

Connecting for Christ at Christmas

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Ray James played baseball in the National League from 1899 to 1911. He once hit 22 consecutive foul balls in one “at bat.” It can be very hard to connect well not only in baseball but in relationships. The proof of this is just to catalog a few things from skirmishes between siblings in our families’ Thanksgiving Day celebrations to the alienation that is behind terrorism. The irony is that we are more connected today than at any other point in history. A catastrophe can happen a half a world away and almost before it is over we have an alert on our cell phone or on our Facebook page.

God wants people to connect.

Hardly a college doesn’t have a psychology department where this social science is to help us understand how to communicate and related. For all this we have lots and lots of disconnection.

God wants people to connect. He didn’t like Adam’s aloneness and made Eve. Jonathan and David are in the Bible, at least in part, to help us admire the connection between the two of them. The psalmist extols, “How good and pleasant it is when people dwell together in unity.” (Ps. 133) The New Testament says Jesus breaks down the dividing walls of hostility between people (Eph. 2:14). In II Cor. 5:20 we are called ambassadors of reconciliation. Add it all up and it is clear that God wants people to connect.

We could have a dozen bosom buddies and another 100 soul mates but if those people are connected to God, it's tragic. Why? Because a friendship with you or with me doesn't save them.

At bottom all disconnection we experience in life is really a problem of being disconnected from God and it will persist in every sphere of life if a person does not connect with God. Him connecting with us is what's behind Christmas. There isn't peace on earth if there isn't fundamentally peace with him.

We go from the table on Thursday to another table at Christmas and then another on New Year's Day perhaps, and if not then, on New Year's Day with nachos in front of the football games. If we want to we can extend to another table of nachos in front of football a month later for the Super Bowl.

At all these tables there will be the sister who talks too much, the brother who works too much, the daughter who spends too much, the son who criticizes too much, the uncle who drinks too much, the aunt who is angry too much, the father who eats too much, the friend who cries much (she just went through a divorce). And add to those tables the neighborhood open house or, if you're still working, the office party and there will be more of the same. All these are but symptoms of people not being connected to God.

When I consider these tables and events I wonder about their purpose. Merriment to be sure and that's good. But might have let them come into play for another reason? I want to bring us to a passage that suggests this is so. Wherever you are, there is something God wants to do through you there. At these tables might that have to do with how

we can connect with others well *and* in such a way that they can connect with God?

Prayer.

In the New Testament book of Acts we have the Spirit come down and the people of Jesus go out. He says in verse 1:8 that we go out to be witnesses to Jesus in concentric geographic and ethnic rings – to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth. We have in acts representative stories, accounts of what actually happened, which illustrate this expanding movement. There's a conversion story of a hard core Jew, the first European, and the first African. The first African was from Ethiopia. In the first century, Ethiopia was on the very edge of the known world. Homer, in *The Odyssey*, said, "The far off Ethiopian ... the furthestmost of men."¹ That's "uttermost."

acts 8:26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian^[a] eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

³¹ "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

³² This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

¹ Zeph. 3:10; Psalm 18:31; 87:4 all say that God will include Ethiopia in those who worship him (Cush = Ethiopia).

*“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

³³ *In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.*

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth.”^[b]

³⁴ *The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?”* ³⁵ *Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.*

³⁶ *As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?”* ^[37] ^[c] ³⁸ *And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both 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 suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.*

Philip is a regular guy. In the early church there had been a work crunch, too much to do and not enough people to do it. So some assignments were in order. Philip didn't get assigned to the strategic planning committee nor the prayer committee. He didn't get put with the preaching and teaching ministry team. He was put on the Meals on Wheels Ministry, or maybe you want to think of it as the Soup Kitchen, or the Food Pantry. That's Philip.

But then something happened to Philip. It reminds me of what happened to me in tenth grade when we moved to St. Louis, Mo. A track coach at the high school there asked me to join the team. I told him, “No.” The reason was that I had thought of myself as a student but never as an athlete. My mom wasn't a tennis star nor my dad an ex-football jock. She was a nurse and he was an engineer. I defined myself one way and that was that, a non-athlete. But

this coach suggested I be open to more. He persisted in such a way that I gave it a try. I went on to learn great things about myself and teamwork and I ended up lettering in three sports for the rest of my high school days.

Something like this happened for Philip. There was a persecution and while some in the church were insulated from it, he was not and he got driven out of Jerusalem and Judea into (what's next?), Samaria.

In Samaria he realized that the people there needed to not only be fed for Christ but they needed to be fed with Christ. He didn't wait for the pastors to come and talk about Jesus. He did what needed to be done. He talked about Jesus. He could've said, "I'm the practical guy and I don't do any of the talking." That would have been his self-definition. But he was open to defining himself in other ways. So he went from just helping for Christ to speaking up for Christ.

Are you open to redefining yourself? "Oh, I could never talk about Jesus." Can you let God in and redefine you? Can he teach an old Christian dog and few new Christian tricks?

