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“It’s Gonna Be May (The Wideness of God’s Mercy)” The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman (04/28/2024, The Fifth Sunday of Easter)

End of the month, it's April 28th, which means a new month is coming and not just any month.

It's a month that when this transition happens at the end of April, there's actually a very well-known song to commemorate this transition.

It's gonna be me. It's gonna be me. It's gonna be me. It's gonna be me.

That young, curly-haired Justin Timberlake, within sync in 2000, it's gonna be me.

But, you know, the way pop singers affect their vocals, it's gonna be me.

So this will be filling up. If you're a certain age, it'll fill up your social media feed very soon if it hasn't already.

I bring that up because only I wanna talk about a song that Justin Timberlake released in this year, January 2024, his first album in six years.

And the lead single is a song called Selfish. And it's okay. But it's all about wanting.

It's all about wanting someone, all to yourself. You know, you found something good and you want it all. I'm selfish.

I just want you. I don't want to, I don't want anybody else. It's just, it's an ode to overprotection, basically.

But the thing that we see in that song that he's doing on an individual basis in this relationship is something that I see happen a lot in communities.

Once we have that attitude about individuals, it's pretty easy to do it with communities to say, this is mine, not for you. This is my group of people.

I don't want this group of people in my group of people. There's fences, there's barriers, there's walls. And so we put up these signs. We build walls to keep others out. The people who we let in are those who earn it, those who deserve it, those who fit some criteria or some standards that we have.

And on the other side of the wall are the people that don't measure up and we don't want to let in.

If you've applied to college, you know what this is like. If you've tried to get a job, you know what this is like.

There's all kinds of barriers when we say, we come sort of knocking on the door, please, please let me in.

And sometimes you let, or let in, sometimes you are not, I experience this every time and as do you, if you ever travel, the airport is a place of major exclusion.

And it's like they're really trying to rub it in your face. So the first thing that happens is you go to check in and that usually goes okay, but then you've got to go through the security line.

And then you realize there are haves and have nots. The have nots are me. The haves are the TSA pre-check people that just breeze on through.

And then you think maybe that's, maybe that's the only indignity I'll suffer today. No, no. No, no, because then after you've gotten through, you are walking to your gate and you'll pass this magical place called the admiral's lounge.

No, it's, if you're part of it, I salute you and hate you, but I have, I only know this is what it looks like because I had to google what does it look like inside the admiral's club.

You know, it's this, there's like, there's frosted glass, you catch a glimpse of someone goes in, oh, another door, the door closes.

It's pretty nice though in that admiral's lounge. And you think maybe that is the, maybe it's okay, so two indignities.

Well, then you go to board the plane and there's those magical group one people and they always get to go on first and then you're waiting as they call the groups and, you know, finally group seven and you get to go on.

And then maybe that's, maybe it's just three indignities. No, no, there's one more. As you get on the plane, you have to walk past all those people.

It's like the walk of shame, the first class people there with their glasses of champagne, would you like some? No. And then you have to walk to the back where all the cattle and the sheep are and you have to sit there in your little compartment for another two hours.

So exclusion all over the place.

And even if we are not having this put upon us from the outside, we do this to ourselves. We often think there are reasons why we cannot be included in certain situations.

You may have an opportunity, you get invited to a party or an event and you're like, no, I don't know, I don't know those people would have somebody looks at me funny or I'm, I'm, it's not really my scene. I wouldn't, every time there's a karaoke thing that happens here, I'm looking at you young adults, I'm like, I don't know, they might reject me.

See?

There's a talent show coming up, May 17th here, it's almost to raise money for the children to go on their summer mission trip.

And I think as of last week, I'm the only person that signed up. I think because maybe people are worried, maybe they're not talented enough, maybe they're not good enough.

And I get it because throughout life, there's always these kinds of

situations. You know the sign, when you go to the six flags or Disney or whatever, you must be this tall to ride.

And it's not in life that we, you know, if you're, many of you are tall enough to ride the rides, but think about this as a metaphor for life.

Now, this tall and say, you must be this witty, you must be this accomplished, you must look like this, you must have these achievements, you must fit this socio economic class, you must fit whatever this characteristic is to be included.

And in life, that's often how we feel.

It also happens in religious settings a lot. There are certain standards, sometimes the rules are written down, sometimes they're sort of communicated non verbally, but you know there's certain rules about how to fit in into a religious setting.

And we're going to look at Acts, chapter eight today, and someone who is typically excluded gets really in a wild way gets included.

And we're going to walk through Acts eight, and we'll see what we can get to it, and we're going to talk about the greatest Mormon rock band of all time, and then we'll wrap it up.

So in the book of Acts, this is a story that begins with the disciples getting a very clear instruction to go take the message of Jesus throughout the known world.

And Jesus says, start in Jerusalem, and then go to Judea, and then go to Samaria, and then go to the ends of the earth.

