

Did we have a bad experience with the church community—this one or another one—that made it hard to believe that these people could ever demonstrate the kingdom of God on earth?

Do we look out at the world and find that hope only feels like a whisper these days?

Are we struggling to remember the good in everyone, when there are some people leading painful and unjust efforts all around us?

If you are struggling with any of those things, I would not blame you one bit. Those matters are real, and they are hard. But I would also point out that those are challenges with our *beliefs*—with what we can wrap our heads around right now. And while that can matter a lot, this story invites us to focus on something different, for now: to focus on faith that is about doing and living like Jesus. To focus on following him eagerly with our hands and feet. And consider how we can dive into the baptismal water and into the journey of living and serving that follows.

The answer to Abdimalkah's question—what is to prevent me?—was silence. There was nothing to prevent him. Not his body, different though it was. Not his understanding of scripture, nascent though it was. Not his questionable belief, about which we can only speculate. Not his wealth or his line of work. There was nothing to stand in the way of him following Jesus. Faith is us moving into action today, without delay, not stopping to work out our exact beliefs, but going right ahead living the way Jesus did in our public life, in our private life, in our prayer life. Faith means eagerly putting one step in front of the other to love and serve, give and hope, alongside the wider community of faith who is seeking to follow.

What is to prevent you? I wonder what Abdimalkah anticipated Philip saying in answer to his question? Maybe he thought Philip would give him a laundry list of reasons to prevent him from being baptized, to slow down his journey with Jesus. Maybe. But I hear in his question the assumption that there was nothing to prevent him. That baptism was the next logical step in drawing his life closer to the pattern of Jesus. Abdimalkah was ready, and so he could not imagine that anything would or could stand in his way. And by the grace of God, he was right. Nothing can stand in our way, friends. Ready or not, we can follow Jesus right now. We can eagerly live our faith no matter what questions we still have or where our beliefs stand. No matter what shape our bodies are in, no matter what norms we break by our very existence, God is ready to welcome us into living our faith as we follow Jesus.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

May 18, 2025
Fifth Sunday of Easter
“Eager Faith”
Rev. Emma Nickel
Scripture: Acts 8:26-39

Two weeks ago we said that the bodily resurrection of Jesus makes it clear that human bodies matter to God. Because the image of God dwells within each of us, our bodies are good. And we are called to care for other people and their real bodies, too. Today's story in Acts starts with bodies. And then it quickly reminds us that all bodies, in their amazing uniqueness, are always welcome to follow Jesus. Neither our bodies, nor our hang ups or questions or worries, can ever prevent us from joining on the path of Jesus.

The person reading the scriptures in Acts is described as an Ethiopian, which means he probably had brown or black skin. He is described in the text as a eunuch. As was the practice at the time, the bodies of boys and men were sometimes altered so that they could serve as 'harmless' guards for powerful women. This caused them to be shorter than other men and usually beardless, so they were easy to identify. It was this person, living in a body that did not fit into the male and female categories prescribed by society, who's eager commitment to Christ this story celebrates.

Before we continue, I want to note that the Ethiopian is not named in this passage. And I don't like referring to him based only on a characteristic of his body. Many commentators, starting as early as the 200s CE also felt a need to call him by name. Traditions have created various names to use for him. Related to the Hebrew words that refer to his work as servant of the queen, we'll follow scholar Wil Gafney in calling the Ethiopian, *Abdimalkah*.

Abdimalkah served alongside the queen of one of the most powerful nations in Africa. He had an important role managing her wealth and he must have had a lot of education in order to be able to read. When we meet him, he was returning home from worshipping in Jerusalem. Since there were Jews living in Ethiopia, he may very well have been Jewish himself. As he rode along in his chariot that day, he was reading scripture—a passage from Isaiah. Just then, an angel and the Spirit sent Philip to cross paths with Abdimalkah, perhaps sensing an opportunity for faith to emerge. Philip jogged up alongside Abdimalkah and shouted to him: “Do you understand what you're reading?” It was a funny place and a strange way to have a serious discussion about scripture.

1 Wil Gafney, “Black, Jewish, and Queer: The Ethiopian Eunuch,” May 4, 2012, <https://www.wilgafney.com/2012/05/04/black-jewish-and-queer-the-ethiopian-eunuch/>

But despite the absurdity, Abdimalkah was open to what Philip had to say. “How about you teach me,” he replied. In fact, what strikes me most about Abdimalkah was his eagerness to be a part of God’s story. He was full of curious questions and he was open to each new thing. He implied a ‘yes’ each time a new opportunity was opened to him. He could have closed off the conversation immediately by telling this stranger Philip to go away, but instead he let Philip guide him. He opened himself to Philip’s wisdom and even invited him to jump into the chariot with him. Then he asked for more information which led to the fuller story of Jesus, as the crucified and risen Lord.

