

**Acts 8:26-39 (NRSV):**

26 Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) 27 So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship 28 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." 30 So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 32 Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.  
33 In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?  
For his life is taken away from the earth."

34 The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" 35 Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 36 As they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" 38 He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing.

I want to talk about inclusion today. Partly because, I think we've gotten a little too inclusive here at Camas Friends Church, and I want to kind of rein things in, and just put down some boundaries that might help us retain the purity and integrity of who we are.

So I'm going to propose to you all, moving forward, ten dealbreakers for inclusion in our community. If any of these things are true of you, I'm sorry but we just might not have space for you. IF you all accept my proposal, of course; it's totally up to you! So this would be my list of ten things—because ten is always the right number for such a list—ten things that are grounds for exclusion from this community.

- 1) If you are a big spoon; that is, if you have a bedmate with whom you snuggle in bed, if you are the little spoon, you can stay; if you are primarily the big spoon, enveloping your partner, you have to go. If you never spoon in bed, you can stay, and we'll find some other reason to exclude you.
- 2) If you pronounce the word patronize "PAT-ronize," that is so precious and technically also correct, but it's not *my* way, so you have to go! PAYtronizers can stay.

- 3) If you were born between 1965 and 1980, you have to go. Sorry Gen-Xers, but thanks for MTV.
- 4) If you have ketchup packets from fast food night or parmesan and red pepper flake packets from pizza night piling up in a drawer of your kitchen, you cannot stay.
- 5) If you've cut the cord, and gotten rid of Cable TV for budget reasons, but now have five or more streaming service subscriptions, you're out.
- 6) If you have said the words "I didn't mean to" at least once in April, I'm sorry but we have no space for you here.
- 7) If you prefer pickleball to tennis, please see yourself and your noisy game out.
- 8) If you have more than one vowel in your first name, I'm sorry we just don't have space for that many vowels, here. Or you.
- 9) If something you planted in your yard did not really grow as you hoped it would, I definitely blame you, it's unforgivable, and you are not welcome here.
- 10) If you drank water from the tap or a bottle or a well in the last month, you are not welcome here. We only have space for creek lappers and rain catchers.

So hopefully those boundaries will help simplify and protect our community a bit. I gotta ask, does anyone actually get to stay? I certainly don't. I can *barely* close my silverware drawer, with all the parmesan packets piling up.

Ok, thanks for indulging my satire!

What does it mean to be inclusive? It's not an inflexible rule. Rules can be disconnected from our lived reality and from the practice of discernment. I think if we saw "inclusion" as a rule then we might struggle to know how to maintain boundaries. You, individually, are constantly excluding, in a way, every time you say "no" to something, because you have limits. That doesn't mean you aren't an inclusive person, but that your commitment to inclusivity requires occasional boundaries, and probably for good reason.

If I said to you, "from now on, I'm going to throw eggs at you while I'm speaking, every Sunday, and no matter what you say or wish, I will keep doing it," it would be a distortion of inclusion to then say "you have to make space for this wish, it's how I want to participate, and you're an inclusive community."

That's not only a misunderstanding, it's harmful, abusive even, to appeal to a value you have and then legalize it in the form of a rule that I can appeal to, claiming the moral high ground when I'm actually just being manipulative, using your goodness against you.

I think that being inclusive is less about consistently obeying a rule, and more about committing to the ongoing work of creating and nurturing inclusive spaces, and to ongoing curiosity about how best to do that, in the midst of continual change.

But inclusivity doesn't imply no limits. For example, by putting that flag up, we are likely excluding some people whom that flag makes uncomfortable. Does that mean we aren't inclusive? In a sense, yes, but in another sense, it reflects a choice we've made, to try to center an otherwise excluded community, whose list of options for a welcoming spiritual community is limited, compared to those who don't like the flag and what it represents.

What makes this inclusive, I think, is that anyone can join us *in our commitment to inclusion*. We're not trying to be all things to all people, and so we aren't going to accommodate every person's preferences. There's a spirit here, a spacious way of relating to God, each other, and the Earth, and all are welcome to participate in this ever-evolving community, if you can do so without undermining who we are at the core.

