

Included

by Donald Schmidt

Scripture reference: Acts 8:26–40

Intro: Linnea

Narrator: Allison

Philip: Donald

Jonathan: Ralph

Linnea: The Ethiopian official we hear about in the story that we read in the book of Acts, is more generally known as the “eunuch.” A eunuch was a man defined by a physical deformity that placed him outside of the community of God’s people. He was forbidden by scripture from even worshipping in the temple.

In writing this story, Donald Schmidt saw the Ethiopian Eunuch as representing all of those who have been told by the church that they do not belong.

Here’s Donald’s story.

Narr” The torrential rain had delayed several flights, leaving the airport lounge more crowded than usual. Philip gingerly made his way across an assortment of legs, children,

backpacks, and briefcases to the one empty seat. There was a bag on the seat obviously belonging to the well-dressed man occupying the next seat.

Philip: "May I?"

Jonathan: "Oh sure. " I'll move the bag. Sorry about that."

P: No worries. Thanks."

J: Don't mention it. By the way, my name's Jonathan.

P: "Nice to meet you. I'm Philip."

J: "Listen, Philip, would you mind watching my stuff for a minute while I visit the wash room?"

P: "Not at all. You go ahead."

Narr: Jonathan set down the book he had been reading and headed off. A few minutes later he returned.

J: "Thanks. I appreciate that. It saves having to take everything with me."

P: "I understand. I hope you don't mind, I took a look at the book you're reading. Look's interesting."

J: "It is, kind of. Frankly, it's a little heavy going. I picked it up at the bookstore at the big church downtown. I've read a lot of spiritual stuff, but this one...I don't know; I'm having trouble getting into it."

P: "Into religion are you?"

J. Well, not really ‘religion.’ More spirituality, I suppose. I think I’m what you call a ‘seeker.’ I’ve probably read every book on spirituality, and every self-help book, and every book on how to discover the real you and heal your inner child and, you name it, I’ve read it.”

P: And has it worked? Have you found the real you?”

J: Not really. Somebody told me that if I stopped searching I’d discover I wasn’t really lost but, when I tried that, it didn’t help. So I keep reading.

But...I haven’t found the answers yet. I’ve read every eastern religion out there, read all the pop psychologists, all the new age, old age, in between age—don’t seem to have found the key yet.”

P: What drew you to this one? Did you go to a service at the church or something?”

J: Hardly. I’m not really a church kind of guy. If you want to know the truth, I went to check out the architecture. I’d heard that it was quite a beautiful building, and that’s why I went. On Saturday. I haven’t felt welcome in a church on a Sunday for years.”

P: That’s a shame.

Narr: Jonathan detected—and appreciated—a note of compassion in Philip’s voice. Part of him couldn’t believe he was having this conversation with a complete stranger. Yet another part of him was so very grateful for the opportunity to revisit a story that had been lingering untold for too long.

J: You see, I grew up in the church. Sunday school, Christmas pageants, summer church camp, the whole bit. I thought I belonged, you know? I learned these stories about God, and Jesus, and we were taught that someday we would give our lives to Jesus, and he would enter our hearts, and I kept waiting for the special feeling. (SARDONIC LAUGH) I actually thought I would physically feel Jesus entering my heart. You know, through my chest. Never happened.

The other kids kept having this experience of being ‘saved’ and I hoped, I prayed it would happen to me. I knew that if I were just good enough, prayed hard enough, it would happen. Even though...I wondered. I worried. Deep down, maybe I never could be good enough. One year at camp, the

others were having these wonderful born again experiences, and being baptized, and I wanted it so badly. (HESITATES – DRAWS LONG BREATH)

And then, I told one of the other kids that I thought I was gay. Everything stopped. The youth group leader let it be known that in God's eyes I was not acceptable. I was out of the youth group, and out of the church—end of story.”

P: (AFTER A BRIEF PAUSE, SHAKING HIS HEAD) That is so sad, so wrong.

J: So, I guess that's why I keep reading all of these books. I'm trying to find a story where I fit in.”

P: Jonathan listen. Despite anything that youth group leader may have told you, or any preacher may have told you, I think I know the story where you fit. Can I tell it to you?”

J: Ah! It's still raining like crazy out there. So sure. It looks like we won't be going anywhere for a while.”

Narr: And so Philip began to tell a story. It was a story of a God who created a world and declared it good. Of a God who heard the cries of people in slavery and brought them to

freedom. Of a God who made covenant after covenant after covenant with people, and said “I cannot give you up; I will always love you.”

And Philip told of someone named Jesus who invited women and men and children to gather at table and break bread. Of Jesus who said “whoever is without sin, cast the first stone.” Of Jesus who challenged people to welcome and love even those who seemed outside the circle, who were different, who felt they did not belong. Of Jesus who told stories about welcoming even when to do so, tried and tested every fiber of our being.

P: The story doesn't end, It's an ongoing story, and you and I are a part of it. Jesus came to bring people *into* God's story, not push them out. Jesus came to make sure that there was room enough at the table for all of God's children. *All* of them, Jonathan. That includes you. You are welcome in the church because you are part of the family of God.”

J: “Wow! I....um....wow! I have to tell you, Philip that, after all these years, for once I really believe it. Those stories that you're telling me, they're not new. I've read them before,

I've heard them before, but they didn't click before. Now hearing them this way, this time, for some reason, Philip, things are falling into place. It's amazing! To think of all the money I wasted on those darned books, when it was the story I'd already learned—I just didn't *get* it before.”

P: “That’s okay, That’s okay Jonathan.

J: “I know, I know. That’s the amazing thing. I know. It’s just...I want to make up for lost time. It’s so incredible to feel like I finally belong. It’s like...okay, I know this is going to sound silly. In fact...no, it’s too weird.”

P: What?”

J: It’s just that, after hearing everything you said, and feeling at last like I belong and everything, I wish I could be baptized. I know, I told you, it’s crazy.”

P: It’s not crazy at all. When you get home, I think...”

J: (INTERRUPTING) No, I mean now, “I wish I could get baptized now. That’s why it’s crazy.”

P: Sure, but...there’s no water here, except for that water fountain over there, and ...

J: It’s ridiculous. Crazy....

P: (INTERRUPTING) It's wild. Let's do it.

J: Are you serious?

P: Of course not. Let's do it

J: Wowee! Yeah, let's do it.

Narr: They got up and went to the fountain. They quickly looked around and then, without even taking a second to wonder how to do this or what to say, or what the people looking on might say, Philip pressed the button and the water shot up. Jonathan closed his eyes and dunked his head into the water.

P: Jonathan, child of God, I baptize you in the name of the One who created you and loves you always. Amen.”

J: (SHAKING HIS HEAD) Whoa, that was...”

Narr: Then Jonathan realized that Philip was no longer standing beside him. He turned, first left, then right, but Philip was nowhere to be seen. Had he imagined this? The whole thing was silly enough, perhaps it was a dream?

J: I must have been imagining all this. Except that I feel so completely alive, so completely transformed. And my hair is wet.