

Last month, when I was visiting the Dougbe River School in Liberia, West Africa, I was given a surprise opportunity to preach. I knew I'd be preaching during the dedication ceremony for the girls dormitory. But on the eve of that occasion, just as the three non Liberian-Americans (myself and Tedd Roos and Tom English) were preparing to chillax after a very long and productive day, I was informed by the fourth member of our travelling party, the Liberian-American, Isaac Monah, that an impromptu worship service was going to be held and that I was going to be preaching at it. "Oh, here we go again," I thought to myself. This wasn't the first time Isaac had sprung a last-second preaching assignment upon me. I was ... livid ... to have him put me in that position again, with guests from a church I didn't know.... Blah, blah, blah. Anxiety speaking loudly from my head!!

Isaac knew he needed to give me the space to fume, and he trusted I would get the job done.

I shut myself into my room – as I called it then, my “monk’s cell,” and waited for the Holy Spirit to inspire me; which, of course, She did. And She led me to this text from Acts.

Where else were we doing this mission than on a “wilderness road?” ([photo](#)) And what else was the purpose of the school if not to help others “understand what they are reading,” as Philip says to the Ethiopian. And, why not throw in for good measure the one story in the New Testament whose central character is an African, then, while in Africa. So, I ran my ideas past Tom and Tedd about using this text and they said, “Go for it.” And I did.





[This](#) is probably one of my favorite photos from the trip, as I worked on the service with the teacher, Isaiah, and the leader of the choir, in the yellow shirt.

Wanting to give all of you a bigger glimpse of why this school means so much to me, and what my role often is there, I've decided to share portions of that sermon with you. The beginning of the sermon was recorded on video. I thought it might be fun for you all to see that. It may be hard for you all to hear, so let me give you an overview.

The service was supposed to occur outside under a palm frond-covered canopy. However, a rainstorm threatened and so we moved inside the school cafeteria. The rain eventually arrived and beat down on the tin roof. When you watch the video in a moment, you'll hear it as the "white noise" in the background.

After a few words of introduction, I begin the sermon by recalling an event that had happened earlier in the day, when we were meeting under the canopy. While the drummers from the guest choir were drumming, the dancers formed a line and then moved out from the canopy toward the road that runs past the school. They did so in serpentine fashion, making sharp turns as they went. While they worked their way to the road, Isaac informed me that they were inviting the Holy Spirit to come from the road and join us in the assembly. One by one they made their way back under the canopy and continued the festivities.

I began my sermon by making mention of the Spirit-inviting dance, and then I imitated it - which brought mirth to the whole gathering. I explained how we, in White Protestant churches, don't use drums that tell stories. And told the story

of one of the first times I was in Liberia, I was in one of the villages and I heard drums playing. I went to check it out, and it was mostly young people playing, and I asked if I could try. So I played.

Well, Isaac's side of the story is that when he came to my room to check on me and I wasn't there, he was worried. So he stopped and tried to figure out where I could have gone. Then, he heard the drums, and knew exactly where I had gone. "Blap, blap, blap," he heard; the drums not making any sense at all. We still get a chuckle out of that story....

So that's the context – [here's the video](#) of that first part of my sermon....

When I completed the story of my drumming in Sayuo, I thanked the choir for physically reminding us that the Spirit of God dwells with us – blesses us. And I continued. *(The portion in italics comes from the sermon I preached at the school.) Just like with the apostle Philip, the Spirit has put us on a wilderness road, so that together we can find God and bear witness to the power of Jesus. God has already done that with this place. Here in the wilderness, here on this educational campus in the jungle, God is taking young minds and equipping them with knowledge and understanding so that they can know the extent to which God created them to bless the world. That's the strength of this story. Philip is put in that wilderness place to take someone who is thirsting for the gospel and open their mind to it.*

30 So Philip ran up to (the chariot) and heard (the Ethiopian) reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

Understand, first, that the Ethiopian was educated. Here they are, sitting in the chariot, reading the Hebrew scriptures. We can also glean that the Ethiopian had accepted Jewish thought and teaching as they were returning from Jerusalem. We might infer that they were there on official business of the Candace—or, queen. Perhaps they had needed to learn Hebrew in order to conduct this business. But, something had piqued their interest in the religion enough that they were reading from the scroll of Isaiah.

The natural desire to learn is inherent in human beings. And when the mind is not given the opportunity to stretch its limits there's so much potential that remains locked inside. We are curious beings, we want to understand the ways of the world, be they scientific or philosophical, historical or linguistic, artistic or theological. We hunger for food or thirst for water, we yearn for understanding.

Having lived a full life with education at my fingertips—as a value and norm of my family—I've never had to think about WHY an opportunity for more breadth and length of understanding the ways of the world were so important for living into the fullness of who we are as human beings, and of what we are capable.

Sometimes I can be a bit slow to reach understanding. I've been part of the co-founding of the Dougbe River School because I was invited into it by Isaac and I guess you could say urged into participating through the Holy Spirit. But the impact of this educational opportunity in a place where there never had

been—the ways in which the school is impacting real living human beings—didn't hit me until this latest visit to the school.

