

One of the great joys of sports is arguing with officials about calls - frankly it's what I'll miss most about sports once the robots take over. And since it's baseball season, I thought it'd be fun to review one of the all-time worst calls in baseball. The year: 1996. Game 1 of the ALCS, Orioles vs. Satan's team, the NY Yankees. It's the bottom of the 8th inning, and the Yankees are losing 4-3.

Yankees all-star shortstop Derek Jeter is at bat, and [this happens](#).

[1 **Pic of the Incident**] 12-year-old Jeff Maier (a devout Yankees fan) reached into the field to catch Jeter's fly ball, turning a potential out into a home-run, at least according to Right Field umpire Rich Garcia. With Jeter's score, the Yankees tied the game, going on to win in extra innings and ultimately winning the ALCS and the World Series.

Today, Maier's catch is universally agreed to be Spectator Interference, and Jeter's hit should've been ruled an out, or at most a ground-rule double. Because fans aren't allowed to participate in the game. Obviously, right? Fans playing professional sports would defeat the whole purpose of professional sports. Part of the *fun* is going to *watch*, and when a fan takes it upon themselves to become part of the game, well... people get *mad*.

Baseball only works when the fans stay in the stands and let the players... well, play.

Now: I *love* baseball. I'm *glad* fans aren't allowed to jump in and spoil the game, that in all professional sports we have umpires and referees to prevent that sort of thing.

But I see this sort of behavior in religion, too, and there it's *much* more problematic. Of course religion isn't a *game*, but hang with me a minute. Imagine the life of faith, the life of the Church to be the field, and those of us who are church folk to be the players.

[2 **Baseball stands**] There are quite a few people that have been relegated to the stands, who have been told "you aren't *allowed* to be part of the Church." Particularly if you look at the long history of the Church, over the last 2,000 years, People who because of their gender or the color of their skin or their orientation or their profession or lack of income or ability have been excluded, told they're not welcomed (either explicitly or implicitly).

[3 **Umpire**] In other words, quite often in the Church, there are clear out-of-bounds, and a clear sense of who's in and who's out. Who's allowed to be part of this new life Jesus introduced and who isn't allowed.

[4 **Out of Bounds crossed out**] But the good news for us this morning is that in the wake of Jesus' resurrection, there *is* no out-of-bounds anymore. The playing field has become the whole world, and *everyone* is welcomed to play, to join in the life of faith. God offers new life to *everyone*.

In other words, in the wake of Jesus' resurrection, it's not a question of who's in and who's out. If we're still concerned with the boundary lines, we're asking the wrong question. Now what matters is who chooses to participate.

I know how that sounds. About half of us are thinking, "Okay, that sounds pretty great. But let's be real - if everyone gets in, does "in" even matter anymore?" If everyone is just in, then do my choices even matter? It sounds like a fluffy sort of pipe dream." Some of us would like that to be true, and some of us are mad that I'm saying this right now.

And while I'm a big fan of hugs, and think the world would be a better place if we were more liberal with our hugs, let me put our fears to rest.

When we claim that in Jesus' resurrection, there are no out-of-bounds people, we're not saying that there's no such thing as right and wrong. We're not denying the reality of sin, that our choices actually do make the difference between life and death, that we need redemption.

What we're claiming, very specifically, is that there is now *no one* who is excluded from God's offer of life. That in the wake of Jesus' resurrection, the Spirit is taking God's life to *everyone*, *everywhere*. God is calling *every single person* to new life.

[Scripture Slide] This is tremendously good news, for all of us, but it's also much more challenging than it might seem at first. Turn with me if you have a bible to Acts 8. As you're turning to Acts 8, we need to review the sort of religion Jesus' followers had grown up with.

God's original dream for his people was that they would become the vehicle through which God would rescue the world. From the beginning, God's plan was that the faith of his people would be for the good of the whole world.

