
United, not Uniform
Wesley Mimico United Church
April 13, 2014
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 8:26-40 and Matthew 21:1-11

If our readings from today came with labels, I wonder if the labels would read, “danger, sharp learning curve ahead.” Because I’m not just sure how to read the story about the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch. Obviously, the story is about Philip accepting a person who was considered an outsider by many others. But there are simply so many cultural references embedded in the story, it’s hard to work out which ones were important to the author. We are tantalized with the details but not exactly sure which ones are key. Why was the story of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch so important to the early Christian community that it was worth recording? Why should we read it today?

In the early chapters of Acts, many people were baptized. So what was special about the Ethiopian man? What was it that made it important to include his story from the many many stories that were circulating at the time? Was it because the man in question was a eunuch? Was it because he was a foreigner? Was it because he was not only a foreigner but from a land very far away? Was it because the man was very likely dark-skinned? The man has so much that is uncommon about him (compared to the general population in Palestine at the time) and I am left wondering which characteristics of the man were the most “exotic” in the eyes of the author of the book of Acts.

Or perhaps it was just another case where the early Christian community welcomed a person who was not welcome in traditional Judaism. The man may or may not have been a convert to Judaism, but he would never be welcomed. It is clear in Deuteronomy chapter 23 that a eunuch could not be “admitted to the assembly of the Lord”. That may be why the person in the story is always referred to as “the eunuch”, never as “the man”.

But forgive me, I think I inadvertently slipped into a parallel universe and

neutralized some history there. I was suggesting that of course, the man was welcomed by the Christian community. But we all know that's not how the story turned out. We all know that many people - even today - that have non-traditional gender identities are not always welcomed in Christian communities. Philip may have welcomed and baptized the man, but that does not mean that the community accepted him. In fact, in many churches across North America today, this man would also not be “admitted to the assembly of the Lord”. Perhaps because of his gender-identity, perhaps because of his skin colour, perhaps because of his country of origin, or perhaps because of his social status.

It's easy to say that we love everyone, but accepting others turns out to be no so easy after all. And perhaps, that's a good thing really. Because it forces us to think and feel more deeply about our own identity. It forces us to think more deeply about what it means to really accept other people.

To me, that is the gift of the United Church of Canada. In my mind, the United Church embraces differences. But I don't mean that in the simplistic way of just imagining that we are all of one mind. I mean that in a deeper way - that we can accept people who are different from ourselves, and that we can work with different people without hoping that they become just like us. In our baptism today, we welcomed Peggy into this congregation. But we are not hoping that she becomes exactly like us – we are hoping instead that we will all grow in new ways because Peggy is in our midst – *she is not one of us. She is one with us.* This is the United Church of Canada after all - not the Uniform Church of Canada.

[descend – talk about week-killers]

I have a related question to ask. How many of you have done any weeding yet this spring? Do you enjoy weeding? I used to hate weeding – until I learned the proper way to do it. Actually, I learned 2 ways to get rid of weeds. One method I learned from the wise sage and philosopher, Red Green. He has a method that is very simple. Just close your eyes and you can't see the weeds any more. But for all that I like Red Green, his method seems to be lacking in something. But what about this – instead of closing your eyes to get rid of weeds, open your eyes. Open your eyes wider than you have ever

opened them before. Open your eyes so wide that you learn to appreciate the beauty and value of those “weeds” and then – as if by magic – they will not be weeds any more. Don't kill the weeds, just convert them into non-weeds with your own mind. Simple, right? It's a method that is 100% effective – if you do use the proper application.

And that method does not just work with weeds. Think of people or situations in your own life that feel like weeds. People or situations for which your first (and possibly second) instinct is to exterminate. But just maybe, if you can learn to look at the person or situation with larger eyes, you could see the great gifts that they offer to you. Perhaps they could be embraced, rather than exterminated. Perhaps they would stop being weeds in your life.

[share a story from your own life when you turned a weed into a non-weed]

The Jewish people living in Palestine at the time of Jesus were politically and economically dominated by Rome. Passover was approaching, and that meant that many Jewish pilgrims were heading to Jerusalem. And passover for Jewish people represents a story of liberation from slavery and domination. Passover in Palestine would be a reminder of liberation in a place where Jewish people did not feel very liberated. Tensions would naturally be high. In order to keep the peace, Pilate would have brought in troops to help control the crowd - to make sure that the passover festivities did not become a catalyst for civil unrest and rebellion.

And so, on the original “Palm Sunday”, we would have had 2 parades. Through one gate, we have Pilate, riding on a war horse, leading a large, well-equipped and well-trained army. That parade represented power, force, control, and domination.

Through the other gate, we have - Jesus. Riding on a donkey, with no army, no wealth, nothing of power. But where Pilate would have been greeted with a mix of indifference and fear, Jesus was greeted with joyful crowds, grateful crowds.

Modern biblical scholars seem to agree that the parade that we celebrate on Palm Sunday was not an isolated event. It was in fact a parade in response to Pilate's parade.

Jesus's parade was actually a parody - a lampoon - of Pilate's parade. Jesus's parade was criticism. It was ridicule. It was sarcasm. It was the sort of mocking response to authority that can get you killed!

I'm reminded of a scene from the 1979 Monty Python movie, "The Life of Brian". A small band of Jewish people are plotting rebellion against the romans. And the leader says, "The romans have taken everything we had. And what have they ever given us in return?" This is of course, the final challenge. The rhetorical question that proves that the romans are evil designed to galvanize the group into action against the romans. And yet, out of the silence that ensues, a timid voice speaks up and says, "the aqueduct?" And then, everyone in the group starts to put ideas out as to what the romans have in fact accomplished with and for society in Palestine. And of course, the romans contributed a lot to the life and times of the people. But the leaders responds like this. "All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the fresh water system and public health ... what have the romans ever done for us?"

As human beings, we so easily fall into the mental trap of creating barriers against people and ideas that are different, that we don't understand, that we don't like. As human beings, it is easy to place barriers between ourselves and people like the Ethiopian eunuch, and power structures like the roman empire. But Jesus and Philip remind us that those barriers are only mental barriers. And, more importantly, those barriers are our own creation! We choose the barriers that we wish to live by.

And so, as we enter Holy Week, I invite each of us to reflect deeply on any "weeds" in our own lives, and decide if this year we are prepared to open our minds enough to eliminate unhealthy barriers. To turn those weeds into non-weeds. To accept others for who they really are. That will take time. That will take reflection. That will take forgiveness. And on Good Friday come back for a service of forgiveness and of healing. Because after we forgive others, we will truly be ready to share in the celebration of Easter!

Amen.