

## **“The New Family”**

*Acts 8: 26-40*

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We are now 5 Sundays after Easter. That day - that bright Sunday morning when the once dead Jesus burst the bonds of death and came forward out of the tomb. Life conquered death. The impossible, the inconceivable, happened. The future was cracked open with fresh potential. There we meet a living, let-loose Easter Saviour, who breaks down barriers to God and those between people.

This week, the Bible takes a look at family ties and our identities. Now, if there was one human experience dear to us, it is our family. We love our families. During political campaigns, politicians love to talk about supporting the family. It gets votes. Usually they are pretty vague about what “family values” actually means. But, family is one issue a politician can be for without stepping on anyone’s toes.

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a more cherished human arrangement than the family. And for good reason. God seems to have instilled in us a fierce loyalty to our blood kin. And a willingness to love and shelter and protect our own. God made us to love and protect our families. Most of us are not violent by nature. And yet - when asked “If your family was threatened, especially your children, would you kill someone if it were necessary to protect your family - I would dare say that all of us, myself included, would readily answer - “Yes!”

The common expression is “Blood is thicker than water.” Our family has become the source of our identity, and our values. Home is where you go when you have absolutely nowhere else to go. Family are the people who take you in when everyone else has rejected you.

Roots. We always need to get back to our roots. What did the Bible say about all of this? Have we added something to it that wasn’t there in the first place? We may have forgotten how deeply ambiguous the early church was about family. We need to be reminded that pagan Roman society had no more cherished value than its belief in the primacy of the family. Every Roman institution had its basis in the Roman family. There was virtually no other means of social advancement in ancient Rome than marriage into a more superior family - because your family determined your status in life. And we should also remember that one major Roman criticism was that those nasty Christians were destroying the family.

Let us recall the story of Jesus calling his disciples, the story of the calling of the sons of Zebedee. How they left their father with his fishing nets and followed Jesus. The story doesn't say what their father thought of his two sons walking out on the family business and tagging along after this itinerant preacher named Jesus. In fact, the Gospel doesn't seem to care what he thought. By calling people to follow him, Jesus broke the hearts of many a first-century family.

And now, in our story this morning from Acts, it was after Easter. The apostle Philip is sleeping. And he awakes from his sleep to find an angel standing before him. **"Get up!"** says the angel, **"and go out into the middle of the desert at noontime."** And so Philip goes. And out into the desert he meets a man. Sort of. He is a eunuch - a chamberlain in the court of the queen of the Ethiopians. He is returning from a visit to the temple in Jerusalem and he is reading from the Word of God. Reading from a scroll that has a passage from the prophet Isaiah on it.

And then he comes to that passage from Isaiah: **"He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, like a sheep before its shearers is dumb. He didn't open his mouth. Justice was denied him. He has been cut off from the land of the living. Who is going to declare his posterity?"**

And you see - that passage connects with the Ethiopian eunuch. Who is going to declare his posterity? - That question is asked about the coming Messiah in the book of Isaiah. And this eunuch can feel the poignancy - the urgency - of that question in his own life. He himself will never have any posterity because he has been neutered. He too is without generation. So, who is the Scripture talking about? When Philip climbs into the Ethiopian's chariot, that is the eunuch's first question. **"Who is that?"**

And we may wonder to ourselves as we read this passage from the Acts: Why is this man so interested in this small, seemingly obscure passage from Isaiah? Well, he is a eunuch. And the Old Testament scripture says, in **Deuteronomy 23:1** that the eunuch **"shall not enter the assembly of the Lord."**

There shall be no place in God's family for a eunuch, says the old law. Why? Because, of course, the family is all-important. And this man will never have a family - this sexless person, made that way by accident, or choice, or royal decree. In the society around him, children and wives were praised as the highest reward from God. But this eunuch will never have children, will never have a wife, will never have a family. And so, according to the old law, he can never enter the temple and praise God with the rest of us who have been blessed by God with a family.

This eunuch is reading this passage from Isaiah. He says: Who is this who is cut off, cut off from the land of the living, without posterity, and therefore without future? Who is this? You see, to him, this is important. Because the prophet Isaiah say this too. Listen carefully: ***“The days will come when the foreigner will no longer say, ‘The Lord will separate me from his people.’ The days will come when the eunuch will no longer say, ‘O, I am just a dry stick.’ The days will come when the eunuch who loves me and my house and my covenant shall have a name written in my house and my covenant which shall be better than a thousand sons and daughters, and will be remembered forever.”***

You see what is happening? This man has been searching for meaning to his existence. He has been searching for identity. Everybody has told him that he will find both meaning and identity in the family. And outside of the family he will find neither. And here he is searching through the Scriptures trying to find his name. He has been to the Temple in Jerusalem, but they won't let him in. Because he doesn't have family.

The family. It is the source, not only of our greatest gifts. But also of our greatest damage. You see, the family has become the one, the only place of our identity and direction. And, lacking any other place within our lives with the power to stand for anything, our society is left without any other source of identity or meaning. And so we make the family take over everything. The shocking thing is this: not that we give too little attention to the family. But that we put too much pressure on it. The sad state of many Canadian families may be testimony to the truth - not that we don't love our families, but that we smother them. We are asking our families to bear far too much weight. To be all things for us. To fill all of our needs. And then we panic when they can't deliver. And families crack under the burden.

Listen parents. One of the greatest gifts a parent can give a child is the reassurance that all of the parent's hopes, dreams, and aspirations are not resting upon that child. Whenever the parent has communicated to the child: "I gave you...." "You owe me..." the family has failed.

Listen children. One of the greatest gifts children can give to parents is the reassurance that the source and significance of their lives is not totally dependent upon the competency or the goodness of the parents.

God created the family. And God did not create the family in a vacuum in His world. God created the family as an institution that is dependent upon other human arrangements in order to survive and in order not to become demonic and destructive.

Most of the really serious damage that is done to us occurs in families. The blood of the family is thicker and more indelible than any other human attachment in our lives. And if you are not in a family, then in our society you are apt to be very, very lonely. For we live in a society in which we have made the family the one - the only - attachment that matters.

In our story this morning, the eunuch is on the outside. No identity. No future. No meaning. And now he comes across this passage from Isaiah. And he has found a place in the Bible that offers him hope. A passage that is speaking to him.

***“Who is this?”*** He asks Philip.

***“Why, that was Jesus of Nazareth,”*** says Philip. ***“He is the Messiah that Isaiah was talking about. And he too was cut off. He had no offspring. And yet he created the largest family in the world.”***

***“Who is to forbid me from joining this family? Can I too be adopted into it? Can I too be baptized into it?”***

Now, Philip knows that God is calling him to do this. But he is still just a little bit uncomfortable.

Philip says, ***“Well, I might baptize you. But here in the desert there’s no water.”***  
***“Look,”*** says the eunuch, ***“here is water!”***

And right here, in the desert, a white man and a black man, a Jew and an Ethiopian, Philip baptizes the eunuch. There is water in the desert.

We, too, need to put first things first. If we ever want to fix up the problems in our lives and in our families, then we need to put our lives and our families in their proper context - which is within the context of the family of God. Jesus said: first, seek the kingdom of God. First seek the deep relationship with God that is so vital to life. Find your meaning and identity within a relationship with a living and loving God. And let Him adopt you into his family called the church. And then healing can come to our lives and our relationships and our families. Only then.

This story of Philip and the eunuch in the desert teaches us this fundamental spiritual truth. In this new family of Jesus Christ - water **is thicker than blood**.