

be·coming·us

Sermon #3: Immigrants

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Text: Acts 8:26-40

Theme: Helping immigrants in the U.S.

Intro: If you had a choice to baptize one person or 500, which would you choose? That was approximately the choice of Philip in Acts chapter 8. He chose one, and I think you probably would agree; he chose the better.

The story of the Ethiopian Eunuch is a simple one. We have a Jewish evangelist, displaced from his city by Paul's persecution. He flees to a region where no self-respective persecutor would chase him—the "ghetto" of Samaria. Philip didn't plan the location as a strategy of evangelism; he just ran for his life. In a surprising twist of fate, he finds himself on the cutting edge of church growth. Literally, he planted the first non-Jewish Christian church. That's impressive for a young man who heretofore was involved in the feeding arm of a senior adult ministry. His fame spread to such an extent that the chief Apostles paid him a visit to authenticate his novel approach to church growth.

He had fame, miraculous power, lots of baptisms, and a stellar reputation. Why would anyone leave that? But he did. He was called by God to pack his bags and head out of town to intersect with a single individual who would ultimately open the Gospel not only to a nation but to an entire continent. So let me ask you again, would you choose one over 500 if you knew the one might well baptize 5,000?

There are still people today, who can be reached to accomplish evangelism on a scale that we ourselves could never imagine. Wouldn't you have loved to have been Philip? To open a door to one person who became a portal for an entire ethnic group? That door is actually open again today in ways that have been virtually impossible for most westerners for centuries.

We know that migration and immigration create openness to the Gospel. And we know that Americans are positioned in a unique space and time to capitalize on this openness as never before. Whether we do or not will be a choice we make. But in order to make an informed decision, let's at least take some time to open up the Bible and see what obstacles we will face if we decide to move forward through this open door.

I. Five reasons why we might miss our own divine appointment

A. We like those who are like us. In other words, God loves the world; we love homogeneous groups.

1. There is nothing wrong with the gravitational pull to individuals and groups that look like us. In fact, they can be great tools for reaching people. After all, Paul always started at the synagogue because they spoke the same biblical language. But homogeneous groups can also be barriers that keep us from a greater opportunity.

2. If we trace the book of Acts, we see how really important to God Gentile evangelism was and how terribly difficult it was for the church.
 - a) Except for Acts 11:19-20, no group or individual chose to leave the comforts of culture to cross a geographic or ethnic line. What about Paul's journeys? Well, they were all prompted by persecution, visions, or trials. Sure he wanted to go to Rome, but remember, he planned on visiting the church there.
 - b) The same is true for Philip. It was persecution that sent him to Samaria and a miraculous call that pushed him to the desert road.
 - c) If we walk from Chapter 6-10, when the first full Gentile accepted Christ, we see a number of steps God took to take us on this journey of Gentile inclusion:
 - (1) 6:1, Hellenistic widows had a physical need that demanded a cultural barrier be broken within the same blood line.
 - (2) 8:4-5, Philip was put on the run by Paul's persecution to reach the half-Jews of Samaria.
 - (3) 8:26, Philip was then miraculously called to the desert to reach a non-Jewish convert called a God-fearer.
 - (4) 9:1f., Paul, the persecutor, is miraculously converted to be chosen as the Apostle to the Gentiles.
 - (5) 9:43, Peter is moved to Joppa to live with a ritually unclean tanner to prepare for a visit to a Gentile's house.
 - (6) 10:9, Peter has a vision of unclean food he is ordered to eat: "Stop calling unclean what God has cleansed."
 - (7) 10:21, Through a parallel vision, the servants of Cornelius show up at that exact moment to take him to Cornelius.
 - d) In short, crossing geographical and ethnic lines is not easy, natural, or simple. It will take a call of God, a man of peace, and an effective strategy.
- B. We avoid change.** The more successful we are, the more we resist change.
1. Philip already had a successful ministry. There was more work for him to do than he could keep up with. God now calls him to get up and leave it when there was clearly opposition from Simon Magus and no way these Samaritans could fend him off without the dominant leadership of Philip.
 2. When things are going well in your ministry, it is easy to justify sticking with what is working. None of us have enough material and human resources to start new ventures when people are already coming to Christ. Why start something new and dilute your energy and resources?
- C. We judge the "other" is "inferior"...**ok, that's not nice to say, so we'll just say, "others are odd." That was certainly true of the Ethiopian Eunuch.
1. The Ethiopian Eunuch had two strikes against him.
 - a) Obviously, he's an Ethiopian. They had been historic enemies of Israel (2 Chron 14:9f). The ancient name of "Cush" (see Isaiah 11:11; 18:1-2; 20:3-5).
 - b) They were dark-skinned foreigners.

