

This Word is From the Risen Lord
Acts 8:26-39
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Neither Ferdinand Magellan or Christopher Columbus or even Marco Polo embarked on a voyage as treacherous and exotic as deacon Phillip. One of the original seven servants of the church, Phillip put his sail into the full wind of the Holy Spirit and was blown to ports he could have never anticipated.

First, the Spirit transported him to preach the Gospel to Samaritans, people he had been taught to hate since his birth. To his utter amazement, the Samaritans heard the good news about Jesus Christ and believed in Him as Lord and Savior. Before Phillip had time to dry dock his ship of faith in a safe harbor, the Spirit whipped up again and sent the young deacon sailing out on a wilderness road toward the Gaza Strip where he encountered a man from Ethiopia who asked him if there was anything that should hinder him from becoming a baptized follower of Jesus Christ. Actually, what he asked Phillip was, "Is there anything about me that would hinder God from accepting me as a follower of Christ?"

One of our most pervasive fears is that in our elder years, we will become a hindrance to others. In reality, however, we cannot determine if we are a hindrance or not. The only one who can accurately identify a hindrance is the one being hindered. For some young adults, a baby is a hindrance, for others a child is a blessing. A certain number of single adults see a husband or wife as a hindrance to their freewheeling lifestyles, others see a healthy spouse as an answer to prayer. Little brothers can be seen as a hindrance to big sisters or as lifelong friends. No doubt there are adult children who see their aging parents as a hindrance, but there are many more who see them as gifts of God.

By hindrance, the Ethiopian eunuch was not speaking of the little annoyances that tend to frustrate and annoy us as we move through our daily routines: a bum wheel on a grocery cart, a flat tire on the beltway, an extraordinarily long line at Starbucks. He is speaking of a serious hindrance. More like the obstacle umpire Jim Joyce put in the way of Armando Galarraga. One out away from one of the rarest achievements in sports, the pitching of a perfect game, Galarraga threw a pitch that was hit to the first baseman who flipped the ball back to the pitcher who in turn tagged the base one step ahead of the base runner. Game over. As Galarraga celebrated his once in a lifetime achievement, however, Joyce called the runner safe. He later admitted that he blew the call but the damage was done. An unalterable hindrance had been placed before the pitcher's pursuit of a perfect game.

Yet as serious as that hindrance was, it pales in comparison to the type of hindrance this Ethiopian man is describing. The obstacle he is wondering about is more like the hindrance the Israeli commandos placed on the Turkish ship attempting to deliver humanitarian aid to people in the Gaza Strip last week. In effect, the commandos determined that there was something about the residents in the Gaza Strip that hindered them from being worthy of the basic necessities of life. The African man to whom Phillip was sent, wanted to know if there was anything about him that posed a hindrance to God, slowed God down, got in the Creator's way and kept the Almighty from accepting him as a follower of Christ.

On the surface, the question seems absurd. How could any mortal being create a barrier for the One who uses collapsing stars as a cosmic vacuum cleaner and the moon as a celestial yo-yo to move over 342 million cubic miles of water from low tide to high, twice each day. Yet that is precisely what this man had been led to believe. Unlike the unfair hindrances that have been put on people of color around the world, however, the barrier this man has been told would prevent him from being acceptable to God had to do with the sexual nature of his body, not the

color of his skin. The man had been castrated.

The book of Deuteronomy reports that sometimes castration was the result of an accident that crushed a man's mid-section and made him incapable of normal sexual relations. Jesus said that some people were born eunuchs, evidently referring to some physical or sexual aberration present from the womb. Other unfortunate people, Christ said, were castrated by force. We know from numerous historical studies that some cultures castrated their prisoners of war, others executed the horrible assault on a man's personhood as punishment for the crime of rape or some other culturally prohibited sexual act. The Lord also acknowledged that some believers chose to live as a eunuch. In this context, Jesus meant there were believers who chose to live as intentionally celibate. He was not describing victims of self-castration. Without a doubt Christ would have viewed men who voluntarily castrated themselves as disturbed not worthy of commendation.

We aren't told why this man is a eunuch because the cause of his condition was irrelevant to his concern about God. His sexual mutilation had not been a problem for him occupationally. In fact, it had probably served as an asset. Kings and princes, didn't like functioning heterosexuals to be too close to their wives and daughters. They desired able bodied men to protect the women in the palace, but they didn't want the men to be too able-bodied. Eunuchs, therefore, were often conscripted to serve royal women. This man served as the head of the Queen's treasury.

The King of Ethiopia, at the time of this encounter, was a young boy who was said to be a god. Rather than ask a deity to lower himself to deal with the mundane affairs of a nation, the people allowed the young King to sit around and be divine while his mother ran the country. Phillip was sent to help a man, therefore, who had ascended to the highest office possible for a non-royal to hold, treasurer to the queen mother.

