

## ANGELS AND EUNUCHS

ACTS 8: 26-40

The Fifth Sunday of Easter – May 10, 2009

University Church of Chicago

Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

Last Tuesday, May 5, was Soren Kierkegaard's birthday. A number of you missed the party that was held in my office, and several more of you were celebrating Cinco de Mayo, which you (somewhat correctly) believe is of more importance in the history of the culture of the Western Hemisphere. Still, as you know by now, Kierkegaard holds a very special place not only in my heart but also in the history of Christian thought.

By all accounts, he was a strange but engaging man, born in 1813 in Copenhagen, Denmark, the seventh and last child born to Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard and Anne Sorensdatter Lund. Soren inherited his father's wealth as well as his melancholy (what we would call depression), so he spent his adulthood writing philosophy, theology, communications theory, literary theory, and even political and social theory, polemics, prayers, journal entries, sermons, pseudonymous diatribes. He once characterized himself as a missionary, called not to introduce Christianity into a pagan country, but to "reintroduce Christianity into Christendom," to breathe life into the nominal Christian faith that dominated his society.

Most of his forty-three books were published in editions of 500 copies that never sold out prior to his death in 1855 at the age of 42. However, around the beginning of the twentieth century he exploded upon the European intellectual scene and was published first in America by the University of Texas (of all places!) like a long-delayed time bomb, and his influence since then has been incalculable.

Most of his forty-three books were published in editions of 500 copies that never sold out prior to his death in 1855 at the age of 42. However, around the beginning of the twentieth century he exploded upon the European intellectual scene and was published first in America by the University of Texas (of all places!) like a long-delayed time bomb, and his influence since then has been incalculable.

Kierkegaard spent most of his daylight hours wandering the streets of Copenhagen and talking to everyone—poor and rich, educated and ignorant, believer and skeptic, professor, pastor and layperson. He was a *bon vivant*, a dapper man about town. But in 1846, when he was thirty-three years old, he was viciously lampooned, attacked and vilified in a Danish newspaper, *The Corsair*. Before the Corsair affair, he had considered becoming a pastor, but after the attacks, he was no longer able to talk with people for fear of being mocked and ridiculed. His life became one of inwardness, retreat, writing more feverishly than ever.

He came to believe that true Christianity necessarily was linked to outward suffering, since Christian faith requires a break with the values that established societies always embody. Since the true follower of Christ must be willing to suffer opposition and persecution from society, and even expect such persecution, genuine Christianity must be distinguished from “Christendom”—the notion that being a Christian means that you are a respectable, nice member of a given society. A genuine Christian is someone who has found forgiveness for sin through faith in Christ and therefore expresses her/his faith by being a follower, an imitator of Jesus; it is not merely an abstract, propositional belief.

This story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch concerns the kinds of revolutionary changes that were occurring when a growing crowd of first-century Jews began to view their covenant with God, based on their relationship with Jesus of Nazareth, whom they believed to be God’s Messiah. Philip was one of those seven missionaries commissioned to spread the Good News to Samaria, beyond the bounds of traditional Judaism. It’s a ministry that Jesus himself initiated by engaging in a conversation with a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well (John 4).

Philip, the hero of today’s story, has left the Samaritan mission in the hands of Peter and John, and has been directed by an angel of God to reverse course and walk southwest toward Gaza on the Mediterranean coast. Along the way, he encounters an Ethiopian eunuch riding in a chariot. Philip overhears the Ethiopian reading aloud from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He asks him if he understands the meaning of the text. The African politely invites Philip aboard his chariot for conversation about the text.

The Ethiopian is on his way home from worshiping in the temple in Jerusalem. He has dark skin and he comes from those unknown lands below Egypt. He is someone wealthy enough to ride in a chariot, educated enough to read Greek, devout enough to study the prophet Isaiah, and humble enough to know that he cannot understand what he is reading without help.

For a modern parallel, imagine Mayor Daley inviting that street preacher at the corner of Washington and State to join him in his limousine for a little Bible study. The inclusion in this story runs both ways.

The eunuch is reading the fourth, and perhaps the saddest of the Servant Songs in Isaiah (52:13-53:12). The identity of the suffering servant of God perplexes the Ethiopian, even as it has intrigued us all these centuries. So Philip interprets for him.

Having heard the good news about Jesus, the servant of God, the Ethiopian asks to be baptized. With a hint of anxiety, he asks, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” The story simply says that the two men go down into the water and Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch.

How many of our accidental encounters with other people are really divine appointments? How can we learn to tell the difference between the two?

