

Giordano Bruno was a 16th century monk who also happened to be an astrologer. In his day, most believed the earth to be the center of the universe with all the other “celestial bodies” fixed to it and orbiting it. In 1543, Copernicus challenged all this creating the idea of heliocentrism—the *sun* was, in fact, what the *earth* revolved around. Copernicus caught all kinds of hell from the church for this as is well documented.

But Giordano Bruno took this idea even further, thinking about what lay even beyond what we could see with our own eyes. This led Bruno to envision in remarkable clarity what we *know* to be true today about our universe—that the sun is a star, that other planets are similar to earth in form, and that there are even multiple galaxies apart from our own. Not only are we *not* the center of our own universe, we’re lost in a multitude of space and stardust—a cosmological needle in a haystack.

Bruno never separated his science from his God. In fact, Bruno’s discoveries led him to be amazed even more by the Creator and the wonders of this universe. Bruno was in constant wonder of a God who still had new things to show us.

Bruno’s claims were considered just as badly a heresy as Copernicus’ views and Bruno was eventually put on trial. He was berated for believing things that the church saw as unbiblical. As the inquisition hammered down on Bruno, legend has it that he lifted his head to the tribunal and declared, “Your God is too small.”

I’m not one to think that God looks just like Santa Claus – or even that God is male. For me, God is the name we put on that which organizes and drive the universe so yeah – I know God is really really big. But what’s amazing is, God gets bigger for me the more I learn about science. The number of tiny microbes living in a drop of dew on a blade of grass, the massive number of galaxies, the crazy expanse of time – The universe is so much bigger than I can wrap my head around - and God is bigger than that!

When we cease to be humble in our faith, our God is too small.

When we label those who disagree with us as heretics or write them off as just insane, our God is too small.

When we are the ones who get to decide who’s “in” and who’s “out” of the church, our God is too small.

When we don’t reflect the radical, subversive, and scandalous grace that Christ showed us to others, our God is too small.

Of the Gospel writers, if John is the theologian and Matthew is the preacher and Mark of course with his very short sentences is -- Luke is the great storyteller. It is in the gospel of Luke that we find some of the best loved stories of the tradition (Good Samaritan, Disciples encountering Christ on road to Emmaus etc.) rich in detail and character description and so it is with this story from the Book of Acts, which is, of course, the gospel of Luke’s second volume. One of the most

incredible characters in all of the New Testament is perhaps the one most out of place – the Ethiopian Eunuch.

The story goes like this – In the years following Jesus’ death the disciples were in great danger and they scattered. Philip was travelling the road from Jerusalem south to Gaza.

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 <sup>28</sup> and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. <sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” <sup>30</sup> So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” <sup>31</sup> He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?”

<sup>35</sup> Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. <sup>36</sup> 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?”<sup>[h]</sup> <sup>38</sup> He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

What a picture the author paints. But the layers of meaning need a little teasing out. So what do we know about this surprising character, this Ethiopian Eunuch.

From the fact that he is riding along this wilderness road in a chariot – we know he is a man of some great importance. In fact we learn that he managed the treasury for the Queen of Ethiopia.

And he’s reading – so he’s an educated man (very few people knew how to read in those days, let alone read Hebrew). And he has his own personal scroll of the prophet Isaiah so he’s likely wealthy, it was not at all common to own an actual book. He is returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, so he seems to have a strong spiritual life. He’s undertaken a great journey to worship God in the temple.

He also invites Philip to come and sit with him in the chariot, showing his hospitality. And the questions he asks of Philip show him to be a humble person.

And from the fact that he is a eunuch – we know this man will never ever be good enough.

His whole life has been shaped in the service of others; eunuchs were generally castrated before puberty to serve the needs of the social elite, to serve in the court of the queen and the harems of royalty where they would not be tempted to harass the women. His entire life was dedicated to serving the powers that be – and the very same people he serves – will view him as mutilated, perverse, as ritually unclean with no hope of ever becoming anything else.