Maybe it was his close relationship to the royal family that caused this man to reconsider his religious views. Those who watched the family from afar might have been deluded into thinking they really were offspring of the gods, but this treasurer knew differently. He felt that God had to be more than a petulant child king and his search for greater truth evidently led him to the Hebrew Scriptures. Scrolls of the Hebrew Bible were very rare so the fact that he had even one indicates that his powerful associates had procured it for him. As he studied the scroll, a partial copy of the book of Isaiah, he must have come across Isaiah 56 and read that God accepted and honored all eunuchs who were devoted to the Lord. The African leader no doubt came to the conclusion that the God described by the great Jewish prophet was the true and living God. The love and wonder he felt for the God of Isaiah inspired him to want to convert to Judaism, so he took leave of his job and journeyed over 1500 miles by chariot, to the holy city. When he arrived at the end of his pilgrimage, however, he was told that the sexual nature of his body presented a hindrance to the acceptance of God.

Rather than quote the holy word of the prophets, the priests in the temple referenced Deuteronomy 23 which contains a partial list of those people they saw as obstacles to God's grace. The passage says that children born to illicit unions were barred from the assembly of the Lord. In fact, it not only prohibits those children but every child that descends from them for ten generations. That simply could not have been the intention of God. People from the nations of Moab and Ammon were also stated to be unworthy of the love of God. We know from the book of Ruth that Ruth was from Moab and she was an ancestor of King David. By this statement, King David should have been banned from the temple, and since Jesus was an extended descendant of King David, this prohibition makes Jesus unfit for temple worship. Obviously, the prohibitions instituted by the temple leadership were not from the heart of God. At the top of the list of all the undesirables condemned by the temple priesthood, were people who had suffered castration for any reason. This ban too was from men, not God.

There was nothing for the poor man to do but go back home. He must have been stunned. Here he was, a man so powerful he could open doors all over the world, except in one place. The gates to the temple were slammed in his face, for his very body was said to be a hindrance to God's grace.

From time to time, as the wheels of his chariot rolled across the sand of the desert, the humiliated man must have stopped, and unrolled the book of Isaiah for another look. After reviewing the promise that God accepted and honored eunuchs, his eyes centered three chapters to the left on Isaiah 53 where the prophet talked of the beloved servant of God who had been led like a sheep to a shearer, who suffered the very loss of his life.

How confusing this must have been to the Ethiopian. The Jewish authorities told him his body presented a hindrance to the love of God, while their own Scripture promised that God honored the faith of all people. In his disoriented state, Phillip arrived and helped him understand that in Christ, he, like all people on earth, were welcomed into the very household of God.

If I tell you that your dog Fido is a hindrance to your freedom to travel, my opinion doesn't make it so. Only you can determine whether Fido is a hindrance to your life or a cherished pet. If you drive by my house and see me working in my vegetable garden, and say, "what a hindrance that must be to your weekend plans." Your perspective doesn't make my garden a liability to me. I find it a privilege to spend some of my weekend helping things grow. The only person who can accurately identify a hindrance is the one being hindered.

Tragically, the temple priesthood declared this eunuch to be a hindrance to God's grace and purposes, but their opinion did not make it so. Only God can say what is a hindrance to the Sovereign's grace and purpose and God said, it was the attitude of the community faith that hindered the work of redemption, not the physical attributes of the man from Africa.

Dr. Frank Stagg, a courageous and brilliant Southern Baptist scholar wrote a commentary on Acts in 1955 that documented the central purpose of the book as one of obliterating false hindrances to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The early believers thought that one's nationality, race, gender, or, in this case, one's sexual characteristics, created a barrier that repelled the love of God, but in each situation, God sent a prophet, a preacher, a deacon, an apostle to say, these folks are not the hindrance, the attitude of the community of the faith is the hindrance to God's plan of redemption.

This story reaches its crescendo when the newly converted Ethiopian passes a body of water and says to the deacon, "Look here is a body of water, is there anything that would hinder me from being baptized as a follower of Christ?" A dramatic pause must have followed until Phillip said, "not a thing." Heaven's bells rang as the formerly rejected man was welcomed into the family of God.

The church of Jesus Christ is deeply conflicted about issues of sexuality today. Even in this church, we have vastly diverse perspectives on this issue. This passage doesn't resolve those heartfelt disagreements. But on the authority of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I can tell you, that all people are welcomed in the house of God and that Jesus Christ loves us all and died to save everyone of us from our sins. And upon that same authority, I can profess that when we bar any group of people from the gospel of Jesus Christ, we become the hindrance to the work of God, not the group we condemn.

Deacon Phillip understood this. The apostle Paul finally got it. In two weeks, we'll see that even Peter caught the vision and by the end of the book of Acts, the inspired writer Luke is able to pen magnificent words, words that evoked the deepest joy in our Savior's heart. For the last sentence in the book of Acts describes Paul's work in Rome this way: "He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance."