



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

760 East Broad Street • Columbus Ohio 43205 • (614) 221-6552 • fax (614) 221-5722 • www.bspsc.org

“Common Ground”

Acts 8:26-40

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Reverend Amy Miracle
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, OH

A century ago today, a terrible war ended. The armistice was signed on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month ending what later became known as World War I. It was a conflict characterized by trench warfare. In this way of fighting, opposing armed forces attack, counterattack, and defend from relatively permanent systems of trenches dug into the ground. The opposing systems of trenches are usually close to one another. Both sides “dig in” and, in doing so, sacrifice mobility in order to gain protection. It’s possible to prevail through the use of trench warfare. But it’s a brutal way to wage war and the cost to both sides is so very, very high. In World War I, there were over thirty-seven million casualties. That means that fifty-seven percent of those who fought were injured or killed.¹

A hundred years ago today that brutal war ended. The hope at the time was that the nations of the world would do more than suspend hostilities. The hope was to build a new world order that promoted cooperation among the nations. That hope was not realized.

I’ve been thinking a lot about trench warfare this past week. You don’t need to be a veteran of the First World War to be familiar with it. We’ve all seen it. Experienced it. Engaged in it. Two groups dug in. Each convinced of the righteousness of their position.

Singer-songwriter Sara Groves has written a song about the challenges of being married and how, even in the strongest of marriages, fights occur and it’s easy to hunker down into bunkers. The song starts like this:

We just had a World War III here in our kitchen
We both thought the meanest things
And then we both said them
We shot at each other till we lost ammunition²

Have you been there? With a spouse or parent or friend or colleague or neighbor? Trenches dug. Sides chosen. Convinced of the rightness of our position. No compromise in sight. It’s not a bad description of our current political situation. Trenches dug. Sides chosen. War waged. Anyone who walks in between the two groups and suggests compromise or cooperation is seen as a fool by one side, a traitor by the other.

Like I said, I’ve been thinking a lot about trench warfare this past week. And I looked in the Bible. I didn’t find much if any Biblical support for trench building. It’s not in the Ten Commandments. There is no “thou shalt build a trench and defend it with your life.” Jesus doesn’t say, “Dig in for all you are worth and then try to utterly destroy your opponent.” I didn’t find any Biblical stories that promote trench warfare.

¹ http://www.uwosh.edu/faculty_staff/henson/188/WWI_Casualties%20and%20Deaths%20%20PBS.html

² Sara Groves, “Roll to the Middle” from the album *The Other Side of Something*.

In fact, the Bible is full of a different kind of story. We just heard one of them this morning. There are two main characters in this story. The first is an Ethiopian eunuch. At that time, Ethiopian is a term used to describe someone who comes from somewhere far away. The ancient world is unclear about exactly where Ethiopia is located.

This Ethiopian is also a eunuch. He most likely has been castrated so that he will not be a threat to the female leader he serves. He isn't male and he isn't female. He doesn't fall into any identifiable category. We learn more things about him. He is educated. He can read. He has some power and resources. He is traveling in a chariot that he is not driving. This is the ancient world equivalent of a limo and chauffeur.

How I wish we knew his name. He deserves a name. I wish we knew his name.

We know the name of the other person in the story. Philip, a leader of the early church, comes from a different world. He's a local boy, lower class, uneducated. Probably works with his hands. Can't read. Doesn't have a chariot. Doesn't know anyone who has a chariot. Has never ridden in a chariot.

These two people have virtually nothing in common. They literally come from different parts of the world. And, to complicate things even further, Philip is a part of a tradition that condemns eunuchs.

Philip and the eunuch encounter one another on an empty stretch of road. We first see the eunuch riding in the back of his chariot reading a book.

The Spirit nudges Philip to talk to the eunuch. I'm betting he doesn't have much experience talking to Ethiopian eunuchs in chariots. Philip does a smart thing. He begins the conversation by asking a question. "What are you reading?" That's a great question. I love being asked that question. I love asking that question and hearing the answer.

The eunuch is reading the prophet Isaiah. These are not the scriptures of his people. But, he is eager to understand what he is reading. For some reason he thinks Philip may be able to help him. So the eunuch invites Philip into his chariot. "Come sit with me," he says to Philip.

Philip—God love Philip—he jumps up into that chariot and, before you know it, the two of them are sitting side by side, shoulder to shoulder, reading and discussing the text.

Think for a minute about all of the borders that these two men cross to get to that moment. They both have to leave their trenches, their places of safety and security and be open to interacting with and learning from someone they have been taught to distrust.

Together they read:

*As a sheep led to the slaughter
or a lamb before its shearers is dumb
so he opens not his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken up from the earth.*

The eunuch wants to know more about this one who was rejected and humiliated and that's all the opening Philip needs to talk about Jesus—who was rejected and humiliated and, like the eunuch, did not fit in.

Philip tells him all about Jesus—about how Jesus regularly crossed borders. He tells him all about Jesus—who not only taught and preached and healed, he also formed a community, gathered disciples, brought together the most unlikely of people and called them family. This family, Phillip tells him, is a community of misfits who fit together because they belong to God. The eunuch asks to be a part of that family.

Let me read this part of the text.

As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

That question breaks my heart. There is so much behind that question. Of course, there will be something to prevent him from being baptized. There is always something. This is the moment when Philip goes back to his trench; the eunuch returns to his.

It’s all up to Philip. Will he baptize this strange creature that Philip’s tradition tells him is not holy, not worthy? The Bible is very clear on this matter. It’s in the twenty-third chapter of Deuteronomy. Eunuchs aren’t welcome in worship. Eunuchs aren’t a part of the family of God.

It’s up to Philip to make a decision, to make the call, to use his best judgment. There are many reasons Philip could have said “no.” This baptism seems a little rushed. Philip can make a case that the eunuch needs more time to make a thoughtful decision about something so important. Or Philip can say “no” because of process. He needs to check in with his colleagues in Jerusalem to make sure they are all on the same page about baptizing eunuchs. There are so many reasons for Philip to say “no” or “not yet” to this baptism.

God love Philip. He doesn’t say “no.” He doesn’t say, “Let me check in with the home office.” He doesn’t hesitate. He baptizes the eunuch.

And the church has never been the same since.

Baptism could so easily have become a closed door that is rarely opened. Baptism could so easily have been something that kept people in their trenches. It would have been so easy for the early church to make baptism dependent on the credentials of the one requesting baptism. The church made the life-giving, mind-blowing, world-changing decision to root baptism in God’s credentials, in the nature and character of God, in God’s insistence on claiming us just as we are.

So when Philip baptizes the eunuch, it’s a watershed moment. For Philip. For the eunuch. For the church. This story is the opposite of trench warfare. Philip and the eunuch give up security and safety in exchange for mobility and connection. These two people who have nothing in common discover common ground. This story establishes Christianity as a border-crossing religion. At our best, we are a border-crossing religion. This story reminds us that good things happen when we cross borders.

How do we spend less time in our trenches and more time crossing borders? This story offers us some suggestions.

- Be curious
- Ask good questions
- Assume good motives
- Take risks
- Seek common ground
- Connect to a larger story

- Talk about Jesus
- Focus on Jesus
- Follow Jesus

At our best, we who follow Jesus are border-crossing people. And that's a good thing because our world is in desperate need of such people. So, may we be such people.

Amen.