The centerpiece of the Jewish faith was the Temple, which was God's house. The Temple was the bridge between Heaven and Earth, the place from which God's love and mercy were to flow into the whole world.

[5 Stadium/Temple overlay] The Temple was carefully constructed and maintained - the inner court, where the actual worship of God took place, was restricted only to Jewish men. Jewish women were allowed to the outer court - often called the court of women. Only Jewish men were allowed "on the field" to worship - to offer sacrifices. The women were relegated to the stands, as spectators.

But at least they were in the temple complex - the stadium, so to speak. Everyone else - which included any men and women who were handicapped in anyway, anyone who was ill and anyone who was non-Jewish, couldn't even enter into the Temple complex. So that means pretty much nobody in this room right now would be allowed to worship, we would have to remain outside, in what was called the Court of the Gentiles. The temple priests and guards

made very sure that no one from outside got in - they policed the borders with ruthless efficiency.

The Temple, which had been intended to be a source of life for the whole world, had instead become a private club for the chosen few. In the wake of Jesus' resurrection, the Church becomes God's new Temple. The Church is the bridge between heaven and earth. The Church is the vehicle God is using to rescue the world.

[7 Pic of the map] In this series, *Go There*, we're investigating what happened to Jesus' followers in the years immediately following his resurrection. We've seen that before he ascended to the throne of Heaven, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to his followers so they could bear witness to him in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the Earth.

And what we see over and over in Acts is that the Spirit compels the church to include those who used to be excluded.

On Easter Sunday, when this began, women were the first witnesses to Jesus' Resurrection.

In the first couple of weeks, it was people in Jerusalem who were excluded. The Spirit welcomed in the poor. The Spirit welcomed in rebels - the very people who had killed God. The Spirit welcomed in those with broken bodies, those who had been forced to sit outside the Temple.

At the beginning of Acts 8, several of Jesus' followers arrive in Samaria, announcing the good news about Jesus, and fulfilling the second phase of Jesus' command. After Jerusalem and Samaria, all that was left was the ends of the Earth.

Which brings us to the end of Acts 8. Philip, one of Jesus' inner circle, has been preaching in Samaria. And then he has a strange encounter:

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

At the leading of the Spirit, Philip wanders into the middle of the desert and encounters a man who had gone to Jerusalem to worship. This man is a eunuch - at some point, probably as a boy, he had been castrated. Because of this, he was able to serve in the Queen's court (because there was no chance of royal scandal).

Since he was from Ethiopia, there's a decent chance this man may have been Jewish. He wasn't Jewish, he couldn't worship out the Jewish Temple. But here's the thing - even if he was

Jewish, he wouldn't have been allowed to worship in the Temple because he was a eunuch. Eunuchs were people who didn't fit into the categories people of the day used. They were seen as culturally female, but bodily male, sort of. They sort of fit into both categories - male and female, and sort of didn't fit into either. The Temple authorities had strict prohibitions against anyone whose body wasn't whole participating in worship. Clean people were whole, they fit nicely into categories. Unclean people weren't whole. They didn't fit. They were outsiders. And they certainly weren't allowed to worship with God's people.

[8 Temple/Field, Eunuch outside] We don't know why this eunuch went down to Jerusalem. Had no one told him he wouldn't be allowed to worship? Or did he think his power and status would grant him access despite his mutilation? We know he showed up ready to play ball, and he wouldn't even have been allowed in the *stadium*.

Here is the scene, then: the Spirit drives Philip into the desert. He encounters a eunuch who has been to Jerusalem to worship and has been rejected because he doesn't fit. He's been told he's not allowed on the field. He's heading home, and he's reading Scripture - specifically Isaiah.

So Philip starts a conversation with him:

Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

"How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."

I'm fascinated that the eunuch is reading this particular passage in Isaiah. It's a passage called the "Suffering Servant," and it's a poetic recounting of Israel's sufferings during the Exile. The Suffering Servant is an embodiment of God's People, and this servant is abused, broken, crushed.

