

Scriptwriter

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Acts 8:26-39

Indulge me a couple of stories.

Story #1. Back when I was 14 or 15 years old and I was left alone for the evening while my parents went out for dinner with friends I received a call from our next door neighbor. It was around 9:00 and the reason for the call was that our neighbor had noticed a young man in front of the church across the street pounding on the front door. My father was the pastor of the church thus the purpose of the call was to alert the pastor that there was someone in distress pounding on the front door of the church. With dad away for the evening and no cell phone by which to reach him, I thus became the person in charge. Nervously I walked across the street to find a young man – probably ten years older than me – in great distress who was desperate for someone to help him. His only thought was to come to the church. An important relationship had just ended and he was despondent. Can anybody help me? Not having any idea what to do, I did the only thing I could think to do, I took the young man back to our house and quickly called the Assistant Pastor. Never have I been happier for someone to pick up the phone. Could he help? Which he did. He came over and talked to the young man for a few minutes and then took him to his own home and gave him something to eat, talked with him, prayed with him and helped him to see that life was worth living and that things would someday be better.

Looking across the street and seeing that young man pounding on the front door of our church is an image that will likely never leave me – it's remained etched

in my mind for some 40 plus years. When life had taken a bad turn, when hope seemed fleeting, when despair grew overwhelming, a young man's thought was to somehow to turn to God and God's people.

Geneticist Dean Hamer from the National Institute of Health several years ago wrote a book entitled *The God Gene* in which he postulated that the genetic code of human beings includes a gene that predisposes us to yearn for, hope for, long for – the existence of God. That we are hardwired to want to believe that there is some transcendent being in the universe with whom we can have a relationship. We are programmed to want God. We are scripted to seek the divine. Some didn't like the book because Dr. Hamer seemed to suggest that our wanting God had more to do with us than to do with the actual existence of God. Others found it a great affirmation for faith – in that how could we want someone who doesn't exist? Every key belongs to some lock. Our yearning for God must mean that God exists.

Blaise Pascal put it this way – “There is a God-shaped hole in the life of every man.” There is a hole inside us that only God can fill – so in the darkness of a weekend's night a despondent young man climbs the steps to a church and pounds on the door because he needs God to fill the vacuum.

Story #2. One of the other “joys” of being a preacher's kid, at least this preacher's kid, is that you got to be, thanks to your father, the one who on occasion got to introduce to the church youth group a student who was new to the church – especially ones that father was concerned about blending in. I was, for example, the one who got to introduce the first African-American student in our town whose family had just joined our church. I also got to be the one to introduce a young woman, I will call her name Janet, who was, in my mind, pretty weird. A little out of the ordinary. Kind of big, a bit clumsy, socially awkward – you know what I am talking about. Weird enough that

“You see we don't have to be the mere product of our gene pool. We do not have to give into the fear gene...because you see, God in Jesus Christ, God in the Holy Spirit appears to have a different script.”

I begged my father not to give me the job. Let her fend for herself. However, there was no negotiation. So the next Sunday Janet and I walked into our youth room -- “Meet Janet,” I said to my young Christian friends half-heartedly. Frankly, that was as far as I took my job ... and I let Janet from that point fend for herself. And you can imagine it didn't work out too well. Snickering, whispers, cracks behind her back – I think Janet lasted a couple of Sundays with us before she knew she was not accepted.

I don't know enough about genetics to know what gene lies behind that instinctive response we have to someone different than us – someone out of the ordinary. Maybe it's the fear gene. The fight or flight gene. That somehow scripted inside our beings as humans is this reactive response to people not like us – people not inside the circle – people out of the ordinary. So we distance ourselves, put up defenses, leave them on their own to fend for themselves. And we never saw Janet again.

So we are this mysterious lot we human beings – scripted inside us this yearning for God, this longing to be accepted and embraced and loved by God – and, at the same time, this gene that makes us afraid of the stranger, the unordinary one, the different one who of course is longing and yearning for God as much as we are.

The God gene, the fear gene. We are scripted in a mysterious way, aren't we?

And don't you wonder if there isn't some of this in play when Luke tells us the story about the Ethiopian eunuch. Now if there is anything about which we might be unfamiliar and certainly uncomfortable it would be eunuchs. Eunuchs in the ancient world -- to put it in PG terms – were men, who when they were young, for all sorts of cultural reasons, were surgically neutered – rendered, in essence, sexless. If you want to know all the reasons why – Google it when you go home. Suffice it to say that there was this segment of the population that did not fit the norm, and in some cultures were abhorrent. The people of Israel and the Law of Moses didn't mince words – no eunuchs shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Josephus, the first century Roman historian, tells us that over one of the gates into Jerusalem was a sign that listed all the types of people who would not be admitted – number one were eunuchs. So even baked into the script of God's people was the loud and clear message – stay away from those eunuchs.