This time we had the opportunity to meet the majority of our first batch of graduates from the Dougbe River School. The school serves children from Pre-K through 9th Grade. For children to further their education they need to go to the nearest city or beyond. While we were in that city we met with a group of the alumni for a meal and fruitful conversation. One of them—her name is Felfred—confided in me that if it weren't for the school, she would currently be married, most likely not to someone of her own choosing, have 2-3 children, and be settled into the routines of the traditional culture. She's now in her first year of college, and dreaming of becoming a medical doctor. Felfred said one day she looks forward to being married and having children, but now she is able to choose how and when that happens. And that is all because of the school. This is one impact of an education.

We have built a place along that wilderness road, where people with knowledge and understanding can come alongside those who lack it and open them to a new worldview, and expand their minds.

Back to Acts: The person in the chariot – it is important that you hear how they are described both as an Ethiopian and a eunuch – invites Philip to **literally** come alongside them, in the chariot, to help them understand what they are reading.

The eunuch is reading from Isaiah 53:7-8. It is a section of the prophet's writing that is known as speaking about "The Suffering Servant." In its context, the Suffering Servant

was the Israelites; the covenant people of God, who because of their allegiance to Yahweh would be persecuted by the people around them, and, unfortunately, when they did not adhere to the teachings of Yahweh would suffer from the consequences of their actions. The passage reads like this,

*“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.*

33 In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

The Ethiopian wants Philip to explain about whom this is speaking, the prophet or someone else?

Philip used that opportunity to explain more about the nature of God, the purpose behind the prophet’s writing, and, as Philip himself witnessed, Jesus the Christ’s fulfillment of that scripture. He spoke of Jesus’ suffering, and how Jesus’ suffering speaks to our own. He spoke about how God’s love as shown through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is deeper and broader than anything expressed by humanity. And that through Jesus, the way of God is open to anyone who wishes to learn more and live within the beloved community of God.

It is quite likely, as an example, that Philip unrolled the scroll to a section a little further along in Isaiah that speaks to the inclusion of “foreigners” in God’s kingdom, and, specifically, about eunuchs. It is from Isaiah 56:1-7: (underlines added by me)

56:1 Thus says YHWH:

"Do what is right! Work for justice! For my liberation is about to come, and my justice is about to be revealed."

2 Happy is the person who does this, and happy is the person who holds to it – who observes the Sabbath and does not profane it, and keeps one's hands from evil deeds.

3 Foreigners who would follow YHWH should not say, "YHWH will surely exclude me from this people." Nor should the eunuch say, "And I am a dried-up tree."

4 For thus says YHWH: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath, who choose that which pleases me **and hold fast to my Covenant** – 5 to them I will create within my Temple and its walls a memorial, and a name better than that of daughters and sons. I will give them an everlasting name that will not be excised.

6 And the foreigners who join themselves to me, ministering to me, loving the name of YHWH and worshiping me—all who observe the Sabbath and do not profane it, and cling to my Covenant – 7 these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar, for my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples!"*

This Ethiopian, a foreigner....This eunuch....is so overtaken by the love that God has for those who are suffering, for those who accept the Word of God no matter their station in life, that they ask Philip then and there if they can be baptized – this person wants to become part of the community of Jesus the Christ!

Now, if Philip was considering what his brothers and sisters back in Jerusalem would have thought about baptizing a “cultural outsider” – for up to this point,

only Jews from the Hebraic tradition had joined the Jesus movement – Philip might have hemmed and hawed about that request. But let's remember it was the Holy Spirit who sent Philip there! The Spirit of the Risen Christ doesn't care about the boundaries of participation that we faithful people – whom the prophetic tradition often calls “*stiff-necked people*” – put on to limit who can be included in God's Covenant Community. A couple of chapters later, in Acts 10, the Spirit leads the Apostle Peter to introduce the Jesus story to a Roman Centurion (aka a “gentile”). There, Peter states, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35 rather that any person of any nationality who ‘fears’ God and does what is right is acceptable to God.” (10:34–35)

The Holy Spirit said “enough of exclusion. We are doing a new thing here, and that is opening up the grace and mercy of God to ANYONE who wishes to claim it.”

And with a little help from the eunuch's Spirited new friend, Philip, they depart one another, each with profound joy at being included in this beloved community of love and welcome.

By the way, the Church in Ethiopia is one of the earliest to be established outside of Palestine. So, it is most likely that when the eunuch returned home, they bore witness to the love and acceptance they received through Philip!

By the way Part 2, *The Inclusive Bible*, notes about the Isaiah 56:

* Eunuchs and foreigners are symbolic of outsiders and outcasts. The gay and lesbian community has taken the promises in these verses to be emblematic of the idea that they, too, are welcome in the “kingdom” of God.

So, if anyone you know wants to try and limit who is included in the kingdom of God, you can point out these texts *from the words of the prophets and apostles*

that exhort the understanding that God does NOT show partiality to anyone, and that ANYONE who loves God and follows God's love command is acceptable to God. And that might be your own way of providing a little help to *your* friends.

May the Holy Spirit continue to push us into spaces far and near where we find friends with whom we can reciprocally understand the grace of God more deeply and with joy. Amen.