

“Mission: Not Busy Work”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center and CBS News, on January 27, 2013, a young man named Matthew Fenner attended the Word of Faith Fellowship church in Spindale, North Carolina. As the service came to a close, most went out, but about 15-20 people asked Matthew to stay behind in the Sanctuary so they could pray for him. Some apparently found out he was struggling with his sexuality. So they gathered around Matthew right in the center of the Sanctuary and, with him surrounded, one person yelled out, “disgusting” - and then they began to attack him. They threatened Matthew with confinement for two solid days. They slapped him, strangled him and verbally abused him in order to free him from his homosexual demons. As many as 15-20 young people; assaulted him that night. They screamed and shook him, punching his chest. Then they grabbed his head while they said certain phrases over and over again. Matthew Fenner later said, “I honestly thought I was going to die.”

Nearly two years later, five Word of Faith church members had been indicted for kidnapping and assault in connection with Fenner’s beating that night in that church. Originally the authorities were not willing to investigate Matthew’s allegations because the church had influence in the community. It was a 750-member church on a 35-acre campus in a small community in North Carolina. But no one would let it go. The bruises were too visible and the scars too permanent. Bret Childers the executive director of Faith in America stated, “It is pretty clear to me that these individuals wanted to inflict pain on Matthew because of his sexual orientation. It was a misguided religious teaching,” Mr. Childers said, “that caused that suffering and abuse. The church called the beatings a form of deliverance and after two horrible hours of abuse they let him go, but it is probably something he will never be able to let go of for the rest of his life.”

The Bible matters and the way we interpret the Bible matters. It mattered to the people who were circling him [Matthew Fenner] that night. I don’t think to this day in their minds they think they had done anything wrong. They interpreted the Bible to the way it was, and I think – actually - if you interviewed them today, they would say that they were caring for Matthew; to beat those demons out of him - and they would quote Scripture on how to do it.

Now in today’s text, I want to walk through it with you briefly: A politically powerful eunuch reads from the Isaiah scroll and asks how the Bible is to be interpreted. (Oh, if those numskulls in North Carolina in that Word of Faith church would have asked with the same humility how to interpret the Scriptures that relate to this issue, I believe they would have responded in an exceptionally different way.)

Philip was commissioned by the original Apostles to go out and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (As he was walking away, he was leaving Jerusalem fleeing like the other Apostles from the abuse that was taking place in Jerusalem. They had just finished stoning Stephen to death; the first large persecution of the church was taking place in Jerusalem, so they were getting out so they could proclaim the Gospel in other places.) Now, all of a sudden, as Philip was moving south from Jerusalem, the Angel of the Lord

spoke to him and said, “I have a plan for you. I want you to turn and go to Gaza which is south of Jerusalem, but toward the Mediterranean Sea west.”

So he went, and the Lord guided him to this Ethiopian riding on a chariot who happened to have a scroll of the Prophet Isaiah, and he [the Ethiopian] was reading it. I don't know if it was out of curiosity, if he was a Jewish convert, or what the deal was, but he was reading it. He heard out loud and wondered what the interpretation was, and so Philip asked and the eunuch, as powerful as he was, invited him into the chariot. (This would be like some diplomat in Washington in a group of cars with the little flags on the hood, driving along, and the guy is reading the Bible in the back seat and can't figure it out. The guy sees a street preacher on the corner, stops the caravan, and invites him in to the leather seats, in the Cadillac stretch limo and says, “Tell me what this message means.”)

That's how ridiculous this idea was and yet it happened.

The struggle was that this was a eunuch, and a eunuch was a castrated individual who worked for the Queen of Ethiopia. He was in charge of their entire financial treasury. He had money and power. You could tell his status from the chariot. You could tell he had money, because he was reading a scroll, which would have been incredibly expensive - because they were all handwritten. He invited him [Philip] in to hear the word.

