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Intersections from Thresholds

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Acts 8:26-40

I wish there was a way to know all of the stories of the people who have visited the corner of 38th and Chicago to see the place where George Floyd was killed and where the world-wide uprising for racial justice was ignited. I have not been recently but each time I visited 38th and Chicago I saw humanity in its fullness. The crowd, across many dimensions, reflected the often-hidden diversity of the Twin Cities. So many different people and I have been wondering about their stories.

Only God could chronicle and keep track of all the people who have visited the corner of 38th and Chicago since May 25th. Only God knows the stories – the full stories of the people who were drawn to that thin place to seek understanding, healing and a sense of community. I heard one story on the radioⁱ from a black young man in his twenties. He told a reporter he went to 38th and Chicago for solace. He said,

“Every day I’ve come out here it grows a little bit. You see people from all over Minneapolis, but you [also] see people coming from the suburbs and the rest of the state. All kinds of people.”

Another young Black man said,

“This is a place for the community to come and incite change, there needs to be a change....”

I’ve been wondering about the six-word stories each visitor to that intersection might offer to express their feelings and thoughts about race, class or gender. The exercise of offering six-word stories on racial identity comes to us from journalist Michele Norris, creator of the Race Card Project. To date the project has received tens of thousands of submissions from every state in our nation and 62 countries. The stories I have read or heard have been playful, serious, painful, incisive and hope-filled. Stories such as:

- Real Americans are not all white
- Embrace who you are, love it
- Get your feet off our necks
- White mom, colorful kids, heart ripped
- I’m allowed to wear a hoodie
- A turban doesn’t mean a terrorist

God alone sees how the class, race and gender of each person who visited 38th and Chicago intersects and has been a source of advantage or disadvantage; has led to full access or limited access; has been the basis for inclusion or exclusion.

It is very likely that most of the people who visited returned to places that were not as diverse as the community gathered at the sacred space in South Minneapolis. Finding ourselves in the middle of diversity such as that at the intersection of 38th and Chicago is an exceptional experience.

Throughout the book of Acts interactions between diverse parties are the norm rather than the exception. It all started with Jesus's followers being filled with power by the Holy Spirit and acquiring the ability to speak in other languages. Their fluency caught the attention of many who were traveling through Jerusalem. Amazed to hear their own languages spoken far from home, they were drawn in to listen to the gospel, they were baptized and they became devoted followers. The ones who were filled with the Spirit preached in the streets of Jerusalem – a new place for most of them – and later traveled beyond Jerusalem bringing the good news about Jesus – bringing the gospel to specific communities and people. Through the testimony and preaching of ordinary people, God's expansive love was shared in forgotten places. People who had been ignored and overlooked learned that God claimed them as God's own. Not only did the gospel cross the boundaries of language and geography, it broke down cultural and religious barriers, too. This was threatening. It is always threatening when the people of God reject being sorted

and separated from one another. It is threatening when the people of God recognize and name the image of God in those who are in need of healing.

The ones who were filled with the Spirit and carried the message of the gospel were initially well-received but later as more people began to live into new identities as baptized followers of Jesus, some of the community members and leaders began to oppose their teaching and threatened their lives. Those who were called to carry the gospel feared being persecuted so they ran away from Jerusalem and were scattered around Judea and Samaria. Philip was among those who scattered and ended up in the Samaritan city of Sebaste preaching the gospel. Samaritans and Jews were still separated from one another when Philip arrived offering the reconciling message of the gospel. The residents of the city of Sebaste received the gospel with great joy.

While Philip was engaged in ministry among the Samaritans he received a new assignment that would have him carry the gospel message further across boundaries. An angel came to Philip and gave him instructions to position himself on the road in the wilderness between Jerusalem and Gaza. Once there the Holy Spirit brought a chariot to Philip's attention.

The lives of two people who moved through the world with very different attributes intersected in the wilderness. One was part of the scattered leaders called to build new communities of Jesus followers while navigating social, theological, cultural and political forces. One was a high-ranking black official from the

Ethiopian Empire who moved through the world with the comfort, privilege and ease that are attached to wealth.

Philip was traveling on foot but he managed to run alongside the chariot and he could hear someone inside reading from the prophet Isaiah. Without any formal introduction Philip got the attention of the person inside the chariot by asking, “do you understand the passage you are reading?”

The person in the chariot who Philip questioned was on the way home to Ethiopia having travelled more than 1,200 miles seeking to worship in Jerusalem. As a eunuch, the official was barred from fully participating in worship. Eunuchs were not allowed access to the temple in Jerusalem.

The official answered Philip, “How can anyone understand these words unless they have a guide?” The official invited Philip into the chariot and began to ask questions:

- Who is the subject of the passage you overheard me reading?
- Is this the prophet’s experience or is it a description of someone else’s experience?
- This part about ‘a sheep lead to the slaughter’ and this part about ‘a lamb silent before his shearer’ and this ‘In his humiliation justice was denied him’ – whose experiences are being described

Philip began with the Isaiah passage and unpacked the good news – the story of Jesus’s life: calling disciples, being baptized by his cousin, preaching and embodying God’s love, healing the bodies of the sick, confronting systems that misshaped and abused people, reclaiming those who were relegated to the margins of communities, suffering a violent public death, rising on the third day, speaking courage to his frightened followers, and sending the Holy Spirit to Jerusalem to equip everyday people like Philip to carry the gospel.