And he was actually quite successful. That's what happens when you answer the redefining call of God.

Now when you are successful, what do you do? You keep riding that wave, right? They say, "Don't mess with success."

But God operates differently. God has other ideas of what to do and in Philip's case that meant going to a desert road between Jerusalem and Gaza. A desert road is not a population center, a commercial crossroads, a media capital, an academic haven, or

anything like that. It doesn't seem like a strategic place for ministry ... *unless God says so.*

Will you let yourself be open not only to defining yourself as one who might speak for Christ but also to letting him use you wherever he puts you? (Wherever you go, Christ is sending you, there's something he wants to do through you there.)

On this desert road Philip encounters the equivalent of the Ethiopian Secretary of the Treasury. He has wealth and power at his fingertips. We know this because he's in a chariot limousine. He's reading so he has a chauffeur. If he's reading it means he has a scroll or book which in the ancient world was a very expensive item. He's educated because he is reading a scroll in what would be to him a foreign language. He's reading it out loud which was probably common practice in the ancient world.²

But he is a man who has paid a price for all of this. He is a eunuch. One scholar points out that the word for prime minister and the word for eunuch are the same. To be the king's assistant you couldn't rival the king in any way, harem or otherwise. He had paid a price. Maybe that's why he isn't referred to throughout as "the Ethiopian" but as "the eunuch." We're to understand that he had paid a price.

We have people today who have paid a price to get where they are that has meant that might have children physically but emotionally they are eunuchs. I talked to a guy once who said that for the last ten years he's been a zombie. He has had a family but he

² Augustine comments about seeing Ambrose reading without moving his lips. Why note it unless it was notable?

hasn't been alive to them. He was a kind of emotional eunuch. Relationally cut off. Spiritually cut off. We have people today who are around us and are eunuchs.

This eunuch is on pilgrimage. So it isn't a political treaty that he's working on. He's on a quest. Maybe being at the top of his profession isn't fulfilling him as it once was or as he imagined it would. Maybe he's thinking about the price he has paid and trying to figure out what to do now. Some kind of emptiness is there because the text doesn't keep referring to him as the Ethiopian but it does keep referring to him as the eunuch. The emptiness has him on the move. Maybe it is what motivated him to learn Hebrew³ ... so he could find some answers in some sacred texts.

In his searching he comes to Jerusalem to its temple. What does he find? Well, he finds most starkly that he is barred from entry. Sexually mutilated people are not allowed. That is what the law says in Duet. 23:1 . Imagine that you have come all that way and you are turned away. Wow.

I remember once having travelled a long, long time. I don't remember where I had been but I had travelled a long, long time. Maybe it was from India to Singapore to Tokyo to Los Angeles. My last connection was Houston, connecting to my home in San Antonio. The plane was late and I ran to the gate only to see the airplane door just closing. Wow. Turned away after all that! The Ethiopian had it worse.

³ C.S. Lewis learned Icelandic so he could be in a Tolkien reading group that handled Icelandic mythology in the original language.

But the eunuch has some of the Bible. Maybe he had it all along or maybe he picked it up while he was in Jerusalem. At any rate he is reading it. In the same place that he is reading, where he is reading what is quoted here, right next to it is this: ³ *Let no foreigners who have bound themselves to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely exclude me from his people." And let no eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree."*

⁴ *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—*

⁵ *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.*

Jesus puts Philip on a desert road where a man's life matches the landscape. He's dry. It's dry. But he's reading about Jesus who put himself in our place. He was turned away that we might be brought in. He was rejected that we might be accepted. He was dried up that we might be watered. He was mutilated that we might be made whole.

With that insight that another had suffered for him, the eunuch asks a scrutiny question. In weddings there is a scrutiny question. Is there any objection or reason that this union not take place? Speak now or forever hold your peace. The eunuch asks, "Is there any reason why I can't be baptized?" Is there any reason I cannot be a part of this Jesus' community? Is there anything about my skin color, my body type, my nationality, my background, my economics that would

disqualify me from receiving the cleansing love of Christ and becoming a part of his family? Answer: No. Then right there, in the desert, there is suddenly water ... life... in which he can be baptized.

A middle class middle aged Jew from Palestine and a wealthy black politician who's been sexually altered ... brothers in Christ. Connected. Only in Christ. Don't you see? The gospel is a power. A power that changes and connects. With that power that eunuch becomes, as the Isaiah passage predicted, remembered and fruitful via this text to this day.

Are you willing to be used by that power? Are you lead-able? Will you keep your eyes open in these coming holidays for the person he is bringing into your life? The likely or unlikely person? Will you come beside them and stay beside them? Run beside their chariot? Will you listen to what their lives are saying out loud? When God gives you an opening with them, will you take it and sit beside them?

In 1900 there were 9 million Christians in Ethiopia. In 2007 there were 45 million. You never know what will happen when you will connect a person with Jesus to a person. Who knows? But wherever you are, Christ has put you there. Remember that this season.

*If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call. pastorjeffwood@gmail.com
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