For example, your deliberate and unrepentant Islamophobia and antisemitism aren't welcome here, but you, insofar as you are willing to receive feedback about the harm your ideology and practices cause, and try to change, can probably join us in the work of nurturing an inclusive space. But we're not everyone's cup of tea, and I think that's okay.

Inclusion can't just be something you feel or wish. It's not a rule you can enforce. It's not just a belief, either. Inclusion is something you practice. Inclusion is something you intentionally create through structures and patterns and shared expectations. Inclusion is something you grow. Inclusion is something that people hopefully experience.

Inclusion doesn't mean "anything goes here" or "if I don't get what I want I'm being excluded." Inclusion, to me, means "join us in our quest to be a more loving community" or maybe "help us create a space where each person is safe, respected, and cherished." If that's a community people want to join, then I say, dive right in.

And that's exactly and somewhat literally what the eunuch does. Consider this scene.

First, it's striking to me that Philip travels from Jerusalem to Gaza, to spread the message of Inclusive Love, as we sit here in 2024, watching a massive and ongoing failure of inclusion in this region today. Also, here is a person who appears to be coming to worship in a culture and faith tradition different from his own, perhaps motivated by curiosity, a desire for cross-cultural friendship, or maybe, under the radar of his superiors, just looking for a broader and deeper sense of belonging.

I say that because...well...he is a eunuch, a male castrated by the powers that be, likely as a means of control and likely implying a kind of servitude to the court. His appearance would probably be striking, his difference evident in his voice and face and demeanor, and his inability to procreate perhaps also would add to his marginalization, in this world. He may be a high-ranking eunuch, but is still a eunuch, and his lower social status would probably make him more, in the eyes of those with power over him, expendable.

It's noteworthy that he's not even named, but labeled, with a term that refers to a physical reality, but also a social role. It's easier to marginalize someone without a name. Maybe Luke, author of Acts, just didn't know this name. But we will name him, because I want to disrupt this namelessness, even as I realize that part of what might be profound about this moment is that someone with no name, someone mutilated by the state, perpetually marginalized, no matter his rank, is welcomed into the community of Christ-followers, not as servant or slave or inferior, but as equal.

So, for now, let's call him: Addis, or Addy, which means "new" as in Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa, which means "new flower." I'll call him Addy moving forward, not to erase his eunuch-ness, but to affirm his human-ness. And hopefully, should Addy and I meet in the next life, he will tell me his true name, chosen by himself, and I'll use that.

Addy leaves his worship experience, evidently curious to know more, and has gotten his hands on a copy of the writings of the prophet Isaiah. Philip responds to a nudge to go talk with Addy, and asks him "do you understand what you are reading?"

Not a critical or...patronizing...question, I don't think, but an expression of what might be the first step of inclusion: noticing exclusion, even unintentional exclusion. Was the text in a language Addy only partially understood? Maybe. Was the language clear but still too insider, too jargon-y, too many references to things only someone who'd lived and breathed the tradition would understand? Maybe.

"Do you understand?" says Philip, a question implying an offer: "I'd like to help remove the barriers to understanding." Addy replies: "I do *not* understand; would you guide me?" And in a subtle but noteworthy action, Philip accepts Addy's hospitality and gets into *his* chariot, *his* space, and sits beside him. Philip is not in control, Philip is doing what the Spirit and Addy dictate; Philip, hopping into the chariot, is literally along for the ride.

Luke tells us which passage from Isaiah is being examined here:

*"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.  
In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?  
For his life is taken away from the earth."*

Addy is captivated. "Who is this person, in Isaiah?" I think this is more than just casual curiosity. The graphic imagery of a sheep being sheared or slaughtered, could remind him of his own story, the trauma that has shaped who he has become, the trajectory of his own life, the violation of his own bodily autonomy at the hands of others, the injustice done to him, the humiliation, a life truly taken from him, at least a life that might have been. Maybe Addy reads this text and feels solidarity, feels seen, feels welcomed.

Philip gives him an answer. The person in Isaiah could be and is any number of people. It probably doesn't really matter who the original person is, if there even is one. What Addy probably most needs to hear from Philip is, who is this person, *to you*? Philip, recognizing that his experience of the crucified and risen Christ is encapsulated in the words of Isaiah, speaks from his experience of Jesus, one slaughtered, humiliated, treated unjustly, one whose life was taken.

