



Love Unlimited
Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

Imagine being born into a pandemic and having the same pestilence return when you are 18, 28, 39, 42, and 44. These outbreaks are particularly nasty and can easily kill 1 out of 5 in a community. As you would expect, each episode comes with quarantines and restrictions. Markets, gatherings, restaurants, and theaters are closed for extended periods. Unfortunately, that is not too hard to imagine. But how would you react if you were a locally famous, London playwright forced into isolation? Would you sulk? Or would you write *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*? William Shakespeare's career and life were marked by six eruptions of the bubonic plague. He survived, adapted, and incorporated battling the disease into his plays.¹ He never spoke of the plague directly as it was taboo to even mention it but hinted at it in his language.²

Natural diseases can be awful. It's human cruelty, lack of compassion, and indifference that is hard to explain.

Matthew (chapter 2) tells the story of the murder of the innocent children within two years of the birth of Jesus:

16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

18 "A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

Unfortunately, children have been objects of violence for thousands of years. If the violence, cruelty, and abuse children suffer does not make us say "enough is enough" I don't know what will.

According to a 2020 Children's Defense Fund report, Eddie Hill IV was a bright student with a bright future. By the age of 10, he had already skipped a grade and earned a reputation for being "wise beyond his years." He loved math and dreamed of becoming an engineer when he grew up—but he never had the chance. Just weeks before he was set to begin fifth grade, Eddie was struck and killed by a stray bullet while sitting outside on his front porch. He had been planning to run for class president in the fall.

¹ [How the Plague Influenced Shakespeare \(juancole.com\)](http://juancole.com)

² [He Didn't Flee: Shakespeare And The Plague | Here & Now \(wbur.org\)](http://wbur.org)



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Tragically, Eddie is just one of many children and teens robbed of their childhoods, lives, and futures by gun violence. We tend to think that guns are only a gang problem in major inner cities. Gun violence statistics include unintentional shootings, suicide, mass shootings, and youth-on-youth violence. Did you know that since 1963, 186,239 children and teens have been killed with guns on American soil—four times the number of U.S. soldiers killed in action in the Vietnam, Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq wars combined?

But gun violence is not the only issue our children and youth face. We know that to succeed, children need stable homes, quality health care, ample nutritious food, good schools, safe neighborhoods, and access to resources and opportunities that enable them to reach their potential. The reality is, too many of our children face an uphill battle in all those areas. Covid-19 has magnified the issues children face at every level: physically, economically, academically, socially, and psychologically. If we want our marginalized children to flourish, we need to prioritize their well-being.³

On a global scale, children are displaced and forced to leave their home, family, and friends due to criminal activity, civil unrest, war, religious hate, sex trafficking, and famine. Their trauma does not end in refugee camps or at the border of a hoped-for host country.⁴ Their desire is for survival, safety, and peace. They hope to escape a life of terror and find hospitality in the midst of understanding, compassionate people.

Central to John's thought (both in the gospel and in his first letter) is the word "abide." It is translated from the Greek word "meno" meaning, "to survive or live." Simply put, Jesus calls us to live in him and to allow him to live in us. It is an invitation to make room, to be hospitable, and to receive in faith the abundant life and unrestricted love of God. Living in Jesus changes our perspective of ourselves and of the world.

The Ethiopian eunuch of Luke's book of Acts wants to know more about the God of the Jews whom he has embraced. He can't become a Jew, but his devotion is beyond exemplar. His story is a powerful and inspirational lesson for all of us. As a sympathizer of the faith,⁵ the nameless Ethiopian is a sample of faith seeking understanding. It is refreshing to come across people who do not arrogantly assume to know or understand but are open to new insights and seek support in their learning. Curiosity is the key. Faith is a gift of God best nurtured in community through active learning and practice.

³ [The-State-of-Americas-Children-2021.pdf \(childrensdefense.org\)](#)

⁴ [Family Separation: What It Was, and What the Biden Administration Can Do \(businessinsider.com\)](#)

⁵ N. T. Wright, Acts for Everyone, is confident the Ethiopian was not even a proselyte (p. 133).



