



There is so much in the news this last week that is – depending upon your viewpoint – encouraging or discouraging. Encouraging: the finding and freeing of more than 200 women and girls that had been captured by Boko Haram. Discouraging: the burning of affordable housing for seniors during the Baltimore riots. Yes, I am using the word “riots” although even that is controversial for some who call the actions “rebellion” and call those engaging in acts that are against the law anything but “thugs.” We clearly have differences of opinion and differences in understanding about what is going on in Baltimore. Even whether it was prudent to have the Orioles and White Sox to an empty stadium rather than risk the safety of fans attending. And, we have the NFL draft.

Every year when the best football players are picked for the upcoming season and hopefully many seasons, we have all the highs and lows and guesses about who would be the first pick in the first round- and who would end up being labeled “Mr. Irrelevant” – the last pick in the last round. Worse than being labeled “Mr. Irrelevant” were the fears of those college players who wouldn’t be picked up all. Having worked all their life to date to excel, they weren’t found “good enough” to be picked during the Draft. What would become of them now?

Each of the readings today reminds us that we are loved by God regardless of whether in our secular life we are the first pick of the first round or one that doesn’t get picked at all. William Sloan Coffin, who was for many years the chaplain at Yale University, said in his book The Courage of Love that “God’s love doesn’t seek value; it creates it. It is not because we have value that we are loved but because we are loved, we have value.”¹

¹ William Sloan Coffin. The Courage of Love (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 11.

Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22: 25-31; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

Take, for example, the Ethiopian eunuch. A eunuch was considered to be of much value to the queen or other women in a royal court because sexuality was no longer an issue- he was no longer a threat in the way another male might be. At the same time, this very same eunuch would not be permitted to worship at the Temple because he was considered blemished- and only the unblemished were permitted entry into the Temple area beyond the very outer gates or courtyard. Held up on the one hand and denigrated for the very same reasons on the other hand. His value in the world came from what he was not. His value before God as interpreted by the people of his time was as nothing because of what he was not. Even so, this man had a desire to understand God and wondered if he had value – if he was worthy of love when the world told him “yes” but only if he gave up what others valued highly.

And along comes Philip, one of the seven chosen by the first apostles to tend to the widows and orphans who were not being cared for because the 12 were too busy elsewhere. This Philip is often called Philip the Evangelist because of his interaction with the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip is visited by an angel and told to go to the south. Philip is apparently not told why he needs to be on this wilderness road- just to go. And he does. And so the Ethiopian and Philip meet up on this wilderness road. Now the Ethiopian is traveling in a chariot and Philip apparently was walking. One man with wealth and position and the other probably with little status in the world. But the angel tells Philip to disregard the outward status of the Ethiopian who, after all, is in charge of the entire treasury for Candace, queen of Ethiopia. Philip is to approach this man who might take offense at being stopped by someone who was walking along- apparently of little account.

But Philip does what the angel says, and the Ethiopian perhaps recognizes someone who can help him – a man caught between the world who has both held up him by giving him charge of the whole treasury and the religious authorities who have declared him unfit to come before God in the temple. A man who on the outside for many likely had everything the world values but on the inside is seeking his place before God. As was common in the ancient world, reading was done aloud and so Philip was able to start the conversation by asking the Ethiopian if he understood what he was reading. Unlike many folks today who are often afraid of saying so, the Ethiopian was honest and said “no, how can I unless someone helps me.” The Ethiopian had integrity in admitting he needed assistance.

And he was willing to accept it from someone who might have seemed an unlikely teacher- probably dusty, out of breath from running to meet the chariot and perhaps even dressed a bit shabbily.

As the conversation and travel continue, the two come to some water- and the Ethiopian asks Philip what is to keep him from being baptized. The answer “nothing.” And so Philip baptizes the Ethiopian in the water. No big ceremony. No special clothes. No forms to sign. Just, let’s go into the water and Philip baptizes the Ethiopian. And the Ethiopian is a member of the body of Christ. It doesn’t matter that the world calls him blemished. To God, he is loved. To God he is welcome.

It could have been so different. Philip could have refused to listen to the angel and this wonderful story wouldn’t be in our Scripture. The Ethiopian could have refused to stop or refused to admit that he wanted assistance in understanding Scripture. Philip could have refused to baptize the

Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22: 25-31; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

Ethiopian because the world considered him less than perfect. And we could go on and on about all the ways in which this story could either never have happened or happened differently.

But we do have this reading in Acts which tells us about how the church comes to be and spreads throughout the known world and down the centuries to our time. We do have this reading which reminds us that God loves us regardless of the world's verdict or even our own assessment about whether we are good enough.

We are each human which carries with it our own failings – our own form of being cutting off from God and all that we might be if we fully lived into the gifts and talents with which we have been blessed.

The first letter of John rams this home. “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” Pretty darn clear. Whatever holds us back from loving God, from loving our neighbor, serves to separate us from God. The writer of First John continues “if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is perfected in us. ... we abide in him and he in us...” When we love only with the eyes and values of the world, we separate ourselves from each other and from God. We do not abide in God and we fail to live up to our potential.

William Self, a Baptist preacher, puts the dilemma this way: “fear cannot generate love, sympathy, tenderness or compassion. We cannot scare people into tolerance or terrify them into kindness. The fruit of fear ends up being distrust, suspicion and resentment. Against the lovelessness of fear, John sets the fearlessness of love.”²

Philip and the Ethiopian didn't let the world's values- including teachings about who to fear or distrust, who was of value and who was not- stand in the way of God's love which enabled them to see the Christ in each other.

Winston of Florida State going to the Tampa Buccaneers will be remembered for being the first pick of the first round of the 2015 NFL Draft. And someone else will be remembered, at least on the web, as “Mr. Irrelevant.” But I have news for us. In God's eyes, **each one of us** is the first pick in the first round.

There is no such thing as Mr. Irrelevant. **Amen.**

² William Self in Feasting on the Word, Year B, vol. 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 471