

What Can We Learn?

Acts 8:26–40

by Rev. Dr. Blair Bertrand

Many churches have stained glass windows and many of those show stories about Jesus. “Jesus knocking at the door” or “Jesus and the little children” or “Jesus at the Last Supper”¹. Often times these windows tell other, less obvious, stories. The small words at the bottom of windows tell the story of love and loss.

In a church far from here, in a small city named Zomba in a country called Malawi, there is a window that tells yet another story. It is of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch so it does tell a Biblical story. And it is dedicated to lost loved ones so it does tell the story of that congregation.

But it tells another story too. Philip is pictured as standing above the Ethiopian eunuch at the moment of baptism. The eunuch looks up with joy and it is clear that his eyes are gazing up at Philip. Philip is white and the eunuch is black.

Malawi is mostly made up of black Africans. The window is in an old Presbyterian church built by Scottish missionaries. Philip, a Middle Eastern man, would have had lighter skin than an Ethiopian. But the idea that he would have skin as white as a Scottish missionary is not believable.

Why select that moment and that pose? There are other possible moments. The eunuch is rich and powerful, the text makes that clear by having him look after the treasury and placing him in a chariot. In contrast, Philip has nothing and is on foot. Why not have the eunuch inviting Philip into his chariot? Or both of them, side by side, reading the Word of God?

There are many possibilities but this is the story that was told at that time. It was a story of white missionaries bringing the Gospel to black Malawians. It is not a unique story. The European and

¹ If the church you are preaching in has stained glass windows, choose a few of the Jesus stories depicted instead of these three.

North American missionary efforts of the late 19th and early 20th century spread all over the globe. And praise God that they did! Churches from Nigeria to Korea to Japan to India to Guatemala to Nicaragua were strengthened. Now there are more Presbyterians in places like Korea and Malawi than in Scotland or Canada.

We are talking about Zomba, a small city in a small country (Malawi) on a big continent (Africa), because of that missionary effort. The PCC continues to partner with the church in Malawi. PWS&D, International Ministries, the WMS, and congregations all have long standing relationships and ministries there.

Still, how might we design that window today? How might we understand mission in our world? The Ethiopian eunuch can guide us in answering those questions. By answering the three questions he poses in this story, we get insight into what mission might look today.

The first question the eunuch asks is, “How can I understand, unless someone guides me?” For centuries commentators have noted how incredible this question is. Recently, Barbara Brown Taylor noted that “the text presents the Ethiopian as someone wealthy enough to ride in a chariot, educated enough to read Greek, devout enough to study the prophet Isaiah, and humble enough to know that he cannot understand what he is reading without help.” He is wealthy, educated, devout, and humble.

His status as an Ethiopian eunuch, that is, his status as a foreigner and someone who is ritually unclean, likely keeps him out of the Temple. But we don’t see him as an outsider. We see him as devout, owning and reading Scripture on the bumpy road home.

Even with his power and his piety, he asks for help. It is this humility that commentators note. He has all the material resources he needs yet he lacks something. He cannot understand his faith without help. He knows it and reaches out to Philip.

In the Zomba window, the missionaries are imagined as Philip. They are the ones who bring answers to the ignorant Ethiopian eunuch. But what if the opposite is truer? North American

Christians are wealthy and educated. Perhaps we are the Ethiopian eunuch and what we need then is piety and humility.

Visitors to Zomba from Canada love the music. Reports back are filled with rapturous descriptions of the passion and joy of the people. And that is true and maybe something we can learn from. But there are even deeper things of God that we might learn about.

Take the Rev. Dr. Takuze Chitsulo who is one of the ministers in Zomba. He has a PhD in the Old Testament, an achievement that the PCC supported. He analysed the minor prophet Habakkuk in relation to the move from one party rule to multi-democracy in Malawi. Pretty heady stuff that would play well in an Old Testament course here in Canada. He is a scholar and a minister.

But he is also aware that evil does not just take the form of oppressive structures. Sometimes evil takes a personal turn. Spirits, demons, and those who use them are part of everyday ministry. The Presbyterian church in Malawi conducts exorcisms. This would likely make many wealthy and educated uncomfortable. Instead of dismissing these ideas, perhaps we should humble ourselves and ask “what can we learn?” Dr. Chitsulo humbled himself to learn in a very Western way, excelling at his Phd. What would it take for us to humble ourselves and listen to his and his church’s view on evil and the spirit world?

The Ethiopian’s humility should serve as an example. Mission must start from a place of humility. Whether we are reaching out to our neighbours across the street or across the world, we cannot start by assuming that we have all the answers. Our wealth and power can blind us to the fact that we too need help in understanding what we read.