If you touched something unclean you could wash and be made clean, if you could wash and become clean. If you did something unclean you could offer a sacrifice, but this man, because his sex does not match the norm, is simply unclean, no matter how faithful a man he might be, no matter all these other attributes, despite travelling all this way from Ethiopia to the temple in Jerusalem he will never be allowed inside the temple. He will never be a part of God's chosen people all the way. He will never be a part of good society. To us even – note, he is only the Eunuch. He is given no name.

And yet, even in the midst of this terrible network of oppression, God – if not God's people – keeps calling him back. He's come across a passage in the Book of Isaiah speaking of the Messiah as the one "who in his humiliation was deprived of justice," and the Ethiopian asks this incredibly polite and perfect question, "about whom does the prophet say this".

What he's really asking is:

Is there room for me in these promises I hear about God. Is there room for me in God's story. Is there room for me in God's love. And there's Philip sitting next to him... on the spot

The book of Acts is not the story of how the disciples become the Apostles. That's not the point. Acts is the story of the education of the new born church about just how far God's love and grace really extends into the world -- already. These newly Christened apostles don't carry the Spirit with them to people who don't have it yet, but in Acts they are sent out to encounter the Spirit, to meet it, to name it and to affirm it's action among people they can scarcely imagine. So when Philip sits in this chariot with this man he doesn't teach him about Jesus as if there will be a pop quiz later, but shares his personal experience with Jesus. And how his experience of Jesus is shaping his faith. How his experience of Jesus informs his interpretation of this passage from Isaiah. He understands that Jesus was also an innocent cut off in his prime, that Jesus also suffered humiliation and injustice at the hands of the powers that be, that he was also killed... but Jesus remained faithful, to the cross and beyond, in order to bear witness that the promises of God are for all people, and especially for those who have been excluded. This isn't an Old Testament/New Testament thing, this isn't a Jewish/Christian thing, this is a GRACE thing.

And the seeds of the Spirit are right there. In this book this man was reading. A little later in Isaiah is reads...

For this is what the Lord says:

"To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,  
who choose what pleases me  
and hold fast to my covenant—  
to them I will give within my temple and its walls  
a memorial and a name  
better than sons and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name

that will endure forever.

The strength of that promise is made new and fresh for them. The nameless eunuch, emboldened by these words says, “Look, here is water, What is to prevent me from being baptized?” It’s like a dare to Philip to put his practice where his preaching is. And to his credit and to the glory of God, Philip gets down from the chariot into the water with him, the Creator who made him, and Jesus who knows him inside and out and the spirit who holds him when the world assails him day after day. And the church’s heart grows 3 sizes that day. The eunuch gets something better, a new name, after all that’s what happens in baptism, right, the church may have forgotten, no one wrote it down, but God knows his name and he does too, and that makes all the difference. Have you ever felt not good enough? Excluded? Abandoned? Ashamed? God’s love and grace are for you too. God knows you by name.

And this is an amazing thing in our intricate and expanding cosmos. As our understanding of science, of the universe, of the nature of creation expands – our understanding of the infinite nature of God expands and becomes more rich. And our own specialness as part of this great universe also becomes undeniable. God knows the name of the largest star, the smallest particle, and each person in this room.

In the same way, if we continue to draw the circle wider to welcome more and different types of people into our family of faith, if, like the disciples, we encounter the spirit, meet it, name it and affirm its action among people we can scarcely imagine – then our hearts will continue to grow, and our faith will continue to grow. And God’s love and grace will continue to grow as we see it, and name it, and share it in the world.

At Old South we are undertaking this very serious work. We pride ourselves on being a place of radical welcome, the church of the open door, and part of this commitment is to continually be mindful of the ways in which our hospitality falls short. Right now the deacons and staff are exploring possible changes to make our worship more welcoming to transgender, non-binary and gender queer individuals. Maybe that will look like new nametags that explicitly state our pronouns. A setting in which all people are encouraged to state their pronouns helps foster a space where all are affirmed in claiming and stating their own gender expression and identity. We’ll probably need to practice a bit more at using the singular “they” pronoun – although our Trinitarian theology, and understanding of God as neither male nor female may help with this. Certainly it will also mean being intentional about avoiding binary gender language in our liturgy and governing documents. But why stop there. How can we make our building, liturgy and worship more accessible and affirming for all people? God invites us into this moment of deep consideration of how we can grow in understanding, in welcome and in faith.