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Luke tells us quite a bit about the Ethiopian eunuch. Back in ancient times, the term “Ethiopian” was used for dark-skinned people who lived beyond the populated world. Ancient literature sometimes referred to people of a dark skin color with a romanticized respect, while other authors viewed them as inferior. Both perspectives exhibited Greco-Roman xenophobia, but the point is that the appearance of an Ethiopian in Acts might well elicit thoughts of universal inclusion referred to by Jesus himself in his commission to the disciples to announce the good news to “the ends of the earth.”⁶

The Ethiopian is a eunuch, a castrated and impotent “man” which means that people make cruel jokes about him behind his back. He carries authority and power as he is the treasurer of the Nubian queen and yet, his sexuality is looked at with contempt and scorn and is legislated against in the official Judaism. It is, then, remarkable that this Jewish sympathizer and “outsider” would go all the way to Jerusalem knowing full well that he would not be allowed in the Temple.⁷ According to Jewish Law, in fact, his sexual condition is ungodly and despised, not worthy of divine consideration. Because of his mutilated or missing genitalia, he is prohibited from full participation in worship.⁸

But the Scriptures give him solace, something to hold on to, a refreshing place of living water. Funny that he is reading from chapter 53 of the book of Isaiah. A few chapters later, in fact, the prophet will envision redemption for the sexually ambiguous. In the eschatological restoration of God’s people, eunuchs will be brought within God’s house and given a name greater than sons and daughters. God’s embrace of the eunuch shows that the promised age of restoration has begun to dawn.⁹ The good news thwarts the prejudices and bigotry that religions and societies keep falling into.

Philip interprets Isaiah’s passage about the humble, suffering servant of Yahweh and employs that passage to announce the redeeming life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in whom we are crafted through Baptism. Jesus is the one who was crushed under the weight of the world’s wickedness and the one whom God has vindicated and exalted. It is through Jesus that God’s universal inclusivity is fulfilled. I can only imagine the eunuch’s heart skipping with joy!

It is then that, upon seeing a body of water, the Ethiopian eunuch asks to be baptized. He remembers the embarrassment of the exclusion he has suffered in Jerusalem where he was precluded from worship.¹⁰ Would this follower of Jesus, after speaking so well of the new

⁶ Acts 1:8

⁷ [Who Was the Ethiopian Eunuch in the Bible? \(learnreligions.com\)](http://www.learnreligions.com)

⁸ Leviticus 21:16-20; Deuteronomy 23:1. See also <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/castration-jewish-virtual-library>

⁹ Isaiah 56:3-8

¹⁰ I have faced that exclusion and embarrassment also at two “ecumenical” encounters where I was denied Holy Communion because I was a Protestant.



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“Way,” stop him from being baptized? If God’s unreserved and unlimited love towards all is inclusive of the vulnerable and the despised, would he be negated entry in the new communion? To this scorned and unwelcomed eunuch salvation means hospitality and inclusivity. “No wonder,” bishop and scholar N.T. Wright explains, “he wanted to share in the death and resurrection of this Jesus by being baptized, by having the whole story become his personal story.”¹¹

The story ends much as it began: God seeing to it that the gospel rushes to the ends of the earth. The eunuch himself, the first non-Jew Black to be baptized, will take the message into the heart of Africa, while the Spirit whisks Philip away to preach along the shores of the Mediterranean as far north as Caesarea.

God touches us in our personal stories. We each need to be able to see and tell what salvation means to us personally. To some, it might mean redemption from an addiction and restoration to a healthier life. To others, it might be a rescue from a life of lies and violence. To others yet, it might mean awakening from numbness and indifference to the suffering and neglect of others and the emergence to a life more whole. It might also initiate others into a life free of prejudice, anger, and hate, free to love and include, free to extend unreserved protection and hospitality to the different, the socially unwanted, and the vulnerable.

May the God of Jesus inspire us with God’s unlimited love for all. Amen.

¹¹ Wright, p. 135