



“Tear Down That Wall”

Acts 8:26-40; John 15:1-9

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Fifth Sunday of Easter

In 1974, Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama startled the Christian world with a innovative book titled *Water Buffalo Theology*. Koyama’s experience as a Japanese missionary in Thailand convinced him that Christian thinking needed to be translated into language and concepts appropriate to the culture in which it lives -- in his case, Thai farmers who used water buffalo every day. Koyama’s book propelled him into a position of influence and prompted the church to shake off centuries of captivity to European models of thinking about the faith.

Koyama taught for a time at Union Seminary in Manhattan where he is remembered with affection and great respect. His journey to teach in the west, and in particular, America, was an unlikely pilgrimage.

Koyama was a teen-ager in Tokyo during World War II. He was nearly killed in one of the U.S. bombing raids on Tokyo. Koyama grew up part of the tiny Christian minority in Japan. It was particularly difficult to be a Christian during the war.

A Baptist, Koyama was baptized as a teenager – during the war. He remembers vividly the words his pastor told him at his baptism. “Kosuke, God calls you in Jesus Christ to love all your neighbors, *even* the Americans.” The big little word “even,” became the theological watchword for the rest of his life as he forged a more inclusive Christian theology.

That story reminded me of a story closer to home. Jitsuo Morikawa, a Japanese American minister, was an early influence on my life and ministry. Morikawa was an influential leader among Baptists in the North when I began my life as a minister. His spiritual journey is also remarkable and unlikely.

Morikawa grew up in British Columbia and came to America to be educated just before World War II. After a brilliant seminary career, he became pastor of a Japanese Baptist Church in California. He married in September 1941. Seventy-seven days later, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

Along with most Japanese Americans, Morikawa suffered a dramatic shift of fortune. He, his wife and members of his church became objects of deep suspicion that often turned into hate. His church members, mostly fishermen, had their boats and equipment confiscated. Up in Canada, the government declared the Japanese enemies of the state and his father and mother’s farm was confiscated.

By February, the U.S. Government held hearings about what to do with the Japanese. One government official said on the record, “Once a Jap, always a Jap. They cannot and will not change.” Earl Warren, the Governor of California declared that although the

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Japanese had not yet been caught being spies, that proved they certainly would soon become spies.

Only months after his wedding Morikawa and his wife were shipped off to an internment camp in the middle of the desert in Arizona. There, the indignities continued along with privation. But the Japanese internees were not forgotten. Baptist leaders and churches in the Northern Baptist Convention mounted a crusade to free the internees. They visited the camps, brought food and goods to the internees and interceded on their behalf. A Baptist leader, Ralph Mayberry led the crusade and managed to get Morikawa, his wife and a few others freed.

I heard Dr. Morikawa tell that story years ago and recall how remarkably free of bitterness or recrimination he was. He did, however, say he carried a “deep repressed psychic wound.”

But there is more. In 1944, in the middle of the war, the prestigious First Baptist Church of Chicago, called Jitsuo Morikawa to be its pastor. At the time the congregation was predominantly Caucasian. Morikawa said it was an act of madness. It was also an act of towering courage. At the time, Japanese were not permitted to meet in groups for fear of espionage. But a Christian congregation was able to see beyond race and nationality to a vision of the kingdom of God. The church reached out to Japanese Americans and, against all conventional wisdom, allowed them to meet at First Baptist.

No wonder First Baptist Church of Chicago became a multicultural church long before it was fashionable. Their Japanese American minister moved easily among whites, African Americans, and Asians. Ancient and bitter barriers came tumbling down in a congregation that took the Christian gospel seriously. And no wonder Jitsuo Morikawa became a prophetic voice not only among Baptists, but across the globe.

When I heard him tell his story, he was well past retirement, an elder statesman sharing with the rising generation. As he summed up his life, he became animated. His voice rising, he recalled that when he was a young Christian, he was sustained by Paul’s famous words which he said summed up his life, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God...,” a power that created the unimaginable and transformed the impossible.

That is nothing new. The gospel has been tearing down walls since the earliest days of the church. The story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch is a remarkable story of that transforming power.

From the beginning of the Christian movement, as Luke tells the story in the book of Acts, that faith was tearing down ancient walls that divide. Philip tore down a few of them himself.

Philip first appears in the Christian story at a pivotal moment. A very large wall divided the church. Jerusalem was a center for immigrants. Jews from all over the world migrated back to the Holy Land for a variety of reasons. More often than not they did not speak the language of the Jews, nor did they assimilate into Jewish culture. They were given a name not meant to flatter -- Hellenists, people who were not true Jews. Immigration always creates social, political, and religious problems.

A large number of Hellenist widows were convinced they were being shorted at the food shelf provided by the church in Jerusalem. They thought the “true Jew” apostles were favoring the truly Jewish widows. They appealed. Seven Hellenist men were appointed to take care of the problem. Philip was one of them. They tore down that cultural barrier, and the church was at peace again.

Soon, persecution broke out in Jerusalem, and the Christians scattered to save their lives. Philip went to Samaria and tried something new. Up to now, all Christians were Jewish

and they assumed the world would come to them, convert, and retain the Jewish culture and language in the church.

Philip, a Hellenist not bound by cultural conventions, decided the Samaritans could be Christians too. It was a radical thought. The Samaritans were the Palestinians of the day. Racially impure and religious heretics, they were despised and excluded. Preaching the good news to them would be a bit like Benjamin Netanyahu going on TV and declaring, "Palestinians, I have good news for all of you. As of today you are included in the house of Israel – full rights of citizenship are yours. Welcome."