- c) They spoke a different language.
 - d) They ate unclean stuff that would make you vomit!
 - e) They are from a faraway place—foreign = fearsome.
2. He was a Eunuch.
 - a) If you don't know what that is, you wouldn't believe me if I told you. Nonetheless, there was a need for Eunuchs in a kingdom lead by a woman...Oh, yeah, that's right, his boss was a domineering woman. You needed the strength of a man for her protection without the possibility of procreation.
 - b) Do a simple Google search in the Bible for the word Eunuch, and you will find how they were perceived. It's not good.
 - c) There's a lot not to like about this guy.
 3. If we are going to love the people God loves, we are going to have to overlook a lot of things we don't like.
- D. We avoid inconvenience.** Surely if it's inconvenient it mustn't be God's will.
1. The Ethiopian Eunuch was on a deserted road heading nowhere. There's no way to double up your efforts to multi-task.
 2. Most ministry with immigrants is inconvenient.
 - a) You often have to leave where you are and what you're doing to go to them.
 - b) They are not always easy to find, and they don't always want to be found.
 - c) There WILL be cultural barriers to overcome; that's an energy drain.
 - d) There may well be a language barrier, which is difficult and awkward, so it's easy to be misunderstood.
 - e) They may not like you anymore than you like them.
 - f) When Philip went out there, he was outnumbered and in danger.
 - g) Your constituents will ask several times if this is really worth the effort.
- E. We assume others don't need what we have.** We have been trained not to impose our culture and values on others.
1. The Eunuch had been up to Jerusalem to worship—surely someone told him about Jesus there.
 2. The Eunuch had a Bible—surely he could read the prophecies about Jesus.
 3. The Eunuch had money to travel and a job—surely he had his own religious values.
 4. There is really no reason to suspect that the Eunuch was even open to the Gospel...except that he was. If you think going to him was hard, think about how much hardship he underwent to find Yahweh.
 - a) He traveled a very long way, probably against his Queen's religion.
 - b) He went to a temple where he was not welcomed and was stopped in the court of the Gentiles, so he could not complete the last 100 steps of a 500 mile journey.

c) He purchased a new scroll that in our economy would be valued at over \$50,000.

II. **What makes this worth the effort?** Let's answer this question by observing two questions asked by the Ethiopian Eunuch:

- A. Question #1: The Ethiopian Eunuch is trying his best to understand Isaiah 53, the most famous passage predicting the death of the Messiah. He said to Philip in Acts 8:34, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" This is the kind of evangelistic opportunity I would drool over. Don't you want that?
- B. Question #2: Acts 8:36 (ESV) "And as they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" Wouldn't you love to share the Gospel with someone so open, so eager, so in love with Jesus that they would dive into the pool rather than being coaxed. You can. Immigrants everywhere are open to the Gospel. Each one? No. But on balance, they are eager for a new start in life. I'm not going to pretend that it won't cost you. I am going to suggest your reward is bigger than you think, for these immigrants will be as open handed with their new found faith as you are with them. What if there is nothing more effective you could do with your life then open the Gospel to a person who becomes a portal to a nation?
- C. Conclude with a life story of an immigrant who freely accepted Christ and had a tremendous impact on people we could never reach.
- D. Like the Ethiopian Eunuch, many immigrants traveled across an ocean to come to where we are, but we will not cross town to meet them. Nations, not individuals, are hanging in the balance.