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I've had two stories on my mind this week. Two stories about baptism. Two very different stories.

The first is the baptism story in Acts from our reading this morning. What an extraordinary story...

This story of the Ethiopian eunuch and his baptism is one of the many exciting tales told of the disciples moving out of Jerusalem toward the ends of the earth to share the love and life they found in Jesus. We can just hear how the Ethiopian is changed upon learning the story of Jesus from Philip. We are moved by his joy when he proclaims as they are going along the road in his chariot, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

But to really understand the power of this baptism story, we must hear it in its first century Middle Eastern context. We may wonder at this Ethiopian official being a eunuch, a castrated man, and why that matters to the narrative.

Eunuchs played an interesting role during this time. They could have powerful positions, as did this man, who was a court official for the Queen of Ethiopia. Men were sometimes castrated during this time and placed in the courts because they could be trusted because castration made them vulnerable and therefore dependent on the ruler. Also, they wouldn't pose a threat to the women of the court. Sometimes younger brothers of the crown prince were even castrated so that they would not make a play for the throne. This was a cruel act no matter what the purpose. But this is the kind of thing that Empires do. They dehumanize people for their own gain.

But in this story, we see the Ethiopian official not as other and dehumanized but as welcomed into Christ's family. In fact, he does not even wait for Philip to offer him a place in the family. When he hears the good news about Jesus, he sees the water and stops the chariot. He doesn't even ask for permission to be baptized, only what might get in his way. Nothing, apparently. Philip baptizes him. He is welcomed into the kingdom of God as someone with agency and worth.

The story of the Ethiopian official shows us that when Jesus said back in the first chapter of Acts that the disciples would be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, he meant that the ends of the earth aren't just a physical space. It's a spiritual space. The witness of Jesus will go out to even those deemed unworthy by some in the world. The Gospel message would break all the boundaries of who was in and who was out. And it forces upon the church even today the question, "what does it mean for us if the Gospel is good news for all people, without exception?"

I believe that. That the Gospel is good news for all people without exception. I hope you believe that, too. I believe with all my heart that was the message of Jesus when he walked this earth, and the message we are called to proclaim today. But we know that the Church *has not* always and *does not* always proclaim that kind of inclusive message.

So this week, as the story of the Ethiopian man's baptism was on my mind, I heard the story of a very different kind of baptism experience. This baptism story happened almost two thousand years after Philip and the Ethiopian man, but I think comparing them is powerful because it reminds us that this ritual act of baptism, that many of us take for granted, is ancient and sacred.

So this baptism story came out of a book I have been listening to—*Broken Horses*, a memoir by singer/songwriter Brandi Carlile.

Carlile was in her teens in the 1990's, attending a Baptist Church in rural Washington State when she felt called to baptism. She says that she was actually drawn to the church after realizing that she was gay because the church had clarity and helped her make sense of things. She was not ashamed of being gay, and she was open about it. If you think back to the attitude of most churches toward homosexuality in the 90's, you, like me, might be amazed at her being drawn to that institution. For me, it shows in Carlile's personality--a courage, a vulnerability, and an optimism and faith in people that is so refreshing and shows up over and over in her memoir.

Brandi had spent some time at church camps with other Christian teenagers and decided that it was her time to get baptized.

She had previously been discouraged from participating in worship music at her church because of her "spiritual state of mind." But she just didn't really get what they meant, and she thought that baptism would be the final step for her into inclusion in the church community.

So she spent a week in spiritual training with the pastor. And finally, the day of her baptism arrived. When she showed up at the church, she was met at the door by her pastor. He said that he needed to ask her a series of questions before the baptism. He asked her if she practiced witchcraft. She laughed and said no.

Then he asked her if she was homosexual. This question shocked Brandi. She had never hidden who she was and in fact the pastor had met her girlfriend. Frustrated, she replied that she was only being who she was born to be. To which he responded, "If you can't repent, I can't baptize you."

She didn't repent. She fled. Leaving family and friends in the church gathered for her baptism.

Brandi Carlile wasn't actually baptized until Easter of 2009 in a different church in a different city by a different minister. But as I listened to her telling her story in that memoir...listened to her life's work which, while always revolving around music, has been about so much more. It's been about gathering people at the table and making family out of strangers. About using her influence to advocate and fight for justice for neighbors and strangers alike. About forgiveness and reconciliation and healing. These are all things we vow to do in our baptismal covenant.

And so, I started thinking about baptism as a sacrament and what we mean by that. A sacrament is the outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. As ministers, when we baptize someone, we are simply giving word and shape to what already is—the blessing of God and the embrace and welcome into the family of God.

When she spoke of her baptism in 2009, Brandi talked about how it wasn't this big thunderbolt moment, and she said, "Maybe baptism, like coming out, isn't a *moment* after all."

I think she's right. Baptism isn't a moment, but a living into who we are meant to be over the course of our entire lives and through all the people we meet along the way.

And I think that's the charge that Jesus gave his disciples in the Book of Acts and our charge today. To be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. Both living into who we are meant to be and helping others live into they are meant to be. And breaking the boundaries of who's in and who's out when it comes to belonging to the family of God.

There are so many people like Brandi who have been told over the years that they don't have a place in the Church. That's a shame.

What else is baptism but the gift of being welcomed into God's love for the world and being marked as God's own? That gift is never ours to deny. The Gospel is good news for all people, without exception, and it's our work to proclaim it. Amen.