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Signs of Life Series: Have I walked with someone not like me this week?

Recognize and commission Luke and KSC; Carson mish moment; Lilo farewell

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## Some One Different

Once upon a time there was nothing except God. And God decided to make a world. God spun planets into orbit and seasons into cycles and mountains into grandeur and it was good and beautiful. But God realized something was missing. The glory of the oceans and the infinite complexity of the atom were just the setting. The jewel in the setting was not there. So God made us, human beings, male and female, tall and short, red and white and black and brown and beautiful and God said, ah, *this is very good*.

But *we* didn't think it was good enough. So we went our own way. And God decided right then and there to win us back.

God gave us laws to live by. We broke them. God gave us punishment to warn us back. We cowered in fear. God chose one nation, Israel, to be his light to the nations, his teacher's pet to show the rest of the class how to behave. You all know how the other kids treat the teacher's pet. Finally God tried the ultimate thing. *God became one of us*. In Israel God narrowed his attention to one people to bless the rest of us, in Jesus God narrowed himself into one Jew's body. Here was the point: to return us to the relationship with God that God made us for. To knit the universe back together into one family. The church is the beginning of that one family. Hear this word about the work God is doing to make his universe whole.

Acts 8:26-39

*An angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes 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, 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 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. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.*

That’s the word of God, it belongs to you, the Pentecost people of God, thanks be to God.

This is the second in a series of sermons we’re calling “Signs of Life.” We’re preaching through our measures as a church. Our measures show us whether we’re achieving our mission or not. Our mission is simple, “Loving our community, and inviting all to discover life in Christ.” So simple it’s hard to tell when we’re doing it. How do we tell?

What we’re counting this week is this:<sup>1</sup> “Have I walked with someone not like me this week?” Now this is hard. Most of our world is dedicated to keeping us segmented into people just like us. I’ll give you an illustration—for the vast majority who don’t smoke, when was the last time you spent time with someone on purpose who does? When was the last time you had someone much poorer than you over for dinner? Or much wealthier? The people we work with, go to church with, work out with, hang out with, tend to be very much like us. In the church bubble I live in it’s very hard to spend time with someone *not* a Christian. Even in the church we segregate ourselves—youth here, kids here, older folks here—how do we break these bubbles?

Our story from Acts shows how. It shows us how wild *God* is about reaching out to those not like him. In Christ, God reaches out to us, who are wildly unlike him! God *becomes* one of us to show us all how to be human. *God* has shown us how to meet this measure, how to walk with someone not like us.

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<sup>1</sup> On screen plz

Three points from our story for today.<sup>2</sup> One, there is a breathlessness about how God works. Two God is forging us into a new kind of people. Three, when we baptize all of us go down in the water together.

<sup>3</sup>One, there is a breathlessness about how God works. I visited with a cousin of mine in New York recently. He supervises commodity traders at JP Morgan Chase (I don't even know what that means). He took me to the floor of the exchange and everybody had 6 computer screens in front of them crawling data. My cousin moves so fast I had to run to keep up with him—that's his normal pace. They make \$6 million in a good trading day. He thinks his work matters. That's why he's rushing around. And for what—hustling more credit default swaps?

In the church we move so slowly sometimes. Do we realize that what *we* do matters? How important it is? We have the word of life. Without the Lord Jesus there is no creation, no grace, no life. Why aren't we at least as breathless as my cousin, at least once in a while?

The angel says to Philip—get up and go to the desert. And Philip *runs*:<sup>4</sup> look, “Philip ran up to the chariot.” In our world people run for fun. In the ancient world, in the desert, they did not run for fun. And after the whole story is over Philip is whisked away hundreds of miles. One of you in my Wednesday night communion group asked “How come God didn't have Philip stick around and teach this new Christian a thing or two?” No idea. In Acts the Holy Spirit has no time to waste. One of you told me recently, “I'm going to sound like a fundamentalist saying this, but every day that passes is a day closer to Jesus coming back. We have no time to lose telling others about Jesus.” I said you don't sound like a fundamentalist, you sound like the book of Acts. Breathless, committed, in a hurry. To walk with those not like you.

You'll notice a drumbeat as we preach our measures.<sup>5</sup> “*This week*.” Have I walked with someone not like me *this week*. Not sometime. Long ago. When I was a kid. *No*. This week. We have to be intentional about Jesus *every week*. Breathlessly. Because it matters so.