I can't help but wonder if it wasn't *this* passage that drew the eunuch *because* he was mutilated. I can't help but wonder if he saw in this particular story of God's people- being crushed, broken, humiliated - hope for his own story. If maybe he rode toward Jerusalem, the Isaiah scroll in hand because he thought *finally* I have found a people who understand me, a place where I fit.

Only to be turned away *because* of his brokenness. Because he didn't fit into their categories.

So he rides away, pouring over the Isaiah scroll, wondering what he's missed. He reads it out-loud to himself over and over, "**He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before**

its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. " Until Philip finds him, and he confesses, I don't understand it. Apparently I've missed something. He begs Philip to explain:

The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

Philip tells him the passage isn't about Isaiah himself, but about Jesus, the final embodiment of God's people. Jesus, whom Philip had followed for years. Jesus, whom Philip had abandoned at his arrest, when Jesus was slaughtered like a lamb. Jesus who had been humiliated, crushed, broken and denied justice.

Jesus, who had been raised from the dead, Jesus, who restored Philip and all his friends. Jesus, who had given them the gift of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that had compelled Philip into this wilderness to find this eunuch.

Can you imagine how the eunuch heard this good news, of a God who would allow himself to be crushed and broken? A God who would allow himself to be humiliated so that he could rescue a broken and humiliated humanity?

Can you feel the hope rising in his chest as he and Philip speak, as he hears story after story of how Jesus welcomed outsiders, how he embraced and healed those who'd been told they'd never fit?

Can you feel the courage building in the eunuch's spirit, wondering if maybe those who'd rejected him at the Temple were mistaken, that maybe this humiliated God might in fact be his God after all?

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea. -- Acts 8:26-40

[Everywhere is the Field - Field of Dreams field] Philip realizes, as he's sitting with this eunuch, this man who's sort of a woman, this person who is unclean, who doesn't fit into any of the clean categories Philip had grown up with, that Jesus' resurrection has changed the categories. Clean and unclean don't make sense anymore. There's no such thing as players and spectators anymore. The field has expanded - as it was always intended to - to encompass the whole world, and now *everyone* is welcomed to play. There's no out-of-bounds anymore.

Even the poor are welcomed. Even the disabled are welcomed. Even those who don't fit into neat gender categories are welcomed. (And we'll go ahead and spoil what happens next - even the Gentiles are welcomed!)

So Philip baptizes the eunuch in the name of Jesus. He baptizes this effeminate man who didn't fit into any categories in the name of the man who allowed himself to be broken to dismantle those categories.

Sounds pretty radical, doesn't it? You can imagine the uproar when Philip reports back to home base. "You did *what*? You baptized *who*? Who do you think you *are*, Philip?! You can't just do that!"

And that's a fair point. Why does Philip get to make this decision? How can Philip decide that God has suddenly changed all the rules and moved the out-of-bounds lines? Didn't he at least have to clear it with a committee first?

That's why it's important to notice Philip wasn't the main character in the story. Neither was the eunuch. As we've been seeing throughout Acts, the Holy Spirit, who came to the Church at Pentecost, is the main player in this story. The Spirit drove Philip into the wilderness and the Spirit arranged the meeting with the eunuch. The Spirit guided their conversation about the Scriptures, opened the eunuch's eyes and took Philip away after he baptized the eunuch.

At every moment in this story, at every moment in Acts, the Spirit is driving the action. This is *God's* story, not ours. And as Peter reminds us again and again, as Philip showed the eunuch, God didn't suddenly change his mind. Rather, Jesus' resurrection is the fulfillment of the plan God had from the beginning - to rescue the *whole world*, not just the Jewish people. To save *everyone* not just the few who fit into nice neat categories.

God is the one who redefined the game. God is the one who abolished the boundary lines, who declared that *anyone* who seeks will find.

