

SEEKING SOMETHING MORE

My thoughts and these words are influenced by the Rev. Curtis J. Preston. He is the pastor serving Lakewood United Church of Christ in Colorado where my daughter and her husband are members. Curt has a way of taking people beyond where they are, while making it clear that it is up to them to decide where they want to be.

Pretty much everything a person needs to know about Christianity can be found in Chapter 8: Verses 26-40 of the Acts of the Apostles. Yet rarely are sermons based on this passage. There is a reason for that. This story invites people to think about what they believe instead of being told.

The main character is an Ethiopian eunuch. He is traveling from Jerusalem where he has been to worship, although he is not connected with the establishment there. He is African. In his own country he is a court official serving the Queen. He is a man of power and influence. He is wealthy. He is searching for something more in his spiritual life.

The Holy Spirit has led the apostle Philip and this eunuch in a carriage to meet on a deserted road. Philip becomes curious when he hears the eunuch reading from the scroll Jesus teaches from in the temple that says eunuchs who hold fast to my covenants will be given a temple memorial and a name better than sons and daughters.

A conversation ensues and the eunuch asks Philip what is to prevent him from being baptized. The eunuch wants to know if he can fully be included in the body of Christ. Philip decides there is no good reason not to baptize this person. Philip's decision is an indication that the love of God in Christ is for everyone.

This story raises questions of gender, sexual identity and the reality that a person can enjoy a variety of privileges and still face exclusion and prejudice. It is about approaching strangers, being approachable and including others in the community of believers. It is about status and transcending bigotry.

The old testament and the new testament are collections of inspired and selected stories that reveal God's relationship with humanity. These stories are about creation, the law, wisdom and mercy. Read as a whole, they are about loving our neighbor and being in relationship, as a matter of faith, justice, peace and inclusion.

Rev. James Briney, pastor and teacher.
Oro Valley United Church Of Christ

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Now that marriage equality is the law of the land, I will do what I have always done. I will meet with a couple that is interested in being married and listen to their expectations. We will decide together if they are ready to make their commitment as a matter of law and in the presence of God. Given the alternatives, it tells me something about the sincerity, the faith and the intentions of couples who value the vow aspect of their wedding ceremony.

When the issues were theoretical, I was open to the possibilities, but not predisposed to non-traditional marriages. Nearly fifteen years ago when I led a seminar on church identity and growth, I was asked if I would perform a same sex marriage. I said no, because it would not be recognized as a lawful marriage. But I understood what was behind the question. Few had begun to consider the benefits to society. Interestingly, no one had a problem with me officiating at weddings for pregnant fornicators.

I am not equating pregnancy out of wedlock with marriage equality. I am making the point that people who claim their views are based on what the bible says can be awfully selective and self-serving in their interpretation of scripture. It is not the change in the law alone that makes my answer yes today. It is my belief in the word of God and the love of Jesus Christ.

The motto of the United Church of Christ is: Wherever you are on life's journey you are welcome here. That includes all kinds of people with all sorts of views. The church is not intended to be a divided or exclusive setting for theological liberals or conservatives. It is the safe sanctuary for the people of God. That includes individuals who are re-examining what they think, or have yet to put their beliefs into practice.

In matters of law and faith, intent is the key to clarity and understanding. An indication that we are honoring the spirit of the gospel is that we are able to relate to our neighbors as brothers and sisters in one human family. We know we are headed toward that reality when we no longer employ scripture to marginalize and diminish others.

There is a lot going on in the church and our nation as we move forward in faith and law toward a more perfect union with liberty and justice for all. This is a fortuitous time to consider the difference between a point of view and the essence of the gospel. We will know what heaven is like on earth, when we practice what Jesus preached. Until then, it is well to evaluate the whole of what Jesus taught and the context in which he spoke of marriage.

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