And why all the hurry?<sup>6</sup> Because God is forging us into a new people. To understand this wonderful story we have to step back a bit. I've preached this passage to you before, on a past Mother's Day. The point of being a eunuch is that there will be no more Mother's Days in his house.

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<sup>2</sup> I. God is in a hurry. II. God is forging us into a new people III. In baptism we all get wet.

<sup>3</sup> I. God is in a hurry

<sup>4</sup> On screen plz Acts 8:29

<sup>5</sup> “*This week*” on screen plz

<sup>6</sup> II. God is forging us into a new people.

Some of you parents told me you had delightful conversations on the way home about what a eunuch is. Sorry. Blame the bible. Many royal courts in the ancient world had males castrated so they could serve queens with no fear of an infidelity. This eunuch is powerful--he serves Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, he's in charge of her entire treasury, he might be the richest man on the continent of Africa. He has all the money in the world and no one to love to spend it on.

He's empty. He can have no children. In the bible he can't even worship God. Deuteronomy says eunuchs will not be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. The reason is that the point of being Jewish is to make more Jews, to fill the world with God's people. I asked a rabbi once what the weirdest thing is about Jesus, his fellow Jew. He said that's easy. What, walking on water? Rising from the dead? No. He never married. Never had children. My mom was pleased when I became a rabbi, he said. That's something good Jewish boys should consider. But she would have been devastated if I never had kids. That's something good Jewish boys *have to do*. The eunuch can't be Jewish. He has all the money in the world and all he wants is God, who you can't buy. And he can't have God. He rides his chariot back home to Africa reading a book he can't understand.<sup>7</sup> "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asks him. "How can I, unless someone guides me?" he says miserably.

Think of you thing you've wanted most in your life that you didn't get. Go ahead. I got mine in mind. What was it? This man wants God more than anything and can't have him. Can you imagine? Hear me now: our place of greatest loss is where Jesus meets and heals us. Think of that place of loss in your heart. How can Jesus meet you right there?

The eunuch is reading this,<sup>8</sup> "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."<sup>9</sup> He asks, "About whom, may I ask you, did the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Sounds so proper and British when we translate the bible. The eunuch essentially asks, who dat? It sounds like himself, "His life is taken away from the earth." This man can have no children, no life after he's gone. But it's actually about Jesus. *He* was the sheep to the slaughter, the one to whom justice was denied, life taken away. All our loss, all our agony, all our pain is taken up by Jesus and nailed to the cross. There is nothing we can experience that is not swallowed up by Christ. God has become

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<sup>7</sup> Acts 8:30-31.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 8:32-33 on screen plz

<sup>9</sup> Acts 8:34 up

human. One of us. Jesus *is* like the eunuch. No children. Jesus is like Philip, who has four daughters who are all prophets—look,<sup>10</sup> “Philip had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy.” Philip has been told before ‘Look--there are acceptable people and unacceptable people, when will you ever learn Philip?’ And Philip has ignored it. His daughters can preach. Who is to stop them if God gave them this gift? Jesus is making us all into one body, the church. God’s people and Gentiles. Black and Jewish. Slave and free. Unacceptable and acceptable. Rich and poor. Female and male. Old and young. Just one people. The body of God’s Son. Beloved. Have I told y’all you’re beautiful lately?

A woman had a vision once of going to heaven. She said she saw Jesus and he looked *exactly like her*. It was like looking in a mirror. She was surprised. Jesus said why be surprised? You’re made in my image. In Christ every human being can become part of God’s body the church. And here’s the thing: God always said it would be this way. God narrowed his attention to Israel and to Jesus to bless the whole world.<sup>11</sup> God’s life with us is hourglass shaped, it narrows down to Jesus in the middle and then widens out to include everybody. Everybody everywhere matters, we say. Deuteronomy shuts the eunuch out, but Isaiah says something else,<sup>12</sup> “To the eunuchs . . . who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters, I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.” God is always going after the unacceptable, out of bounds, misfit people. That’s why we need to walk with people not like us.