The eunuch’s second question, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” guards against one misunderstanding of humility. Humility might become, “We don’t know anything.” False humility is this kind of self-defeating attitude. True humility is an honest assessment of our limits and the strengths of another.

The eunuch does not humbly ask for understanding from just anyone. He asks Philip. What we know of Philip is that he is an evangelist. He brings the Good News of Jesus Christ to many. When

he preaches people respond, asking for baptism and going forth with joy. It doesn't seem to matter where Philip is, the Good News just pours out of him. He has been kicked out of Jerusalem but still he preaches; he goes to Samaria, a place people from the city of Jerusalem don't like, and still he preaches; and now, the Holy Spirit takes him into the wilderness on the road to North Africa and still he preaches.

Mission today means that the Good News gets preached to those that need to hear it. The Ethiopian eunuch was struggling to understand an important passage of Isaiah. In that passage Isaiah actually mentions eunuchs. It is not too much to think that the Ethiopian eunuch wondered if the words of Isaiah could be for him, could be a promise of salvation for him, could be a word of promise for him. When Philip opens up the Scripture the Ethiopian eunuch sees Jesus, sees the salvation that God has offered him, sees that the promise of the Holy Spirit is for him.

(Here is an opportunity to share. Share an example of reaching out with the Good News from a project or ministry supported by your church or WMS/AMS group.)

This salvation prompts a third question, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" In other words, since the Ethiopian eunuch was humble enough to hear the Good News to him, what now could stop him from responding? In this story there is nothing that seems to stop the Holy Spirit from acting. Notice that while we focus on the eunuch and Philip, it is the Holy Spirit who is doing much of the action. The Holy Spirit comes to Philip and the Holy Spirit gives him directions. In response to their conversation, both Philip and the eunuch go down into the waters of baptism and as they come up the Holy Spirit moves each on his own path. Philip goes on to evangelize elsewhere while the eunuch goes back to Ethiopia with rejoicing.

The answer to what can stop the eunuch from baptism is "nothing." In fact, we have to ask ourselves the question, "Have I really heard the Good News if I do not respond by seeking out God, rejoicing, and carrying the message back to my people?" The Ethiopian eunuch was already faithful, he had come to Jerusalem to worship, but his encounter with Philip brings his faith to a whole new level. Now he returns to his home with a new sense of mission. We might start by thinking that Philip is the missionary here but, in the end, the Holy Spirit uses both as

missionaries. Philip to the Ethiopian and the eunuch to other Ethiopians. In the end, it is the Holy Spirit's mission that both get to participate in without anything to stop them.

For centuries the Western church operated from a place of power. It was our mission, our strategies, our resources, our people. What this story reveals is that our mission is best when it is not actually our mission. Mission is best when it is God's mission that we participate in. Which begs the question, "What is God's mission for [name of congregation] today?" Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch answer that question differently but they do it from the same place. It is the cross cultural encounter that reveals the mission of God. They come together in the wilderness, a place that is neither of their homes but is on the way to both, and enter into a small chariot to focus on reading Scripture.

Is it possible for us in [name of place] to find those in-between places where we might encounter someone who is very different than ourselves and in doing that, have God open up a new mission for us?

[If there is an example of this type of mission happening in your congregation or area then include it here].

Now, might we imagine that window from Zomba differently? Might it be that if we were to design it today that we might portray the humility of the eunuch, acknowledging that the one who has worldly power needs something from the evangelist Philip? Could we make it so that both of their faces are alight with the Good News, sitting side by side as they read the Scripture together? What about putting the Holy Spirit moving them in response out of the waters of baptism, sending them on their respective missions? Does mission today look like a cross cultural encounter in the wilderness that reveals God's mission for both for Philip and the eunuch?

The Rev. Dr. Blair Bertrand works with Theological Education by Extension in Malawi (TEEM), which offers theological education for both clergy and laity. He also teaches Practical Theology at Zomba Theological College and is affiliated with the Blantyre Synod youth department.

Blair completed his doctoral studies in Practical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2014. He's served at Calvin Presbyterian Church in Abbotsford (2011–2017), was the Convener of the Committee on Church Doctrine (2015–2017) and is a member of the Canada Youth Advisory Group.

For Blair, mission is first and foremost God's mission. He shares that, "God is a God who loves the other, who sends God's very self to that other, and who assumes the flesh of the other. When Jesus calls the disciples he almost immediately sends them. To be sent it is to participate in the mission of God."