And yet Philip proclaims good news, the news that despite this tragedy, Christ is risen, a truth that speaks less to what literally happened to the crucified body of Jesus, and more, I think, to truths like “all things are being made new” and “death is not the final word” and “justice and peace are our future” and “Love wins” and “the inclusive Kingdom of God is here.”

Whatever Philip says, his message compels Addy, who asks to be baptized, a ritual of initiation, of belonging. This desire to be baptized, is not a desire to be saved from literal hell, or submission to a new but different system of control. I think it reflects a desire to belong, to participate in a community continuing the inclusive ministry of Jesus.

And what is the answer to his question? What is to prevent him from being baptized? Based on the immediacy of Philip’s response, and action? Absolutely nothing. There is NO barrier to Addy’s full participation and inclusion in the community. I mean, I guess he’s dry and needs to be dunked in water, so there is one hoop to jump through. But it’s really not a hoop but a symbol of his hoopless welcome into a community that transcends borders and binaries. He will still be an Ethiopian, he will still be a eunuch, and yet now has a new community that has space for him, just as he is.

Now there’s an interesting textual quirk here. You’ll notice that there’s no verse 37, and that’s not a mistake. The textual note in the NRSV says that a verse was added at some point to the original text, and so was not likely an original, authentic part of the text. This added verse 37 says, in response to Addy’s question, “what do I have to do?” the following: *“And Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ And he replied, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’”*

Now somebody must have thought it would be helpful to add this verse, maybe nervous that Addy’s question was just left hanging, unresolved; or maybe this was a liturgical or educational opportunity, for a later Christian community to teach its folks a kind of confession of faith. Maybe it was a kind of boundary, not to exclude but to preserve the uniqueness of the tradition, or protect the people in it, somehow. Or maybe it was meant to exclude, something people often do when they’re nervous or afraid.

But an expectation that one “believe with all your heart?” Ok, being wholehearted is fine, but for those who commit to things even with persistent doubts and don’t pretend to be certain about things they aren’t, maybe that’s a stretch. And affirming Jesus as a true representative of God, as “Son of God” implies, isn’t so bad, either, especially if Addy finds Jesus compelling. But maybe some people don’t quite have that part figured out yet. Do you really need a firm, fixed, settled theology of Jesus and God to join a community that tries to listen to Christ and live out the loving way of Jesus? I think you can guess my answer.

I’m glad that added verse is omitted here, because there’s something powerful about someone asking “what is to prevent me from being baptized?” maybe even nervously wondering, “does Philip know who and what I am? Is who and what I am a barrier to my inclusion?” A lot of people today may wonder this, and may get vague, evasive answers from churches and pastors who want to grow their numbers but not condone something they are against. Churches can be quite skilled at masking their lack of inclusivity.

For Philip to say “all you need to do is...*nothing*. Except let me submerge your entire body in water but promise not to drown you, of course.” No barriers, no creeds, no personal statement of faith. All that is needed is a willingness to literally dive in. There’s no condition. Addy wants to participate, and a pathway is made. Baptismal water is found. “What barriers exist to my participation?” he asks. The implied answer? *None*.

Addy comes up for air, now baptized, starting a new chapter in his journey. Philip leaves, his part in Addy’s tale complete, and Addy continues on his way, rejoicing, having experienced the good news of God’s inclusive love, the inclusive way of Jesus, and the inclusive community of faith, where anyone who wants to be part of creating a more inclusive, loving community and Earth, is welcome.

And of course, you are welcome. Big spoons, PATronizers, gen x ers, parmesan packet hoarders, streamers, people that didn’t mean to but still did, pickleballers, those rich in vowels, plant killers, and tap water drinkers. Please stay. We are better off, because you’re here.

**Queries:**

What does inclusion mean, to me?

What are the signs of inclusion?

How am I helping create inclusive spaces?

What does it mean to be inclusive but also have healthy boundaries?

What does it mean to include the whole Earth in the scope of God's inclusive Love?