

Curiosity

Acts 8:26-40

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First Presbyterian, Luling

Except when it's terrible, the internet is a wondrous thing. If you're a curious person, you can find the answer to almost any question. Just this week, here are things I've searched out that I was curious about: the weather forecast, the route for the MS 150 bike ride, which goes straight through our county this weekend, a good chocolate chip cookie recipe, who was the 14th president of the United States (Franklin Pierce, in case you also need that bit of information), what are the cows called that look like Oreo cookies (Belted Galloways), and where are they from (Scotland). I'm sure there was more, but those are the ones I remember off the top of my head.

It's easy to be curious about facts, about things we can search for on the internet. There's no silly questions when it comes to the internet. No one to say, "You mean you don't know who the 14th president was? Everyone knows that!" Just type it in and up pops the answer, or millions of versions of the answer.

Sometimes I manage to maintain curiosity when I'm dealing with people, but it's a lot harder. I can't type in "Why does my friend never want to decide where we're eating lunch?" This is of course something trivial to wonder about someone, and definitely something trivial to judge someone about. But I've thought something along the lines of "Why can't this friend just make a decision, for heaven's sake?" That's not really a curious question, but a judgmental one. I think it's more likely that we approach people with judgment rather than curiosity, an attitude of "I wish they wouldn't do that" instead of "I wonder what it is about their personality that makes them do that?" I'm developing a theory, you can probably tell, that curiosity is the opposite of judgment, at least when it comes to our dealings with people.

This story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is an excellent illustration of what it looks like to approach a stranger with curiosity, when it would have been easy to meet each other with judgment. This story was recently the topic of the Presbyterian Women's Bible Study, and some people said it was their favorite story of the whole Bible, while others said they didn't remember ever hearing it before. Let's dive in and be curious about it, particularly about the two main characters.

Philip, for his part, was chosen early on in the new church community as one who would look out for the poor, mostly widows. His name is Greek, so we can pretty safely assume he is Greek, rather than Hebrew, so he may or may not have been Jewish. An angel of the Lord compels Philip to go from Jerusalem, onto the road that goes to Gaza. Those names are certainly ones that are familiar to us. In Philip's day that particular road was no more dangerous than any other, but we know from stories like the Good Samaritan parable, that travel was not a completely safe thing to do.

On the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, he encounters the other main character of the story, the Ethiopian eunuch. He doesn't have a name, and almost every characteristic about him is a little hard to pin down. He is wealthy and powerful—he is riding in a chariot rather than walking, and he's a court official in charge of the Ethiopian queen's entire treasury. He's kind of a big deal. But he's also marginalized, because he is a eunuch, not fully a man, but also a man at the same time. He's been to the Temple and is reading out loud from a scroll of Isaiah. That's another sign that he's upper class—he owns a scroll and he knows how to read. Is he Jewish? Is he a Gentile? If he's Jewish, there would have been some restrictions on where and how he can worship, because he's a eunuch. If he's Gentile, there are also restrictions on where and how he can worship. There's really no way to know for sure if he's Jewish or not.

The Spirit tells Philip to go over to the chariot, so he does. He hears the Ethiopian reading from Isaiah and asks if he understands what he is reading. This is a question of curiosity. Philip approaches the Ethiopian openly and with curiosity rather than judgment. Philip goes on to explain the passage to him, and how it applies to Jesus, and the good news that Jesus had brought.

The Ethiopian man is an even clearer example of curiosity. He seems to accept the presence of Philip, who has apparently appeared out of nowhere. Every thing he says to Philip is a question. How can I understand, unless someone guides me? About whom is the prophet speaking? What is to prevent me from being baptized? All questions, curiosities not so much about Philip, but about scripture and Jesus and this Christian faith that Philip is proclaiming to him. So many questions, full of curiosity.

Philip, to his credit, hears and receives these questions with openness. There were all sorts of answers that he could have given to that question about baptism, all kinds of reasons why this ambiguous person might not be worthy or qualified to be baptized. But Philip errs on the side of grace, and has encountered this person with curiosity and been met with curiosity in return. And so they pull

over to some water that has miraculously appeared at just the right time, in the middle of the desert, and Philip baptizes the Ethiopian.

Philip could have judged the Ethiopian as unworthy or less-than fully human. He could have seen the Ethiopian as different, foreign, outside the bounds. He could have said he had to go ask some of the apostles about baptism. He could have thought this man wouldn't understand about Jesus, or wouldn't be interested, or wasn't close enough to the inside group. But he does none of that. Philip encounters the Ethiopian with a spirit of curiosity.

And he's met with curiosity in return, in abundance. The Ethiopian could have been intimidated or frightened by Philip's sudden appearance. He could have been offended at Philip's "Do you understand what you're reading" question. He could have rejected Philip's explanation of the good news, because when you think about it, that's a lot to take in all at one time. He could have sent Philip on his way. But he didn't. He kept asking questions. He was curious.

I often think that one of the best characteristics of Presbyterians is that, generally speaking, we are lifelong learners. We like to keep reading and learning and asking questions. The Ethiopian man can be one of our models of faith.

Both Philip and the Ethiopian man can be models for us of how to set aside judgment of other people. Jesus makes it sound so straightforward—don't judge, so that you may not be judged. But how? It's easy and even logical and normal to judge other people. The antidote to judgment is curiosity. We can reframe, rethink, reword our judgment thoughts as curiosity questions.

Let's work on that together. Let's be curious about each other, and about people we love. Let's be curious about strangers we meet. Let's be curious about what God is up to among us.