I heard a pastor of a church like ours say one time “everyone here feels like an outsider.” It’s true of us too. Everyone feels like an outsider. People here decades have told me they feel like they don’t count. No one listens to me. What do you mean? You’ve been on every committee, given money and time and wisdom, had your kids baptized and married here, and you’re an outsider? Yep. In an institution as complex as ours anyone can feel on the outs, unattended to, not noticed. That’s a terrible feeling. But what if this is the reason why? There is no inside and outside? God has smudged all the boundaries so outsiders can come in and insiders can make room. In Acts a wealthy African religious person who is on the list of unwanted, wants to join up. Can we make room for him? If not, we need to change. I wonder whether in decades and centuries to come folks will look back on the church in our century and say how come they didn’t reach out to Latinos? God sent these millions of people to where the church can reach out and we did nothing? Shame on us! We could respond from our graves hey, it was hard enough to get out of bed in the morning! And that’s

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<sup>10</sup> Acts 21:9 on screen plz

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.ablogtowatch.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Ikepod-Hourglass-6.jpg>

<sup>12</sup> Is 56:4-5 on screen plz

true. Here's the point: there is no inside and outside with God. All there is is Jesus, and those who want to get close to him. And when we get close to him we find ourselves closer to each other. We call it church. God forging us into a new people, almost all of whom are *unlike us*.

This is why we're opening King Street Church, where Luke Edwards will lead. These folks will gather in living rooms and coffee shops and parks. There is no physical address, there's just community groups who'll read scripture and preach (really short sermons!) and who will pray and serve. This is for folks so far outside the church they'll never come to our building. So we've gone to them. And I wonder how *we'll* be changed for having done so? This is why we're rethinking how we reach out to those who are guests at our church, as Johnny Carson will discuss in a few moments. We have 1,500 guests in our building every year. They're low-hanging fruit, they're like the eunuch, something has happened in their lives that has brought them to us, all we have to do is open our arms to someone not like us.

<sup>13</sup>Three and finally for today baptism changes all of us. This is my favorite detail of the story,<sup>14</sup> "Look, here is water, what is to prevent me from being baptized?" Wait, you need to take a class. Wait, you need to be up on Methodist doctrine. Wait wait wait. No waiting with God. He's too busy forging us into a new people. The eunuch, the unacceptable one, says, hey, I want Jesus, the *original* unacceptable one! And water appears. In the desert. In midday. And not a little water. You see how God makes a way where there is no way?<sup>15</sup> "And both of them, Philip *and the eunuch* went down into the water and Philip baptized him." I've gotten a lot of teasing for wearing waders into the river when we baptize. Look how serious Philip is, no waders, *he dives in*—they both come up dripping wet, made new. *This is why we reach out to those unlike us, God makes us a new we* (say that with me). God brings new cultures into the church and the church is refreshed, re-evangelized, made new, *different*, as we dive in too.

Heard an interview with a Catholic bishop from Ghana, who said when the church evangelized west Africa they were taught to hit their chest when they confess their sins, "through my own fault, through my own fault, through my most grievous fault." Any former Catholics here today? *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*, anyway. He said "In Ghana when you strike your chest you're saying you are tough, you will fight, so we were saying 'I will fight you God.' Some confession!" European culture just parachuted into Africa. But *now*, Ghanaians put Jesus in their

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<sup>13</sup> III. In baptism we all get wet.

<sup>14</sup> Acts 8:37 on screen plz

<sup>15</sup> Acts 8:38 on screen

clothes. They bring drums and dancing into worship. There are almost as many Presbyterians in Ghana now as there are in the US. And the whole church is refreshed, made new, comes up out of the water dripping wet like Philip does. In the church we give our faith away. That's the only way to get it back and be made new ourselves. According to church lore the eunuch in Acts was the first evangelist in Africa, baptized his queen, the Ethiopic Church exists to this day. The water from that baptism hasn't dried yet.

This text shows the limits of diversity and tolerance, big catchwords in our day. Every campus I know exalts diversity, and that's better than what we had before, *intolerance*. But Philip doesn't just tolerate the eunuch. He baptizes him. Becomes brothers with this man with no family. Comes up dripping wet with him. Baptism isn't tolerance. It's a whole new me, a whole new you, a whole new people. I remember an African American undergraduate saying tolerance wasn't good enough for her. Why? What's the alternative? She said, "I don't just want to be tolerated. I think I'd rather be loved." And that's another thing entirely. Love is where you give yourself away and then get yourself back, different, new.

And that's what God does to us. Gives himself away in Jesus. Makes us a new people called church. And renews his whole world to be the people God intended in the first place. Have I walked with someone not like me this week? Because God walked with me. And when we walk together with those different we might just see water, dive down, and become new. Amen.