God is moving. The *Spirit* is acting. God's people are just *responding*. Following the lead of the Spirit. Constantly surprised when again and again, the people they'd been told were out, God says are now welcomed.

The poor. The broken. The Samaritans. The eunuchs. The Gentiles.

This is tremendously good news. For nearly everyone. The only people this is *bad* news for are the self-appointed referees. Always among God's people, some appoint themselves gatekeepers. They were at the Temple when this eunuch came to worship and we have them in our churches today. You may have some experience with these types of people. Referees make a practice of policing the boundaries, making sure those who don't belong stay out. Referees determine who is out...

This news, that everyone is welcomed, that all who seek will find, that no one is out-of-bounds anymore is threatening to the referees. We're worried that this new life God offers will be watered down, that by welcoming everyone, we're compromising what makes us God's people, that unqualified outsiders will ruin our game/spoil our field/etc....

To the referees in the room, I want to say, this is good news for you, too. This is a call for you to relax, to trust God.

God doesn't say, "Everyone's in." God says, "Everyone *who wants in* is in." That's an important distinction. Philip didn't wander up to a random eunuch and say, "Hey, you're in." The eunuch was seeking God. He'd traveled to Jerusalem to worship. He was reading Scripture. He asked to be baptized.

Whistle Examine

You received a whistle on your chair when you came in today. Pull it out.

For those of us in here who tend to be referees, this is an invitation to hang up your whistle and trust that the Spirit will do the work of bringing people into the Church. The Spirit doesn't need your help policing boundary lines.

Rather, the Spirit calls you to imitate Philip. Like Philip, the Spirit has driven us to Rowlett, Dallas, Texas and the ends of the earth, to find the crushed, broken, humiliated, shamed, discarded, hurting, outcasts, those that don't fit into the categories, to proclaim the good news that God is for them and always has been. And if they want this life that he offers, it's theirs! That's why we try to make it as easy as possible for those who are far from God to hear from him. Because the life change that happens is not our doing, it's God's.

Referees, your call is to live as the image of God you were created to be. The Spirit gives you the power to be that picture. So today, commit to hang up your whistle and live as Jesus lived.

Some of us in here feel like the eunuch. You've sought God before, only to be told you're not allowed on the field. So you've built up walls too, refusing the pain of one more rejection. You marvel at the courage it took for the eunuch to ask, one more time, "What is to stop me from being baptized?"

And yet you've felt something today, that same stirring the eunuch felt as Philip explained the Scripture to him. You've wondered, against all hope, if this God who was crushed and broken might welcome you, too, despite what you've been told before.

You should know that following Jesus isn't easy - every person in here who has been following God for a while can tell you that we've all been convinced of Sin and been called away from behaviors and beliefs that made us feel comfortable, that shaped who we are. If you accept God's invitation of life, it will cost you just as it's cost us.

But you will find a life that is truly life. An excessive, overflowing life that can only be characterized as new, beautiful, whole. We get to be more than spectators to this amazing spectacle...

This whistle is a promise that we here at Catalyst trust the Spirit that makes us a church, the Spirit that drew you here just as she drew each of us. This is a promise that you will always be welcomed at Catalyst.

Catalyst, let us be a church that embraces the terrifying and thrilling truth that in the wake of Jesus' resurrection, there are no boundaries to God's love and mercy. Let us embrace the truth that God is calling *everyone* to be part of the Church, to leave death and enter into life.

Let us hang up our whistles and offer an embrace to all the broken, excluded and humiliated because, after all, that is who our Jesus is, and that is all of our stories as well.

Let us trust the Spirit to lead us into the future. Let us trust the Spirit to make us all whole, together.

The Spirit has called you here.

The Spirit has been speaking to you.

The Spirit will draw you to God

The spirit will let you know what needs to change your life.

The Spirit will make you into a new creation.

Spirit will make us all into the Church.

This is the Spirit's story. We are merely following her lead.

Let's pray.