

MAKING SPACE FOR OTHERS

John 10:11-18; Acts 8:26-40

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"Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship *Enterprise*. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds; to seek out new life and new civilizations; to boldly go where no [one] has gone before." - Captain James T. Kirk

It was years later, when Star Trek was in its re-runs that I realized that this classic Sci-fi TV show was not really about an exploration of the universe, about what's "out there," but about a look into the human heart and the issues that we faced within our own human civilization. The series took on racism and xenophobia. It explored the range of human emotions and their relation to reason. In short it explored the "spaces" that lay between human individuals and cultures, the things that draw us together and the things that separate us.

We'll be exploring space as well this year. We will visit some "strange new worlds; seek out new life;" and perhaps even discover a "new civilization." This is precisely what the gospel does. It tells us that we don't have to inhabit the spaces of this world, this life, and this civilization as we have been. The world of the gospel, life in Christ, and the community of believers provides an alternative. In Jesus words, the kingdom of God is at hand.

We began this exploration two weeks ago talking about God's love making space for the earth and all its creatures including humankind; God's love ordering the world, creating a place for goodness to be discovered and lived in. God's spacious love forms the context for our life in Christ, for the good news of the gospel.

Last week Janet drew our attention to the many things we have and do to fill the space that God has made; things that distract us, that disturb us, that consume us. Our space is too saturated for us to see the goodness and love of God. Our world is in many ways suffocating.

We need to make space, and the first thing we need to make space for is "others." There are some who would say that we first need to make space for God. Doesn't Jesus say, "Seek first the kingdom of God...?" To this, I would remind us that kingdoms are full of "others." Rest assured, God will find us, each of us. That's the nature of God's spacious love. But we are not meant to be alone. In Genesis 1, God creates human beings as two, not one. In Genesis 2, where creation begins with a single human being, the mistake is quickly rectified with a second. Even though the gospel invites us into a personal relationship with God, it nowhere indicates that it should be private.

Making space for others is fundamental to the gospel. Jesus makes space for the blind, the deaf, the lame, for prostitutes and tax collectors, for thieves and betrayers and

deniers. So we are not surprised when he says in John's gospel that there are other sheep who do not belong to the current fold, sheep that he will make space for.

And we should not be surprised that the believers in the book of Acts reach out to those beyond the circle. The encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch read a little like a sci-fi story. Philip is wandering around Samaria, north of Jerusalem preaching the gospel when an angel tells him that he's needed on a wilderness road heading south out of Jerusalem at high noon. More than a day's journey away. And then somehow when his task is accomplished, he's transported back to the place where he left off his mission. Maybe he had some help from Scottie and the starship's transporters?

Matthew Skinner tells us that this story "unfolds like a dream" (p.60). It pushes the limits of credibility. Besides Philip's ability to travel long distances over a short time, the encounter happens in the middle of the desert at noon, not a time when anyone should be on the road, let alone two people. I've always had trouble picturing just how a man on foot approaches a chariot. There are the coincidences. The eunuch happens to be reading from Isaiah, a perfect opening for Philip. Water appears out of nowhere in the middle of the desert to facilitate a baptism.

Again, Skinner doesn't think this dreamlike quality is an accident. Though not real, he says, dreams "explain things. They help us imagine new possibilities when we think we have hit the limits of what we can perceive or should expect." He goes on to say, "One way or another... the gospel will find ways to spread into new cultural landscapes. It will find a hearing. It really does have the potential to disrupt the whole world, one interaction at a time" (p.61).

F. Scott Spencer describes the setting as "liminal." He writes, "Journeys through such desolate territory stripped of everyday distractions afford optimum settings for reorientation and transformation from one station in life to another" (p.101). In other words, these kind of encounters change us.

So, let's think about this Ethiopian eunuch for a minute. There are a number of things that separate him from Philip. For a while scholars understood that he was a gentile since he served in the court of Candace, a queen in Ethiopia, but recently some have reminded us that the Bible tells us of several Jews that served in the high court of foreign lands. So he may have been Jewish. He was coming from the temple and reading from the scroll of Isaiah. If he wasn't Jewish, he was certainly sympathetic to the Jewish faith and may have been what is known as a God-fearer. But he would never be fully accepted by Jews. As a eunuch, he would not be allowed to worship in the temple. His "deformities" made him unacceptable, put him in the same category as the blind and the lame, etc. Philip probably shouldn't be talking to him. Skinner tells us, "If anyone in Acts represents from the perspective of certain cultural stereotypes, the 'other,' or someone who dwells at the 'edges,' it is this figure" (p.61).

