

WHO CAN BE BAPTIZED?  
Acts 8: 26-31,34b-39; Matthew 28: 16-20

Twenty-two years ago, the world was so different. It was my privilege to visit with Dr. Frank Harrington, who was Senior Pastor of Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, then the largest in our denomination. He carried out daring discipleship, welcoming new members group by group, pastor to person, and going into neighborhoods around Atlanta labeled “unredeemable.” Instead, he invited and visited and baptized. He and his staff and church members invited young, troubled teens to know Christ, first through softball or basketball, then through mission and education. The racially divided city began being brought together, regardless of race, in the name of Jesus Christ. When I spoke to Frank two years later, his church was also building *one Habit for Humanity House a month!* Big churches don’t waste human or financial resources when they keep drawing others to their Lord. Another great in the halls of faith was Dr. Paul Edris who was Pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Daytona Beach from, get this, 1939-1975! He went with his youth to football games and to band concerts. He was in the community reaching across racial barriers in the Ministerial Association and through civic groups. He welcomed all people from every walk of life with a smile, a warm handshake, and a sermon laced with stories and jokes. And he reached others for Christ. But unlike the mammoth Peachtree Church, Paul Edris took the name First Church seriously, unlike many other First Presbyterian Churches which are actually the ONLY Presbyterian Church in town! Paul’s vision was not for the church he served to become mammoth, but to become a Mother Church for many others. First Church gave birth to other churches. There is not a Presbyterian Church in town that was not in some way created or enhanced by that Mother Church with the ultimate goal of baptizing and inviting more people into congregations of Jesus Christ.

As we heard in the story from Acts today, professing faith, being baptized into faith, and being schooled in the faith are not the inventions of the great men I just mentioned. They were the work of the early church. In particular, we notice that in the Acts of the Apostles, the Apostles were faithful too. How radical it was for Jesus to entrust the telling of the Kingdom of God to just twelve apostles (with the appointment of Matthias in Acts to replace Judas.) The circle of announcements and conversions began first in Jerusalem, but then, by commission of Christ himself and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, it began to spread. Luke says the evangelism had to start in Jerusalem where Jesus was, and then Acts shows us in just ten chapters how the mandate spread much farther, not just the chosen people, not just nice people, not just to “our kind of people.” The church that came alive with the spirit of Pentecost reached across cultural and racial lines to Samaritans. Their ancestors were shunned by the Jews for declaring that God’s Mountain was in their territory—Mount Gerizim—instead of Jerusalem. The Jews called that blasphemy. But Jesus and his followers went to them in Jesus’ name instead. Jesus was the bridge between the cultures and eventually he became the Savior of many. Phillip, the Apostle, went to Samaria (crossing that clear cultural boundary) and preached the gospel, baptizing Samaritan men and women, all who believed and requested it. No sooner did he begin to convert many in that nation that the Spirit called him to a wilderness road that led south to Gaza and Egypt. On that road he ran into a jet-black man from Ethiopia. He was reading, or attempting to read, the book of Isaiah. That man was clearly not a Jew, and we learn that he was a “eunuch,” a man deliberately castrated by his ruler, believing it would keep him loyal. But the Covenant Code of the Old Testament, specifically in Deuteronomy 23, forbade such a man from entering the sanctuary. What a bind: Philip’s traditional loyalty to Torah and the new commandment from Jesus. If he had read a little lower in Isaiah 56: 3-4, he would have found these words of hope about how life would be when the Messiah comes:

“ Thus says the Lord to eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast to my covenant, I will give ... them an everlasting name:.” Philip joined a cast of others who practiced daring discipleship! He had preached to Samaritans, now he proceeded to baptize and convert a man of another land, another race, and another faith. Then in chapter 10, for the first time, Peter preaches to and *begins to baptize and welcome Gentiles!* That was a first for him! What was the world coming to? The world was coming to Christ, as it still is! Certainly Jews for Jesus were the ones who started spreading the message of Jesus. But Gentiles for Jesus have carried on the message for centuries.

It wasn't too many years ago that Daytona Beach and the rest of the nation led segregated lives. One daring man, who broke the color barrier in baseball played right here on City Island in 1946: Jackie Robinson. When Branch Rickey stuck his neck out and signed Robinson to a National League contract, things changed for good, but not easily. One of his early teammates was a Kentucky boy with no special affinity for black people. His name was “Pee Wee” Reese the famous shortstop of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Pee Wee had grown up playing ball on the New Covenant Presbyterian Church in Kentucky. Rickey saw talent in Robinson, not just as an athlete, but as one with a cool temperament and a good heart. He made an agreement with Jackie: if he would just let the shouting, jeering, name calling, and litter throwing just roll off his back while he played ball, he'd have a position on a major league team. Jackie agreed, but oh, how he suffered. Some days he would go off the field and cry, or he would punch something. But he held on. He was a fine player, yet even Pee Wee Reese was criticized by other players for not having anything to do with Robinson. At one game when Robinson's name was announced, the booing and hissing was so bad that the whole stadium went into a bellowing frenzy. Someone even tossed a black cat onto the field. Somebody had to do something.

Somebody did. Pee Wee Reese stepped from his shortstop position to his pitcher and called “time.” He walked to his teammate, Robinson at second base, said some consoling words to him, then put his hand on his shoulder, and stood there, looking at the crowd. Like a sergeant calling soldiers to attention, the jeering stopped. Silence filled the stadium. The umpire shouted, “Play ball!” And they did. Pee Wee Reese’s action shut down the ugliness of the crowd. He had made a daring move to show, in more than one way, that they were on the same team.

This month we have already had three young people profess their faith in Christ as Lord; one was baptized in the words of Jesus’ great commission: “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” We did not ask any questions about race or nationality or sexuality. We asked who they believed their Lord and Savior was. And they answered, perhaps as Samaritans have done, and Ethiopians, and Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists and Catholics have done: “Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.” Jesus calls us to cross all lines, to make bonds, not boundaries. Then the questions comes: “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” “Nothing, my new friend. Let it be so.” And he went on his way rejoicing. Perhaps you have a story like that too. Let’s continue the great commission of going into the world and making disciples of all nations.

Let us pray: O Lord Jesus, we have learned that you crossed many cultural and national boundaries inviting others to follow you. Inspire us to look for others who are seekers, not questioning the choices, but inviting them with gladness. May baptismal waters continue to change the lives of people in the world. Amen.

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