

Welcome Home¹

Most of you know that I married a PK. She knew she was marrying a preacher; and you'd think she'd have known better; but I lucked out.

Jo Lynn's father began serving Disciple congregations soon after returning from active duty in the Pacific during WWII. His first congregation was in Arkadelphia, while he was attending classes at Henderson State College. Their parsonage was a couple of Sunday School classrooms and the church kitchen. They had to get up early every Sunday morning to get their bedrooms ready for Sunday School.

So, Jo Lynn *literally* grew up in church! She frequently talks about close friends in the churches her father served; and in recent years has reconnected with some of them by way of Facebook. She remembers being nurtured by congregations filled with loving people who were unofficial grandparents, aunts, and uncles. So, from her earliest memories, the church has been a place of comfort, security, joy, and acceptance. She loved being part of a community where children feel at home. In the church she always has felt at home.

It's been the same for me. Until I was in ninth or tenth grade, I was the smallest, slowest, least athletic kid in my class; so I was bullied and picked on at school. But at church, it was different. Our Sunday School classes were smaller, and we didn't have recess, which was when the bullies converged. At church the kids related differently to me, and I always felt at home in the church.

I know that's not always been the case for some. More and more frequently I'm hearing stories from people whose experience of church has been very different from Jo Lynn's and mine; those for whom church has been a place of pain, cruel judgment, bitter rejection.

The question of who should or shouldn't be welcomed is as old as the church itself. In its earliest committee meetings, the church struggled with this very concern. In the Book of Acts, Luke records story after story about the church wrestling with this question—should the Church be open to Gentiles, who hadn't been part of the Jewish faith? They spoke different languages and had strange cultural and religious customs. Most had worshipped idols and pagan gods. Should a simple confession of faith in Christ be enough for them to be welcomed?

In those stories of struggle, Luke shares how God transformed people: Paul on the road to Damascus; Barnabas, who mentors Paul and gives him the opportunity to preach; Peter, who eats in an Italian soldier's house because of a vision that disrupted his idea of what's clean and unclean; Philip, called by God to baptize previously-hated Samaritans. **Note** (and this is crucial): God didn't transform the

¹ Adapted from parts of a Sermon on Acts 8:26-39 by The Rev. Christopher A. Henry, preached August 12, 2012 at Shallowford Presbyterian Church

heathen Gentiles! God transformed the Christians so they would be accepting of those Gentiles!

And, at the heart of each story is God's Holy Spirit: set loose on Pentecost; driving the church to cross boundaries and build bridges and tear down walls. A crucial point Luke makes is that the church grew and thrived precisely by opening itself to new and different people. Luke knew! He was one of them. It was an unsettling time as the Spirit pushed Christian leaders beyond their comfort zones to actually live out the words of Peter's Pentecost sermon *"for the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him."*

This morning's story is a perfect example. Philip, driven by the Holy Spirit to a wilderness road, encounters an Ethiopian official. Back then, Ethiopia was Timbuktu—as far away as you could get from the Jewish world. He was a eunuch and therefore ritually unclean; so as a man of religious dignity, Philip should have kept his distance. But the Spirit kept pushing: "go get in the chariot."

And when he did that, miraculous things began to happen. This unclean foreigner from the other side of the world was reading from the prophet Isaiah, and he was completely lost. So, breaking all rules of ritual cleanliness and proper boundaries, Phillip sat beside this eunuch, who asked Philip three amazing questions, each one a plea for inclusion and welcome:

-How can I understand what I'm reading unless someone guides me?

-Is the prophet speaking about himself or someone else? And, after Phillip explains how Jesus fulfilled the prophets' words,

-What is to prevent me from being baptized?

That final question summarizes the crucial debate in the church then and now: what prevents us from welcoming one another? Who is to be included and who should be left out? The Ethiopian eunuch wanted to know if he could be included.

Fred Craddock's first church was a beautiful little church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Oak Ridge was growing: new people moving to town, the construction industry booming. A lot of the newcomers lived near the church in mobile homes, trailers, and lean-tos filled with young children and large families.

Fred saw all those new people and thought his church ought to reach out to them; so at the next Board meeting he shared a plan—"here's our mission."

"Oh, I don't think so" the chairman replied. "They won't fit in. After all, they're just temporary." Fred was surprised, "They may be here temporarily, but they need the gospel, they need a church." The meeting lasted a long time. Another meeting was called for the following week.

The next week a resolution was presented, "In order to be a member of this

church a family must own property in the county." Fred was reminded that he didn't have a vote, and the motion passed unanimously. "They just won't fit in."

Twenty years later, Fred and his wife Nettie were driving nearby and decided to stop by the church. It took a while to find it. Lots of new homes and I-40 had been built. But they finally found the country road and, nestled in the pines, the beautiful white frame church was sitting there just as always.

Except... Now there was a big, full parking lot: cars, trucks, motor homes and motorcycles. As they pulled into the lot, they saw a big sign in front of the church: "Barbecue: All You Can Eat." They went inside and the place was packed.

Up where the Lord's Table had been was a salad bar; and, folks were lined up there: all kinds of people—white, black, Hispanic; rich and poor; southerners and northerners. And Fred said to his wife, "It certainly is good this isn't a church anymore. If it were, these people wouldn't be welcome. They wouldn't fit in."²

The Ethiopian eunuch asked, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" The answer is...a lot! The list of barriers is a mile long. He's the wrong kind of person in a dozen ways. But he has heard of a God who welcomes even him, and he wants to be included.

So, knowing it might upset the board members back home, feeling a bit overwhelmed by it all, maybe anxious, and certainly surprised, Philip waded into the water and claimed God's promise of grace for his new friend.

I believe as a congregation we have essentially overcome all the preventative barriers that have been raised and all the exclusive restrictions established. I believe our congregation operates out of a perspective that asks, "Who are we to say, 'No' when it is so clear that God has already said, 'Yes?'"

But I also believe that a major factor behind the decline of the church over the past 60 years has been that we've tried to do evangelism without leaving the property. What might happen if you—if I—if we became aware that God was calling us to go, as God called Phillip—and the operative word is "Go!"—maybe to someone who grew up in loving arms of the church, or someone who was turned away and cast aside... Someone trying out faith for the first time, or coming back after a long absence... What if God called you—or me—us—to go to someone just wondering if there is a place in the church for him or her; maybe someone who just needs a fresh start, a helping hand, or someone just about ready to give up.

There are just so many people within our circle of influence who need to be brought to this table, to hear these words: "Welcome home, welcome home, welcome home." Amen.

²Fred B. Craddock, *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*. Westminster John Knox, 2011. pp. 224-225.