Once again the Spirit nudged Philip to go to that chariot and join in. The Spirit nudges him into the eunuch's chariot to hear the word of God, and to interpret it. So having heard the Good News by Philip, the eunuch hears the greatness of who Jesus Christ was and asks to be baptized. Now it is one thing for Philip to visit with the eunuch, it is another to even instruct him in the Bible, but when he baptizes him that means he is saying that God called him to that baptism. The eunuch is now fully part of the church of Jesus Christ.

Now a eunuch has no place in the Jewish community, no place whatsoever, for Deuteronomy 23:1 states very clearly, and I'm quoting Scripture now: *No one whose private parts are crushed or cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.* According to the Bible the eunuch had no place in religious society. But, once again, Philip is told to get in and interpret the word of God. It's so humbling when you hear the eunuch ask Philip, “May I be baptized?” You can hear the twinge of emotion, the tingle of anxiety, wondering if he is going to be told, “No, because you're not appropriate. Your sexual orientation as a eunuch precludes you from full participation in the life of the church.”

What did Philip do? He stopped the chariot. There was no explanation. There was no, “Let's pray a whole lot and if God can fix what is wrong with you physically, and God can pray that you will have a wonderful passion for women again, then I will baptize you.” No, he just took the eunuch down and baptized him, giving him full participation in the life of the Christian church. It would have been a radical, radical decision. And all that happened next was that the Spirit sent Philip one way and the Ethiopian eunuch went another way, rejoicing.

Now you may ask what, in the name of all that is holy, does that have to do with Matthew Fenner? Well, the eunuch was anxious – struggling – not because of his ethnicity or his

social standing, but because of his sexual orientation. Deuteronomic and Levitical law gave a very low view of a eunuch because of his sexual - or lack thereof - orientation. It was said that he was scarred as a eunuch. He was a “defective” man because he was a eunuch – because he was unable to be fruitful and multiply.

Now, where else have you heard that? Gay, lesbian, transgender - especially gay and lesbian people - are not able, biologically, to be fruitful and multiply. We have heard all sorts of things about how they are scarred, they are not appropriate; “defective” if you want to be so hurtful. How is that any different than what they call the eunuch? And yet, what did Philip do? It didn't matter who the eunuch was or was not. It was the fact that he wanted to be baptized and nothing got in the way.

But, we cannot ignore the power of what happened in that moment. Deuteronomic and Levitical law changed forever after that moment. No longer was that the reason - that literal interpretation - a reason to keep people away. Philip changed the law and ignored parts of Scripture that did not fit with who Jesus Christ wanted people to be now. And when I say now, I mean 2000 years ago.

So what does that mean when we interpret sexual orientation now? Its value?

I sat this week reading this [Scripture] and I'm going, “Man I want to avoid this like the plague.” Yet I couldn't, because over and over again it kept telling me that I can't ignore this, because that's the interpretation that I believe the Bible is calling us to look at and to affirm. There is no difference in the definition of the eunuch and gay, lesbian, straight and bi-sexual people. They are excluded by the culture, but they were affirmed by Philip.

If we are going to read, interpret and use the Holy Spirit in that Scripture, if we are going to learn from this passage and not ignore it, like this is so often done, then gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender sexual orientation should no longer be grounds for judgment. There is no sin in being a eunuch. So how can there be a sin in being gay or lesbian? How can it be a sin to be bi-sexual or transgender? But, I turn to that Church in Spindale, North Carolina, and I know there is sin in arrogance. I cannot find another passage of Scripture that talks about arrogance being good. I cannot find the passage in Scripture that says shaming other people is a good thing, or hitting another person is acceptable, or kidnapping another person is anything but a sin. Strangling and assaulting another person is a sin. We do not need to pray the “gayness” out of a person, but we do need to pray the arrogance, the judgmental-ness and the wrong-mindedness out of ourselves and others.

So let's get started by praying for understanding and then compassion that the Holy Spirit can look into how we interpret the Bible, and how we do that with understanding and compassion. I'm not just concerned about the simplistic naming of what's right and wrong in the Bible, but about affirming and preaching wisdom, love, non-violence and compassion.

May the Holy Spirit be with us all as we do that together. Amen