Philip is not one of the apostles. He was commissioned several chapters back to tend to the widows and orphans. Instead he's off preaching to the Samaritans, another group of

unacceptable Jews. And he's so successful that the apostles are embarrassed into sending a couple to legitimate the mission. He's out front, at the edges, doing things he's not supposed to because, according to Skinner, "nothing about the gospel involves restrictions against certain kinds of outsiders" (p.63). So God sends him to this Ethiopian eunuch, a man with more political power than Philip will ever know and yet a man without even the possibility of standing in the Jewish faith. Philip refuses to acknowledge the barriers that exist between himself and the eunuch.

We are all too often about the barriers, even with our neighbors. Barbara Brown Taylor writes in her book, *Holy Envy*, [pp. 193-4]

"In my religious language, there is no loving God without loving other human beings... the same God who came to the world in the body of Jesus comes to me now in the bodies of my neighbors, because God knows that a body needs a body to make things real, and the real physical presence of my neighbors makes them much harder for me to romanticize, fantasize, demonize, or ignore than any of the ideas I have of them in my head. If I could make my neighbors up, I could love them in a minute. I could make them in my own image, looking back at me with deep gratitude for how authentically human I am being to them—and they to me!—reading poetry to each other, admiring pictures of each other's grandchildren, and taking casseroles to each other when we are sick. But nine times out of ten these are not the neighbors I get. Instead, I get neighbors who cancel my vote, burn trash in their yard, and shoot guns so close to my house that I have to wear an orange vest when I walk to the mailbox. These neighbors I did not make up knock on my front door to offer me the latest issue of *The Watchtower*. They put things on their church signs that make me embarrassed for all Christians everywhere. They text while they drive, flipping me off when I pass their expensive pickup trucks on the right, in spite of the fish symbols on their shiny rear bumpers. But if you stop and think about it, what better way could there be for me to actively pursue the God I did not make up—the one I cannot see—than to try for even twelve seconds to love these brothers and sisters whom I can see? What better way to shatter my custom-made divine mosaic than to accept that these fundamentally irritating and sometimes frightening people are also made in the image of God?"

They are an unlikely pair having a conversation about the gospel and they are both undoubtedly changed by it. Philip does not offer a lecture, citing the four spiritual laws, and threatening the eunuch with the fires of hell. The conversation happens because Philip is willing to travel to odd places at inconvenient times and because the eunuch is willing to make space in the chariot. Not only that but the eunuch is curious, already searching the scriptures for something and willing to ask his question.

The scripture he is reading describes the rejection and suffering of the servant in Isaiah, a text we apply to Jesus' suffering and death. As one who is cast aside himself, the eunuch wants to know whom Isaiah is talking about. His question makes space for the gospel and opens onto a new world.

We aren't told what Philip says, but it's likely that he referred to a passage just a few chapters later in Isaiah that speaks of a day when eunuchs will be welcome in the temple.

I have other sheep, said Jesus. Making space for others stands at the core of the gospel. Always the circle expands. Today the church is finding a new environmental ethic influenced by Native American spirituality. A lot happens when we listen to others instead of dominating and enslaving them. Churches are gaining new insights into the freedom offered by the gospel through the influence of African American spirituals. A lot happens when we open ourselves to the experiences of others. The experience of women has brought new imagery for God to the church opening up new applications of the gospel to the disenfranchised and the vulnerable.

The church continues to dream. New visions are opened up as we make space for others. Skinner reminds us that "dreams require interpretation" and interpretation happens best through conversation with others." This is the key to this encounter between Philip and the eunuch. According to Skinner, "It's as if God knows too well how small and confined our imaginations can become, because we think we can figure everything out through our cold calculations about what's possible and what's feasible... dreams remind us," he says, "to expect surprises, to open ourselves up, and never be too sure about where and how something will finally end" (p. 65-6). In Spencer's words, "The Spirit blows where it wills, sweeping the gospel across standard zones of time, space, and society" (p.104), or in the words of Captain James T. Kirk, "to strange new worlds... new life... and new civilizations." It all begins with making space for others. Amen.

Matthew Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospels: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts*. Brazos Press, Grand Rapids MI 2015

F. Scott Spencer, *Journeying Through Acts: A Literary-Cultural Reading*. Baker Academic: Grand Rapids MI, 2004

Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*. Harper One, 2019.