Professor Donald Kennedy, who was a scientist at Stanford and later served as head of the Food and Drug Administration in the Carter years, credits his students with being what he called “a corrupting influence,” shifting his interest from hard science toward public policy questions. He said to them as he

left Stanford for government policy work, “You seduced me into that dreadful scientific error, the substitution of important unanswerable questions for unimportant answerable ones.

“Certain questions,” said Tolstoy, “are put to human kind not that we should answer them, but that we should forever wrestle with them.” That is how we get a self—by wrestling with important unanswerable questions. What is just? What is beautiful? Is this true?

A young man, a student in the Booth School of Business at the University of Chicago, recently came to my office and asked to be baptized and to join this congregation. We had a long talk about the meaning of baptism, about the meaning of church membership—concepts completely alien to him. I invited him to come to worship services, to attend our nine-thirty Sunday morning adult class, to immerse himself in the life of the congregation before making this momentous decision. Michael came for a while, then drifted away. I still e-mail him and call him to try to re-establish our relationship as pastor and friend, seeker and the sought. But so far to no avail.

Should I have baptized him right there on the spot? The way Philip did with this seeking eunuch. Should I have trusted God’s providential grace more than the processes of Christendom? My guilt, my feelings of inadequacy and regret are palpable. I do not ask you for answers. I simply tell you my anguish and share with you the same questions I ask God every day.

Undoubtedly Philip relied more on faith and the power of God’s salvific grace than I do—at least in that instance. But God has given me a new perspective, a new determination not to be so hemmed in by process and custom.

I do not want to be merely a respectable pastor of a liberal church in a free-thinking neighborhood in America’s greatest city. I want to be a servant of God’s Word.

Phyllis McGinley has written a sonnet: THIS SIDE OF CALVIN

The Reverend Dr. Harcourt, folk agree,  
Nodding their heads in solid satisfaction,  
Is just the man for this community.  
Tall, young, urbane, but capable of action,  
He pleases where he serves. He marshals out  
The younger crowd, lacks trace of clerical unction,  
Cheers the Kiwanis and the Eagle Scout,  
Is popular at every public function,  
And in the pulpit eloquently speaks

On diverse matters with both with clarity:

Art, Education, God, the Early Greeks,

Psychiatry, Saint Paul, pure Christian charity,

Vestry repairs that shortly must begin—

All things but Sin. He seldom mentions Sin.

Two decades ago, Christopher Lasch wrote a marvelously prophetic book about us, *The Culture of Narcissism*. Remember Narcissus, the god in Greek mythology who was so beautiful that when he was taking a drink of water from a stream one day and saw his reflection in the water, he fell in love with himself. Thenceforth, he used every opportunity to look at his own reflection. He did that so often and so compellingly that he starved to death. All he could do was think about himself, so he had no time for others or even for his own well-being.

The narcissist is not just an egotistical person, but one who is so self-absorbed that he or she cannot enter into the life of another in any meaningful way. They are self-enclosed, self-absorbed, self-concerned so that they shut out of their lives anyone else. Chris Lasch characterized American culture as one of narcissism, that is, we are conditioned, taught, celebrated to center everything on our own lives, our own opinions, our own needs.

We are like the Hollywood star who went to a party, met a pretty young thing and promptly began to tell her how wonderful he was as an actor, human being and sex object. After about ten solid minutes of this egotistical narration, he stopped talking and said, "Enough about me. Now let's talk about you. How did you like my last movie?"

Unless we allow God to break through our self-possession and our need for self-aggrandizement, we will be plagued always by our self-enclosure.

Robert Penn Warren years ago wrote a novel, *A Place to Come To*. Its protagonist is a man named Jed Tewksbury, a contemporary uprooted and alienated prodigal who wanders from job to job, wife to wife, from broken dream to broken dream. At one point Jed has a conversation with his friend, Stephen, in which Jed speaks nostalgically of his home town in Alabama: "I told him how, hating the South, I had fled it, and afterwards blamed my solitude on that fact. I had fled, but had found nowhere to flee to."

Stephen listened intently, then in turn said, "As for me, I have no country that I recognize as my own, and I am trying to learn to be happy in that condition." Then he began to speak of the countryless world to come. "We are merely feeling the first pangs of modernity—the death of the self which has become placeless. We are to become enormously efficient and emotionless mechanisms that will know how to breed ever more efficient and emotionless mechanisms.

Don't you hope that prophecy is wrong, even though the evidence that it is true becomes more compelling every day. At least Warren identified for us the problem: our need for a place, a home where

one feels at home, where regardless of one's geography or one's history, one feels secure and loved and at home.

The eunuch is one of those people who has not only been castrated but has had to assume the identity thrust upon him by society. Philip jogs alongside his chariot, gets in, helps him understand what the prophet Isaiah has declared and baptizes him. God's providence works in strange and mysterious—and miraculous—fashion.