

Belonging V: Dealing with Difference

[Acts 8:26-40](#)

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“We need to make sure you belong here.”

These are words recently spoken by a Yale campus police officer to Lolade Siyonbola, a graduate student in African studies. Siyonbola, who is black, was napping in the common room of her dorm. A white graduate student saw her there and called the police. According to reports, this is not the first time the white student has called police because she found the presence of black people in her dorm to be suspicious.

Hence, this scene, the officer saying to the black grad student, “We need to make sure you belong here.”

For the last few weeks, it seems that there’s been a new version of this story every day: white people calling the police in response to people of color engaged in everyday activities. Shopping. Walking through a neighborhood. Waiting in a Starbucks. Participating in a college campus tour. Golfing.

Many people of color would say that these incidents are not new. What’s new is the level of reporting of such incidents—the fact that the stories are now receiving media attention, and the world is starting to watch.

This is the last week of our sermon series on Belonging, and it feels to me that it would be pastoral negligence to avoid talking about what’s going on all around us.

“We need to make sure you belong here,” said the police officer.

It's a poignant and profound reminder, to me, that we can't really talk about belonging without talking about difference and power.

Specifically, who has power to decide who belongs where? And by what criteria?

The story we just heard from the New Testament takes place in a very different world from that of 21st century America. But it's grappling with some of the same issues, I think.

The Book of Acts is all about the founding of the Early Church and the spread of Jesus' message throughout the Roman Empire. It's full of stories of conversions, and this is a famous one. It's the meeting of two very different people.

First, we have Philip, a Greek-speaking evangelist, traveling the road from Jerusalem to Gaza proclaiming the word of God and preaching the Good News of the Messiah, Jesus.

Then we have the Ethiopian Eunuch, a fascinating character. He is not named, probably to emphasize the identities that make him stand out in this story. He would've stood out in life too, as a foreigner in Jerusalem and as an adult who likely never went through puberty. Eunuchs were usually castrated at young ages, often without their consent, and were people who existed outside the strict gender binary that defined so much of life then (and now).

When Jewish followers of Jesus heard this story, they would've been extremely interested, because they would know that Jewish law forbids eunuchs from entering the "full assembly of God" (Deuteronomy 23:1).

(Sidebar: I don't want you to get the impression that Judaism was close-minded and legalistic, and Christianity corrected all that; in fact, the Book of Isaiah expressly welcomed "faithful eunuchs" into the

kingdom of God, and Isaiah was also the prophet whose writings were most quoted by Jesus himself. So, like most things, it's complicated.)

But the point is: most Jews, and even Gentiles, would be accustomed to thinking of eunuchs as strange. Eunuchs lived and served in the royal courts of Egypt, Babylon, Persia, and Rome. They fulfilled highly specialized roles—the Ethiopian Eunuch is clearly literate and highly educated, a finance minister. They were not part of everyday experience. They did not do things that everyday people did.

Yet here is the Ethiopian Eunuch, paused on a wilderness road outside the city, doing something that *anybody can do*. He is spending time with the Word of God. Isaiah, specifically. (Remember? The same book where God welcomes eunuchs)

And then something happens that I wish all evangelists would remember. Philip doesn't evangelize the Ethiopian Eunuch against his will. He doesn't get in his face. He doesn't presume. He strikes a conversation—"Do you understand what you are reading?" And then—and this is key—the Ethiopian Eunuch asks Philip for help interpreting the scripture. "He invited Philip to get in" his chariot "and sit beside him," the texts tell us.

And then something *really* extraordinary happens. They pass by a body of water. And whose idea is to make use of that water for baptism? Not Philip's. It is the Ethiopian Eunuch who says, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

What, indeed?

I think this moment is really important to any conversation about belonging. It is the Ethiopian Eunuch who decides that he wants to participate in the Body in the Christ. Belonging is not presented to him as a test he must pass. Belonging is not a gift that belongs only to Philip, to be presented to whomever he deems worthy.

Philip doesn't need to "make sure" the Ethiopian Eunuch belongs in the kingdom of God.

Rather, the Ethiopian Eunuch belongs because he *wants* to belong, and because *God* is true host of this party, not Philip.

In this story, "belonging" becomes trustworthy and real precisely because of this shared enterprise, this mutual moment. This baptism is made authentic because there is an empowered baptizer and an empowered baptisee.

Also of significance is this: post-baptism, the Ethiopian Eunuch is... still the Ethiopian Eunuch. He doesn't stop being a foreigner, or a sexual minority. Those things that make him very different are still as evident as they were before. There are still many places he will not belong. But he is rejoicing in that moment because he has found belonging with the church, with God.

As we seek and pray to be a church that creates a sense of belonging, I think there's much to learn from this story. When I hear this story, it reminds me that belonging is not about erasing difference or absorbing difference, but learning to respond to difference in a new way. Rather than becoming alarmed or threatened, we can try to be like Philip: curious, open, and attentive to what our neighbors and strangers and even God might be telling us.

On that note: When I hear this story, I find the Ethiopian Eunuch's voice so important, so compelling. And humbles me. It reminds me to question my own assumptions about what belonging even is. What feels like belonging to me may not feel like belonging to someone else. It's easy when *you* already belong somewhere to think you know what *others* would need to feel the same.

But when it comes to creating space for others, creating a sense of welcome for others, we can't anything for granted, especially when we know certain differences like race, religion, gender, sexuality, and

class—these can completely change how someone moves through though world, what they expect from others, what others expect from them.

“We need to make sure you belong here,” the police officer said to Lolade Siyonbola.

As a church, as the Church, as followers of Jesus, I think we are called to resist the tide that produced that statement, that moment, those countless moments happening everywhere where deviation from the norm—the white, heterosexual, Christian norm—is viewed with suspicion, at best, and outright fear, at worst. When we give into suspicion and fear, we are swept up in the oppressive power of Empire; but Jesus called us away from that kind of power, saying that we can write a new script for ourselves, a new way of being in the world, a new way of being with one another.

Because it must never be a matter of “making sure” that another passes the “test” of belonging. Let us instead remember how Philip was open to the Ethiopian Eunuch, and how the Ethiopian Eunuch was open to Philip, and how they created a holy moment of belonging *together*.

By the grace of God, let us together continue to find our way on this wilderness road. Amen.