

The Radical Sacrament of Baptism

Acts 8:26-40, John 15:1-11

The First Church of Christ in Hartford, Connecticut

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The Han River, about twice the width of the Connecticut River, meanders through the city of Seoul, South Korea. It winds around so much that there are 31 railroad and car bridges across it in the city alone. It flows north of Seoul as well, and part of the border that divides North and South Korea is the Han River.

Or you could say that the Han River connects North and South Korea. It depends on how you see water, doesn't it? Something that divides or something that connects?

The single most radical thing about Christianity, the thing that made us different from other faith traditions in the Middle East at the time of the early churches, has to do with water.

Baptism. In other faith traditions, not just anyone could be a member. You had to be of a certain ethnicity or gender or socio-economic class to receive the rites of initiation in most religions. But the waters of Baptism, from John the Baptist on to today, are offered to anyone, of any age, of any ethnicity, of any gender identity. That was mind-blowing in the first century, and it should still be mind-blowing and world-opening to us as well. Truly Baptism was the sacrament that pronounced that "In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for all are one in Christ."

People like Philip got this right away; it took others longer to see the way that the water of Baptism might be the way to connect diverse people to Christ and to each other, a community-creator. The Baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch broke so many boundaries to connect this person with the fledgling Christian community and create the first missionary to Africa! "What is to prevent me from

being baptized?" he asked, probably fully expecting that some part of his identity might keep him from being invited to be part of the Christian community.

Think about it. He was Ethiopian. African. Certainly, darker skinned than the ethnically Greek Deacon Philip. But by his baptism, race and nationality dividers, gone! It's unclear what religious tradition he followed. There were Ethiopian Jews in this time, but as a eunuch, he would be forbidden from being Jewish. He may have been a seeker after truth, exploring many religious traditions to find a way to connect with God. So, he may have been the first non-Jew baptized. Religious dividers, gone!

He was a eunuch, which means he had been castrated at some point in his life, probably involuntarily. He was seen by many as sexually deviant, fit only to work in a harem or with the Queen because he was not sexually threatening to the women of court. Philip saw none of this as an impediment to this man joining the Christian community. Sexuality boundaries, gone!

Philip's answer in this baptism along the road comes down to us loud and clear. Nothing can prevent this baptism of one who has heard the good news and wants to be part of the body of Christ. In fact, the Ethiopian eunuch represents Christ's call for his disciples to go to those who most need the love of God and of God's people, for he had certainly been rejected by many despite his high position at court.

The waters of baptism are meant to connect us first to Christ, and then to each other. The waters of baptism are meant to flow over whatever divides us from one another in the eyes of the world and pull us together. We need to claim that connection and work to make it stronger to show the world what is possible when human beings overcome divisions and celebrate our oneness in Christ.

Last week I sat in the Doonjeon Church in Seongnam, South Korea, where I had been asked to preach. I was handed a bulletin entirely in Korean, which I do not read or speak! I would know it was my turn when the Pastor invited me up! At the first service, at 8am, when the first hymn began I was thrilled to hear the tune for "Crown Him with Many Crowns," a hymn whose first verse I could sing anyway. So, we shared some music. I'd been told that a certain part of worship was "The Apostles Prayer," which I figured out, as they said it, was the Apostles Creed, so I said it along in English. They projected their readings and hymns on screens, and as they sang other music with which I was unfamiliar, I hummed along and watched the screen, and pretty soon I could tell the letters for the word "Jesus," or as they pronounce it, "Jesu." Then I could sing Jesu along with them whenever it came up! By the second service, at 11, I simply allowed myself to enter the flow of words and music and open myself to God to pray along with them as a stranger, yet somehow related to them. Kin to them through baptism. One with them in the body of Christ. I felt it during worship, and after worship as they took my hands and spoke to me in halting English words or in Korean whose emotional content I could understand if not the literal meaning of the words. I felt it as we sat at a meal together following worship, sharing water and rice and kimchi and bulgogi and a dozen other dishes. We were divided by language, ethnicity, and culture. We were connected by baptism and praise and prayer and love.

Sometimes here it is easy to feel that we are small. A hundred plus people on this tight corner of downtown Hartford, bounded by roads and tall buildings and a cemetery. But we are connected by these baptismal waters to our Christian kin of many traditions here in Hartford, in Connecticut, across this country, and over the Pacific Ocean whose waters connect us to Korea and Doonjeon Church among many others. Did you know that the largest Christian Church in the world is in South Korea? We are so many, connected by these waters of love! In the words of the poet Denise Levertov, "We have

only begun to know the power that is in us if we would join our solitudes in the communion of struggle." ("Beginners")

Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch overcame so much that divided them as they united in the Baptismal water birth into the body of Christ. Sadly, Christians have become expert at dividing from one another and putting up barriers that Philip would never have recognized as Christian. What power for good in the world we already have, and what power for good in the world might be unleashed if we saw the waters that connect us are stronger than whatever divides us. I felt that in Korea, as the events of the world bring cautious hope to a people long divided by a river and ideology and mistrust. They need the power of love to come together with those long separated.

We need to unleash that power of love here, too. We are the living descendants of Philip **and** the Ethiopian eunuch. We are different from each other in this room, and certainly different from our Korean friends. We need to understand those differences better, while at the same time empowering each other through our oneness in the waters of Baptism, in the body of Christ in Holy Communion, and in the radical community of the church. We need to be a witness to others that this can be done, and so increase the flow of love in Hartford and everywhere. We are not small, not as individuals, not as Center Church, not as Christians in the world. As Nelson Mandela once urged, "Be big!" Feel your power. Flow with it like a mighty river. Love. Amen.