

A whole new way of looking at it

Acts 8:26-40

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I left the church that told me what to think. I had been raised with philosophical conversations around the dinner table that were aimed at teaching us *how* to think. And perhaps that was my downfall when it came to Sunday school.

When we look at scripture, knowingly or unknowingly, we see it through a bunch of lenses. Some of us never questioned what we ‘heard’ or was told in Sunday school. We’ve never examined those ‘truths’ with the eyes of a grownup.

We remember children’s stories – we never looked at them as stripped backed, fantasised versions of the gospel. Children are unable to distinguish between literal and fairy stories. Jesus and the Easter bunny have equal status in a tiny world. There is supposed to be a point of transition (or maturity) in our religious education – but many never got the opportunity.

We have our own history – it may be, as more than one person has described to me, blissful memories lying across Nanna’s lap in church. This is not about worshipping God but more about creating or recreating a feeling. It was rarely about the words or the songs – it is about an uncomplicated time of peace.

People remember words of rejection – particularly those who were divorced, gay, not part of the in-crowd, from out of town. They voted with their feet. There was a lot about “old” church that led a generation to believe they just weren’t good enough and never would be so, why bother? They heard sin and repentance and don’t remember grace and forgiveness.

But then again, there are people who yearn for old-fashioned services, not so much as worship but to recapture– that feeling. While it is comfortable to hear a familiar message, it is not always right for the circumstance.

And on that note, I have a story. My Dad loved to travel so often the 6 children and 2-3 adults would be squished into the station wagon for road trips. There were no seat belt laws in those days so every foot well and cargo space was used to store children. To keep us from fighting, Mother we would sing, play word games and eat...in alternate order.

My parents were somewhat bohemian intellectuals, and their parents were from non-English backgrounds, so their repertoire of children's songs was extremely limited. Basically, they knew *Frère Jacques* and *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*. So they taught us the songs they knew, songs like 'she waited in the water and she got (clap) all wet'¹ and the entire song book of Tom Lehrer. You've heard of him, right? He was an American Yale University mathematician who wrote satirical songs. My favourites being *Poisoning Pigeons in the Park*; *the Old Dope Peddler* and *Rickety tickety tin*. These are songs I learned before I could talk and it was only when I was bouncing my own baby on my knee that I realised how utterly inappropriate they were for children!

You see – I knew the words but I had never *heard* them. I just remembered being part of it all. I just loved it.

That's what Bible school was like. We learned the stories, we know the words – but some people never actually heard them and when they did, they've not noticed the filters.^{2 3}

Critical thinking requires us to be limber – to be able to look at the same thing from a bunch of directions.

Bible study calls us to walk around scripture as if it is 3 dimensional and try and look at it through the translations and adaptations; through history and archaeology; and through scholarly commentators who have wrestled with God in their own times. Putting our songs and Bible studies into their own times is important. Our theological views are shaped by culture. Remember, there was a time when Drs were taught hysteria was a women's disease. Fads and fashions pass through Bible teaching (and churches) just as well.

I have to acknowledge my own filters, where I come from; who taught me; what I have experienced and what speaks to me in a story. I've been told I have a naïve view⁴. I've been told I have an Islander and a liberationist view. It means we read the same Bible but we may not be hearing the same things.

¹ The end of this risqué song reveals her bathing suit got wet. a WWII song sung by sailors.

² For example, it only occurred to me as I was writing this why my parents didn't know any children's songs. Their parents were migrants working long hours to make a future. They had no time to sing to them and if they did, it was not in English.

³ For example, why European's nativity scenes were almost always white people.

⁴ Apparently, that's not an insult but a specific theological bent. I read the Bible like a child, an outsider

Now I am going to talk about Phillip and the Eunuch. This is my favourite story because it is a chaplain's story. The very first person Phillip gets to baptise in his newly minted ministry is a black, transgender, foreigner.

When I said that at the Combined Ministers' Breakfast – there was shocked silence. I was wondering which bit of Ethiopian and which bit of eunuch they didn't understand? I guess most just sweep over that part.

God tells Phillip to go out to the south road. The spirit moves him there. He doesn't know why and he doesn't know what he is doing. He is simply present, open and ready. Rule one for chaplains – be present and ready.

Along comes an Ethiopian eunuch. Rule two – meet them *where they are*. Phillip wasn't sitting in a church waiting. He's in the wilderness.

The eunuch is a wealthy, educated man. He is reading scripture. He is returning from Jerusalem where he went to worship. According to the Old Testament, a eunuch (or any man who was 'incomplete') would not have been allowed to worship in the temple. So even as a rejected outsider, he is a man of committed deep faith, making his pilgrimage. Rule 3 – meet them as *they are*.

Phillip asks if he understands what he is reading and the Eunuch says, 'how can I unless someone guides me?'. Chaplains wait to be asked into another's spiritual musings. They travel *with* them.

Now you and I have been taught that this Isaiah reading speaks of Jesus. But why was the eunuch reading it – why is it important here?

'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.'

I have heard people with disabilities say this is the point where they connect with Jesus. Their bodies have also been changed through no fault of their own. They feel humiliated and the unfairness of it all. They read themselves into this Jesus story. For them, this is the point of *being seen and heard*. We need to hear these stories through others' eyes.

Transgender Christians identify with the whole story as the Eunuch is accepted with no fuss or fanfare. He just is. And is accepted as he is.

Black Christians celebrate this story because the Eunuch is not accepted or rejected because of his colour but instead holds an equal and important role to the telling and re-telling of the Gospel story. He is presented as a dignified, educated person. This is one story where the main character is not white-washed.

Then Phillip tells the eunuch about his experiences. He doesn't tell him what to think. He doesn't push him in any direction.

It is the Eunuch who asks was there anything to prevent him from being baptised. I remind you that this is a person *not* allowed in the Temple In a way, this is a test and Phillip willingly includes him in the Jesus family. It's not about the rules. It is about the love of God. Love over rules (pun intended).

Finally – and this is the most important aspect of chaplaincy – either the Spirit takes him away or he knows when to leave. A chaplain only travels with a person through a crisis or epiphany. They learn to let go and continue in their Ministry for the unknown.

Most people have been taught that the focus of his story is about Phillip converting the Eunuch but I don't think that's true. The Eunuch was already a learned man of faith. I believe God sent the Eunuch to teach Phillip. God put them both there for a reason.

And that is a lesson for all of us. We never know when we are going to bump into someone; in a parking lot; on a bus; waiting in a queue. If **we** are present and accepting, and if they open the door to their hearts; *that* is what we are there for. We may be the guides or the guided. Can we be open to both?

Evangelism does not mean shoving beliefs at someone – but it does mean willing to be open when someone is searching. Even though we might feel like we know nothing. Even though we have no idea what we are doing.

We've all had dust on our shoes; The epiphany of hindsight – an understanding that only comes later. You never know who you're going to bump into on this rocky road of life – the only question is, 'how are you going to respond?'

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