



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Graceland
Easter 5, Year B
Sunday, May 2, 2021
The Rev. Amber Carswell

I went to Graceland this Thursday, it was a first for me. It only took 3.5 years of living here and the generosity of some comped tickets, so that we wouldn't be eating pasta for the rest of the month, but I made it as a parting pilgrimage to a place that I expect literally everyone to ask me about in New York when I tell them I've moved from Memphis.

“Preach from your scars, not your wounds,” says theologian, writer, and Episcopal priest Scott Walters, but we’re going for it anyway.

Because Graceland deeply confused me. I walked through the highly carpeted house, bemused at first, the suave tones of John Stamos in my headset, commenting on the custom-built coffee table, the name of Elvis' favorite yellow palomino, Lisa Marie's favorite chair. He regaled me with tales of how the pool table became damaged and why there were three televisions in one room while I wondered when I was supposed to start feeling... well, anything.

I grew more concerned as I proceeded further, John Stamos dispensing a steady stream of facts into my ears as my internal questions of “What should I be feeling?” devolved into dark and existential meditations on the unknowable chasms separating human beings.

I had become separated from Missy, who had been moving through more quickly -- I moved rapidly, anxiously, through the last exhibit and caught up to her at the gravesite, only to find her unrecognizable, nearing a state of rapture as she beheld the eternal flame lit for this dead man. Who was she, after all? Who was I, this obvious interloper and unbeliever?

This has happened to me before regarding a Memphis landmark, actually. When I first moved here, someone told me that I needed to go to the zoo first thing. I replied honestly, a personal problem I have -- I said I probably wouldn't, that zoos made me depressed. She looked at me and said, “You just don't get it.” How do you argue with that?

You just don't get it.

That ought to have been the moral of the story from the passage in Acts today. Phillip, not an apostle but one of those recently-appointed deacons whose job it was to set the tables for the communal meals in the early church, is told by the Holy Spirit to go, that perennial call of Scripture. Go. Go south, the Spirit directs, and no discussion follows, Phillip leaves his tables behind to follow a road in the wilderness.

He comes across an Ethiopian eunuch traveling in a chariot on his way home from Jerusalem. The eunuch is unnamed in the story, I think on purpose — he's an unknown, an unquantifiable character. He exists somewhere outside the working definitions of masculine and feminine. We don't know if he

was made a eunuch by force or by accident, but it was often a prerequisite for working for a powerful queen in the ancient world. He's come to Jerusalem to worship even though the Law is clear -- anyone who has been castrated is not allowed in the assembly. Such a long way to travel for a spectator's seat. Moreover, as an Ethiopian he is neither Jew nor Greek, sanctified nor profane, he is outside the working definitions of ordered society.

You would think all this would make this a kind of predictable biblical lead-up about the lame and the weak being brought in, but the eunuch is also extremely powerful. He's an official in a royal court, he's fabulously rich -- enough to own his own scroll of Isaiah, not to mention to employ a chariot driver to cart him around. And he's educated -- schooled in various religions, he can read the scroll for himself and does so out loud. The Ethiopian eunuch is this bundle of contradictions, someone outside and above and below our expectations, unnameable, unknown, he would walk into Memphis and would say he doesn't like barbecue. We just don't get it.

The chariot passes Phillip, walking on the same road, who runs to catch up when he hears the familiar words of Isaiah spoken in an unfamiliar accent. Phillip strikes up a conversation with this Ethiopian eunuch; they sit down together and study the scriptures. The Holy Spirit led them to a long, leisurely conversation, the chariot bumping slowly along a wilderness road heading south. Unexpected, unsought, a communion is established among two people with nothing in common but their newly discovered humanity. The study leads to the experience of God. They both leave changed, and they leave a story meant to change us, too.

What a good three-and-a-half years this rambling chariot ride south has been for me. My story blurs here, because I'm never sure when I'm the Phillip running alongside, asking you to slow down and read this passage with me, to show up to any number of the classes on Scripture or theology or the life of faith, the one who is invited into the chariot of your life for a short while as you go on your way. I'm never sure when I'm the eunuch, the outsider in the larger story, that unquantifiable individual of a puzzling array of demographics that would've disqualified me from being your priest when many of you were young.

But what I do trust is that we were brought together by the Holy Spirit, whose reconciling work in the world happens through our hopeful and failing selves. The church is one of those rare places in the world where we voluntarily enter a room with people we just don't get. You sit down by strangers and hear that those who do not love do not know God, and sometimes you feel deeply the implications of such a belief — you fearfully declare it the Word of the Lord. You look around the room and wonder if you're up to the work. You look inside yourself and find a heart capable but not always willing, itself a maze of excuses and excesses and anxieties that keep you from knowing your true self — the one beloved and redeemed by God.

What a place — where all these divides between you and me and God and our redemption, all these can be bridged with something as everyday as conversation over Scripture. It seems like the right story to leave you with. It's the story I've seen replayed over and over, something as simple as a Bible study leads us to the waters of your baptism, to your marriage altars, to your gravesides.

Calvary is full of those sort of hearts willing to step into the unknown places of our world, even toward a young priest from Arkansas a few years back. Those moments of grace ripple out to the block, to the city, to Ethiopia, even to New York. It's no wonder you've got a place called Graceland.