for your life? Can you open to the insights of your children or grandchildren? Is it possible to sit down, as our Confirmation class did, with the Buddhist, the Muslim, the Jew or the Catholic and accept insight from their beliefs and practices? What about with the evangelist down the road or the missionary at your door?

Deus ex machina or right-place-right-time, we can meet spiritual mentors unexpectedly.

The Ethiopian eunuch hadn't prepared to encounter Philip on the wilderness road. Even had he rigged the meeting somehow, there was nothing to indicate Philip might speak with him, for the eunuch was an outcast in that faith community.

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But it wasn't just Philip's presence that enabled the miracle, that allowed for the eunuch's experience of divine welcome. The eunuch himself was open to listening to and learning from his new guide.

When Paige and I started teaching the confirmation class last Fall, I knew we would have insights to share with the youth. We've had experiences and study that allow us to mentor other faith seekers – as have each of you. And yet, so often throughout the year, the tables turned, and we found ourselves growing through their questions and insights as well.

They were evangelists, inviting friends to our conversations;  
 they were dedicated in attending our time together;  
 they were clear in expressing where they diverged from traditional teaching;  
 and they were curious, desiring to know the meaning of this community and  
 the God we worship.

As you look at our youth, you may think they are much different than you were when you studied for your confirmation – *they are*.

They act differently, believe differently, express their faith in a totally different way.  
 They are a new generation of seekers, with a different language for God and this journey they  
 make in faith.

But they are also the same.

They want to know the meaning of their search.

They want to be a part of a community that supports their seeking.  
 They want to talk about their questions and their findings.  
 They want a relationship with the universe and its creator.

And they, like the eunuch, want to know that our story as told in scripture,  
 holds for them not just rules but meaning.

And they, like we, are welcome as they are.

The passage from Acts closes this morning with a religious rite of passage for the eunuch – he is baptized as he confesses his desire to journey with Christ – a PART of the covenant community.

So will 12 young people of this church do today with their confirmation and affirmation covenants.

On the wilderness trail or off the beaten path, we seek guides who will offer new wisdom on the journey to know God.

We seek to know that we are welcome.

You have been the guides to our youth, and they are guides to us.

We all are on this journey of faith together.

So seek your guides, and be open.

Share your journey, and give hope.

And together we will continue striving  
 in our covenant to be God's people.

Amen.