Who is the gospel for and what does it mean? The gospel was intended for an Ethiopian official with responsibility for the treasury of an African nation, who moved through the world in a Black body, was educated, and had the wealth and freedom to travel to Jerusalem. The gospel was for one who lived with a complex sexual and gender identity as a eunuch. The gospel was for one who had suffered humiliation such as not being allowed to fully worship God. This gospel meant God had already claimed the Ethiopian official in love!

After hearing the good news about Jesus and seeing water off in the distance the official asked, ‘what is to stop me from being baptized?’ Based upon Philip’s sharing there were no barriers – the way was clear for him to be baptized so the official commanded the driver, ‘Stop this chariot!’ The official and Philip lowered themselves into the water. Philip brought the official beneath the water to be baptized. As soon as the official surfaced out of the water the Holy Spirit moved Philip on to his next assignment. The official was filled with rejoicing and continued

toward home with the story of Jesus in his body. The eunuch carried the story, 'this gospel is for all people,' home to Ethiopia the furthest point of the known world. All along the official had faith and after being guided by Philip the official came to understand the reach of God's initiating, unconditional, sacrificial, and liberating love.

Finding ourselves at diverse intersections in 2020 is an exceptional experience rather than a regular experience because political and social forces have sorted us into homogenous groups. In the Twin Cities we are especially likely to live in racially homogenous neighborhoods. Structural racism embedded in our institutions is sorting us.

For example real estate transactions from the first half of the twentieth century are still sorting and separating us. [The Mapping Prejudice project](#)ⁱⁱ housed at the University of Minnesota posted a time lapsed interactive map on their website showing that more than 20,000 real estate transactions completed in Hennepin County between 1910 and 1955 included language to prohibit sales to people of color. More recently public policy (focused on education, housing and transportation) has further enabled and preserved areas of concentrated affluence and concentrated poverty.

In the last six weeks since George Floyd was killed our community has been intensely grappling with the deeply embedded racism in this community and the painful inequalities and suffering it causes.

Some are tired of talking about racism. We who are Christians must continue grappling with racism because the sin of racism separates us from God and from one another.

The forces sorting and separating us are significant but the gospel definitively addresses how God's people are to respond to separation and estrangement in our relationship with God and one another. As God's people we are called to regularly go to unfamiliar places – we who God sought out and welcomed have been given the ministry to do the same. (2 Cor. 5:18) When we remain separated and only interact with those with whom we are comfortable we miss the opportunities to see how the gospel takes shape and is embodied in people who are different than us. We miss opportunities to step across thresholds to experience for ourselves the images and fullness of God's love as they are uniquely expressed in and through people who are different than us.

Who is this gospel for and what does it mean for us in this moment?

The gospel is for all people because God's love is for all people. As we are grappling with how racism is misshaping us and our lives together we can be encouraged that God's love equips and prepares us to respond. God has not left us on our own to figure out what to do about racism. As Shirley Guthrie, a trusted Presbyterian minister and teacher, wrote:

God's love is love that enables and empowers us to become different people, 'new' people who realize our own true

humanity as we learn to live in a right relationship with God and our fellow human beings.

Guthrie continued,

[God's love] sets us on our feet and sets us on the way toward becoming strong, active, responsible people growing up into the "mature" humanity we see in Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:13), loving God and other people with our whole selves.ⁱⁱⁱ

Trusting God's love will renew us and make it possible for us to grow ought to give us the courage to do things that are uncomfortable. On Monday, June 15th Minnesota Public Radio rebroadcasted Brian Stevenson's 2014 presentation at the Westminster Town Hall Forum. Stevenson would have been in Duluth, MN that day to offer the keynote address at an event commemorating the lynching 100 years ago of the three Black men: Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson and Isaac McGhie. Because of the coronavirus pandemic the event in Duluth was canceled. Stevenson's words from 2014 presentation are still relevant – if not prescient. Toward the end of his prepared remarks Stevenson's invited his listeners to, "choose to do uncomfortable things." It is necessary, he said, if we are going to address systematic racial and economic injustices for us to, "do the things that are uncomfortable but necessary."

Defying the social forces that sort and separate us will be uncomfortable but it is necessary. Returning to Acts 8, we see the Holy Spirit sustained Philip and provided a sense of security. The

Holy Spirit guided Philip and prepared Philip to be a guide. That same Spirit will join us as we defy the forces seeking to separate us from God and one another. When we choose to be uncomfortable and to do the things that are necessary the Spirit will open a way for us and all God's people to understand – or better yet to experience – the reach of God's initiating, unconditional, sacrificial, and liberating love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ “In a place of tragedy in Minneapolis, people resist and find solace”

<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2020/06/07/npr-in-a-place-of-tragedy-people-resist-and-find-solace>

ⁱⁱ www.mappingprejudice.org

ⁱⁱⁱ Christin Doctrine p. 106