With this clarity in the forefront of his mind, when Abdimalkah saw water, he was ready to take the next step. His final question to Philip asked, “What is to prevent me from being baptized? What’s to stop me from being part of this story, too?” Throughout history, plenty of Christians have had answers to that question. Sometimes the answer is “nothing’s to stop you,” until that person feels called to assume more leadership in the church. Then the barriers have often become “your chromosomes” or “who you love” or “that your marriage didn’t work out.” At the most basic level though, the a common barrier to baptism has been about what a person believes. Before they can join what Jesus is up to, they are told they must assent in their mind to a specific idea about God and Jesus Christ. But in this passage, it’s not clear Abdimalkah believed anything in particular. He offered no confession of his belief in Jesus as God’s own Son, or about the crucifixion or resurrection or what the Spirit was doing inside him. We don’t know what was in Abdimalkah’s mind or heart. And yet we know that he was baptized that day in the water. It turned out, there were no barriers. Not in his body, not in his mind. There was nothing that could separate him from a life with Christ.

I find this story encouraging. There is nothing to stand in our way. But some scribes who copied this early passage of scripture were troubled by Abdimalkah’s lack of a confession of faith; they were scandalized by it even. So they decided to fix it. You might want to take out your Bible and see how Acts chapter 8 skips from verse 36 to verse 38. In the main text, there is no verse 37. You have to look in the footnotes for it. Verse 37 was later added by some scribe who was uncomfortable that Abdimalkah was baptized without saying he believed. The oldest and best manuscripts tell us there was indeed nothing to prevent him from being baptized - no internal or external barriers.

So if Abdimalkah did not believe anything in particular, should he have been baptized? Did the story of Jesus mean anything to him? The gift of baptism may not have signalled a new way of believing for Abdimalkah. It signalled a new way of living. Baptism was his entrance into a life of journeying with Jesus. What he most wanted was to ground his way of life in the manner of Jesus’s life. That day, Abdimalkah began to follow Jesus.

This week I attended the Festival of Homiletics. It’s a festival of worship services, powerful preaching, and encouragement for preachers who dare to proclaim God’s message to people like you, week in and week out. Brian Blount, the former president of Union Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Virginia gave a lecture called “Help My Unbelief.” He proposed that so much of his own Christian life, and that of the church, has been focused on *belief*: figuring out how to agree with the appropriate content of God’s story. But often, the more we learn and study that content—think floods, virgin birth, exorcisms, resurrection—the more questions we have about it. And he’s not sure that just mental assent to those things is the key to being a disciple. He said “we are peddling belief. Jesus is commending faith.” Blount proposed that faith is not something to possess, but is something to live. Faith means *following Jesus*; living our lives as Jesus demonstrated. Acting in the way Jesus did. Following through on our intention to model our lives off his. Believing is wonderful. But belief must be accompanied with the faith of following.

Abdimalkah may not have approached his baptism with belief. He approached it ready to follow Jesus. He approached it having heard from Philip not of the fruits of faith or the rewards of heaven, but about the suffering of Jesus, and how that sacrifice led to good news. As Gafney says, Abdimalkah was ready to follow Jesus in order to “touch the untouchable, love the unlovable and forgive the unforgivable because that is how God loves us.”¹ Abdimalkah was eager to follow. He was eager to live his life in the manner of the incarnated one.

Last Sunday my family worshipped at the Presbyterian Church of Traverse City. Once a month during their Time with Children they collect what they call a Noisy Offering, which goes to support hunger ministries in the community. There were a bunch of small tin pails at the front and after the pastor said the prayer with the kids, each child picked up a pail and went out into the congregation to collect coins. You would have thought this was an Easter Egg Hunt with the promise of a giant chocolate bunny at the end. Kids bounded through the pews, looking for adults with their hands waving, ready to drop some change into their pails. Grown-ups called out kids names to call them over, while grins of delight showed up on each child’s face. It was a way to gamify worship—who could get the most money in their bucket?! Running was allowed, noise was not only ok, but the point of the exercise. All to feed people who need help getting enough food to eat. In the noisy offering, the children were so very eager to follow Jesus. We may have to try it here!

Do we live an eager faith like that? Do we live with the eager desire to follow Jesus that Abdimalkah showed? Are we chomping at the bit to bind our lives to Jesus’ life, living like he did, loving who he loved, and speaking truth with wisdom and power like he spoke? If not, what is preventing us?

Is it our hangup with the words in the creed, or some other difficult part of the liturgy or scripture?