So it's sort of like start in Waco, then McLean and County, and then Central Texas, and then even to Austin and crazy places like that, just like go all over the place.

And the disciples do what most Christian disciples do when Jesus tells them what to do, nothing.

I mean, they do a little bit. They tell some people in Jerusalem, but they don't go out, really, until persecution breaks out, and they're sort of forced.

This Christian community is forced to go out into the other regions. And one of these people that goes out is Philip, and the Holy Spirit prompts Philip with some very clear instructions.

I want you to go to this road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, a region we know well these days, and it's a wilderness road, meaning it's a danger.

It's not a well lit boulevard. This is a place where there's twists and turns, and bandits could jump out of you.

So I want you to go to this specific place. And while he's there, he gets prompted by the Holy Spirit to approach this chariot with an Ethiopian inside.

Now the pastor says, Ethiopian Unic, he wouldn't have known that by looking at the guy, Ethiopian would have been clear.

Ethiopian, we think it's somebody from Adis Ababa down on the horn of Africa, but Ethiopian then meant any black-skinned person from Africa, likely from the Kingdom of Kush in this situation, which we now know as Sudan.

And so Philip could see he's in Ethiopian, but we get a ton more

detail from this passage than you would know just by looking at the person.

It's clear that Philip has this extended conversation with this Ethiopian to learn a number of things. For example, he is a Eunuch. I prayed long and hard about how to describe what this means. If somebody doesn't know what a Eunuch is, it's a person, a man who's had his testicles removed.

And so that has a whole bunch of implications for him hormonally, physiologically, how he would appear, and how he would sound, and how he would look.

So he's a Eunuch, and the reason he's done this is because he is a high official to the Candace. Maybe you thought that was a typo, the Candace.

Because you know Candace is just a woman's name, and you know one from Phineas and Furb. But the Candace, it's a title. It's a title for a very powerful female ruler or leader in this society.

And he is in charge of the treasury. So he's the finance guy. It's a position of high trust, high responsibility, and he works for a woman. And so just to make sure there's no shadiness, you got the job. Just one thing. And so he's a Eunuch. You know, pros and cons.

Job security, but so Philip learns this in conversation with him. And he also, we learn that he was in Jerusalem to worship.

Now you only go to Jerusalem to worship one deity. That is the God of Israel, Yahweh. Now he's clearly not a child of Israel. He's an Ethiopian. He looks different. He's of a different religious tradition.

He's different in about every way as one could be from the Jewish community of believers, the Jewish folks, and then this new, this new sect of Judaism, these Christians that are in Jerusalem.

So he's going to the temple to worship. That says something sort of interesting about him. He's someone who's interested in the God of Israel.

And he's taken vacation time to go worship in Israel. It's a long trip. And it's not easy. He's applied for PTO. He's got the people to handle his duties while he's gone. And now he's on this trip.

I mean, have you gone on religious vacations? No, you go on cruises. You know, you go to Cabo, you go to Colorado, or whatever it is, but he's going to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel because that is the temple. That's the only place you can truly worship the God of Israel.

So he goes there. So spiritually, there's stuff getting churned up inside him. He clearly is interested in knowing more about this God. And not only that, on the way home, he's reading Isaiah. He hasn't gotten his fill. He wants more. He's reading Isaiah. There's a famous painting and you'll see it later of this story where one of the servants of this Ethiopian is holding the book that he was reading. But it's historically inaccurate. Thanks, Rembrandt. It wouldn't have been a book. It would have been a scroll. So he's reading this scroll of Isaiah.

And Philip, I don't know how it works. I don't know if the chariot was

stopped, or maybe he was just sort of trotting alongside of it. And Philip comes up and says, pardon me, do you have any grape or ponte? And he says, he sees his reading. Do you understand what you're reading? He says, no, how can I understand unless I have someone to explain it to me?

And so Philip gets in the chariot, and they have this Bible study in the backseat of the Escalade. And this man, this Ethiopian who church tradition calls him Simeon, we don't know if that was his name, but that's what the tradition holds. I like to call him Simeon. It feels a little more human than the Ethiopian unique.

So Philip gets in and Simeon asks, what's it about? He says, about whom does the prophet say this?

And you heard the verse that, you know, what he's asking about, the verse says from Isaiah, like a sheep, he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before a cheerer, so he does not open his mouth. Who is this about? Who is this lamb, this sheep led to the slaughter? Is it about, is the prophet speaking about himself or is it someone else? And Philip tells him the good news. He began to speak and starting with this scripture proclaimed him the good news about Jesus. This is about Jesus the Messiah.

And apparently gives the whole spiel, not just it's about Jesus, he clearly answered more. He told him about the death of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead that he was a lamb led to the slaughter, which only means one thing. It's not a lamb that you slaughter just so you can have lamb chops. This is a sacrificial lamb.