But Luke tells us that one of the newly selected leaders in the new community called the Church inside of Jerusalem, a young man named Philip, heard the voice of the Spirit to get up and go outside of Jerusalem, go outside of the community and begin

down the wilderness road to Gaza – so driven by the Spirit Philip went -- and there he found on the road a eunuch. An Ethiopian eunuch. A surgically altered, African from as far away as one could be from Jerusalem. And this eunuch has as it turns out the God gene – he’s got the God vacuum – he’s got the God hole in his heart and likely what he had done is he ridden up to the gate of the temple and he’s seen the sign – “No Eunuchs”. So here we go...the God gene and the fear gene collide. So now he’s riding away from Jerusalem still looking for God reading the scroll of Isaiah and wondering about this figure talked about in Isaiah who himself has been rejected and scorned, namely Jesus, and it gives Philip the chance to talk to this rejected and scorned new friend and tell him the good news of Jesus – the one once rejected and scorned who has been raised and now welcomes all into the kingdom. No more scorn. No more rejection. No more fear. Maybe Philip even points the eunuch to a couple of chapters later where Isaiah says, “Thus says the Lord ... I will give to the eunuchs an everlasting name.”

You see something is happening here. And it has something to do with this character the Holy Spirit. This person of God who descends upon the apostles at Pentecost and who seems to surprise them at every turn. This person of God who moves inside Philip to say that no gate, no sign, no law, no uncomfortableness with anybody – is to prevent people entry into the community and life of Christ. It’s that same Spirit who drove Peter up the coast to talk to that first Gentile family and tell them that God shows no partiality. That the grace of God was for all people. You see we don’t have to be the mere product of our gene pool. We do not have to give into the fear gene. The script of our double helix. Because you see, God in Jesus Christ, God in the Holy Spirit appears to have a different script. “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” asked the physically altered man

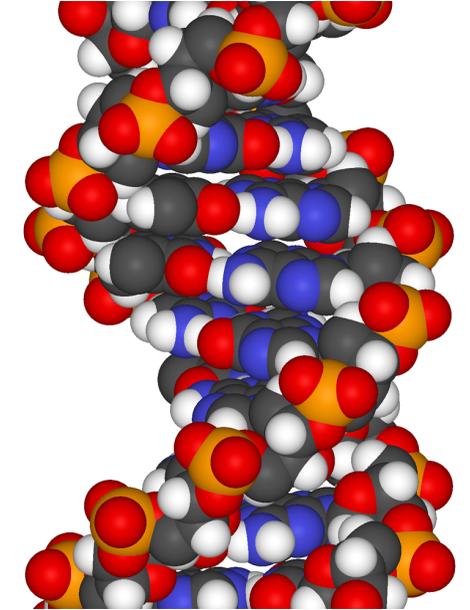
– and Philip says, “Absolutely nothing. Join the rest of us yearning for God with God shaped holes, who bang on the door of the temple or the church or the heavens --- and know that God desires all to come in.”

It’s never made much sense has it that we seem to keep having these debates over who’s in and who’s out. Whether it’s the color of someone’s skin, or the identity of someone’s gender, or someone’s race, or someone’s orientation, or whether someone has had some change made to their body – to let the fear gene overcome the God gene. Because the Spirit of God always seems to keep driving us out of our huddle down the wilderness roads far outside our comfort zones – to engage all those folks who are not like us and to hear them ask, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” And we know the answer.

St. Francis of Assisi, from whom the current pope took his name, knew the answer in his head. But when he and his horse were galloping upon the Umbrian plain and came upon the sight of a leper – oh it was the fear gene, that deep fear script inside him, that kicked into gear and sent him galloping away even faster than his initial approach. Oh, but here’s the good news... the Holy Spirit is even faster ... chasing after that scared saint as fast a Philip chased after that eunuch. Whoa!!! says the Spirit. Whoa! Someone’s banging on heaven’s door. Someone’s trying to get into the gate. Someone’s trying to get that God hole filled. And so the saint-in-training turns his horse around and gallops back, and stops, and dismounts and bows and kisses the leper with the holy kiss of welcome. Welcome into the heart of God. Welcome into the heart of me. No fear here. No scorn here. No rejection here.

Praise the good Lord that that long list of disqualifications that someone could come up with on me – and believe me there is one ... that long list of disqualifications backed up with verses from the

Bible even – that long list that would keep me from this table – praise the good Lord that when he got handed that list, that list of disqualifications on Steve McConnell – he didn’t even bother to read it. Didn’t even look at it. Just tore it up and said, “Have a seat, have yourself some bread and wine and get that God hole filled.”



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Church of the Palms

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