Philip paid no attention to convention and told the Samaritans they were fully eligible for the grace of God – no conditions, no exclusions, no questions. Apparently the Samaritans had been waiting for such good news and eagerly embraced the new faith.

Philip's success raised eyebrows and hackles down in Jerusalem and an apostolic delegation went to see if the rules and regulations of the old way were being enforced. They weren't. Philip prevailed, and Jerusalem reluctantly dismantled an ugly old wall.

Later in Acts, a gender barrier was demolished. Philip's four daughters became prophets, preachers in the church of Christ.

Something new was at work in the world and its power transcended all old loyalties like nationality, race, tribe, gender, and even religion, matters that afflict the human family and the Christian church all these centuries later.

Well, Philip was likely expecting his next assignment to be a larger challenge still. It was, but not like he expected. He got a message from the Holy Spirit loud and clear. (By the way, the Holy Spirit plays a very large role in this story and the book of Acts!)

"Go to Gaza," the voice of the Spirit said, "there you will discover your next assignment."

"What!" Philip must have thought, "Gaza? Why Gaza?" Back then, as now, Gaza was in the middle of nowhere, a desert place, barren of life except for an oasis or two.

But Philip obeyed that inner voice and headed off to Gaza. In the middle of the barren wasteland, he saw an ox driven carriage in the distance rumbling down the road toward who knows where. As he drew closer he saw an important man sitting in the carriage.

He was an Ethiopian, a black man from Nubian Empire, a land known for its wealth and beauty. Racism is no stranger to human history. Moses married a black woman, and the people of Israel responded with bitter criticism.

The Nubian's dress marked him as a high government official and a eunuch in Queen Candace's Empire. Eunuchs, castrated males, hence docile and safe, were often high officials entrusted with the royal harem and government finance. This Ethiopian was Queen Candace's Minister of Finance.

Another barrier loomed up before Philip. Eunuchs were pariahs in Israel. The Law of Israel forbade anyone with mutilated genitals to enter the temple of God. Gentiles could enter the outskirts of the house of God; Eunuchs were untouchables, excluded from the entire Temple grounds. The Eunuch's questionable, even doubtful, sexuality kept him "other" and excluded from the people of God. His entire life he'd been excluded, even from God.

Philip approached the carriage. The eunuch was reading a scroll. The carriage stopped and Philip engaged the eunuch in conversation. It's not a very friendly start, no hellos, no "I'm Philip. What is your name?"

"Do you understand what you are reading," Philip blurted out. The eunuch answered with equal abruptness, "How can I understand without someone to explain?" which can mean, "how can I understand, you people won't let me in."

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At any rate, the eunuch invited Philip to join him in the carriage. Philip sat beside the eunuch and they began to read together. Another barrier came tumbling down. God sent Philip to tell the eunuch that he, of all people, a black, sexually questionable foreigner, was included in God's good news for the world.

The scroll was open to Isaiah 53 where the Messiah is described as God's suffering servant who crosses every human and eternal boundary to find and save the lost. I wonder if Philip scrolled over three chapters in Isaiah to chapter 56, where the prophet envisions the coming kingdom of God as a place where foreigners and even eunuchs will be included. The prophet writes, "I will bring them to my holy mountain and make them joyful and accepted."

The eunuch was stunned by the free grace of God and was converted on the spot. "Sign me up," he declared and asked Philip if he would baptize him at the next oasis. Philip did, and the church of Christ tore down a barrier and included another outsider.

No wonder the early church attracted outcasts, the poor, slaves, and people of every nation. Here was a community that reached out to all – no matter who and no matter what.

Needless to say, the church often forgets its first principles. Human nature overpowers the norms and values of the kingdom and creates a God who excludes people unlike the people in charge of the church. God and gospel get wrapped up in nationality or conventional cultural norms, become exclusive, and in the process lose their soul, and deny the Lord.

The question is how? How do we keep our vision clear and our Lord in charge of our values and our attitudes? That's where the Gospel Lesson enters in. Jesus told his disciples the secret was staying connected to him. "Abide in me," he said.

Abiding is not mysterious or mystical. It simply means stay with me, live with me, listen to my words, love me. Jesus ends by making "abiding" more specific. "Abide in my love." Let him into our lives and invite him to turn our hearts right side up. Notice how his teaching and living embodied God's amazing grace, and let that divine love transform our moral vision – like it gave Philip revolutionary new eyes.

William Willimon tells a story of a friend who is an attorney by profession, but a banjo player by avocation. Over 20 years ago, this man set out to learn to play the banjo. One summer he took a month off to study with a master banjo player in North Carolina. For an entire month he ate, slept, and lived the banjo.

When he returned to his law practice, he continued to practice a set of exercises for his hands and fingers, and he practiced the banjo for hours. He still spends his weekends at music festivals working at his art.

He's not a professional banjo player and won't be. He still makes mistakes when he plays. But, Willimon says, he is a credit to the banjo and what it can do for someone who dares submit to its demands.

He hasn't mastered the banjo, but the banjo is mastering him. Not long ago, someone asked him at a party what he did for a living. "I'm a lawyer most of the time, but when I'm at my best, I'm a banjo player.

This, Willimon says, is a parable about being a disciple of Jesus. We all do something for a living or something that takes most of our time. At our best, we are followers of Jesus Christ. We never master being disciples, but being one can master us.

Remain in my love, said Jesus. Let the love of God master you and walls will tumble down. Start close to home. Let God's love tear down walls in your family, the neighborhood, this community. We'll never be the same! Amen.

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