And he's taken away the sin of the world and he rose again from the dead. And now all who put their faith in him can get baptized. We know he has this whole conversation because the next thing the Simeon says is, hey, there's some water over there.

So he now he's so he's learned about baptism and he asks if he can go into the waters. Here's how he says it. And this is important here. I think because this is not always how we would phrase it.

They came with some water and the unit said, look, here is water. What is to prevent me from being baptized?

We might say, look, here's some water. I have decided to be baptized. This language of decision is really common around baptism. I have decided. I will do it. I am choosing to follow Christ.

His perspective is different. He is someone who is very much used to being prevented. He is someone who is used to being kept out.

In Deuteronomy chapter 23 verse 1, there's a verse that specifically prohibits Unix from entering the temple.

A man who has been injured in this way is seen as ceremonially unclean blemished and he cannot approach.

So he's someone if he went to the temple to worship in Jerusalem, he maybe got to the lobby, but he didn't get on the inside.

So he's someone who is used to being excluded. He also probably got a number of stairs. This Ethiopian walking through Jerusalem.

He's someone who knows he is not part of the club. He is not tall enough to ride the ride as he's reading Isaiah.

He says, how can I understand this? Indicating he's someone. He's not

part of the club. Who is this about? I don't understand. He is someone who's used to being excluded for all kinds of reasons. He's of a different race. He's a Gentile. He's of the wrong religion. He's got this physical, physiological disability that causes him to not have a family structure.

Most normal people would have had in those days. He's not traditional in any way. He is not tall enough to ride.

Yet when he comes to the water, he says, let me hear some water. Is there any, there's got to be some other hurdle that prevents me. Is there anything that prevents me from, because I want this, but there's got to be some reason why I can't be baptized. What prevents me?

And of course, nothing prevents him. They go to the water and Philip baptizes him.

The killers, fronted by Brandon Flowers, who all grew up in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Great band. And they have a song, all these things that I have done.

And there are many people who walk through life carrying all the things that they have done, all the things that have defined them.

Some are known, some may be secret, but we, because of all the things that we have done, often feel like we might not be included.

We are not tall enough to ride. We cannot get into the doors. What if I'm not good enough?

And I hear this all the time. I hear from people who come back to church after a long absence.

I hear it from people who are in church. Someone said to me recently, Aaron, you talk a lot about the grace of God and the forgiveness we have.

And I feel like every time you say that, it applies to everyone but me.

You look around. You see all these people that happen together. You can't see their insides. You only know your own insides.

And you think you're the only one. What prevents you?

When Simeon heard the gospel, he apparently had the audacity to believe that the grace of God might actually apply to him.

And he found that to be the case. Even he could be saved. There's an old hymn that talks about the wideness of God's mercy.

It says, there's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea.

I don't know if you've ever been out on the open ocean where you can't see the shore anywhere. That's the wideness of God's mercy.

And many folks, I mean, do I really need to tell you all this? I mean, here you are at church. You got showered on a Sunday morning.

You came to church. You're not. Some of you say, no, she didn't. But you look like you did.

Here you are. Do you need to know about the wideness of God's mercy?

Because a lot of people think that the wideness of God's mercy is what gets you in.

It's the threshold. But then once you're into the admiral's lounge, you have to behave.

Once you're into the Christian community, once you have joined the church, once you've been baptized, there's some standards, some rules, some quid pro quo, there's some things you got to do.

And you end up feeling again like Simeon. Maybe there's still something that prevents me.

Maybe the grace is for everybody else but me. And I have found that pretty much everybody needs to hear again and again the message of the grace of God.

That the wideness of God's mercy gets you in, keeps you in, brings you back, and sustains you all the days of your life.

There is never a time when you don't need it, and there's never a time that it is not there.

His mercies are new every morning, as the scriptures say. They don't just get you in, they keep you in.

The passage ends beautifully, says that Simeon went away rejoicing. And I love this because Philip didn't say, now, Simeon, we've great talk.

Congratulations on your baptism. Here's your certificate.

Let's talk about discipleship. Let's talk about sanctification.

There's a six-week course you can do. It's a correspondence situation.

There's some YouTube videos for you to watch, and I'll be checking in on you every week to see if you're advancing in your sanctification, your progress in the Lord as a disciple of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There's none of that. He went away rejoicing.

And for you, you're going to confess your sins. You're going to receive this meal, which is supposed to put you in mind of the grace, the wideness of God's mercy, that we receive in baptism and through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And I hope you, too, go away rejoicing because he has done it all, and there's nothing left for you to do.

So go away rejoicing. Let us pray. Oh, mighty God.

Thank you that there's nothing preventing us from receiving your grace and your mercy. Help us to receive it, a fresh and a new, or for the first time today.

We pray in Christ's name. Amen.