

I'm guessing there are some of you out there who were like me last Sunday night, who stuck around the for the entirety of the slog that was the Oscars this year. God bless you if you did, and know you were not alone. I was right there with you. A little over three hours of *a lot* of talking and very little clips from films making it feel like it was actually about six hours. Yet, if you hung in there and stayed through it, hopefully in the midst of those three hours, you saw what were some of the most powerful *four* minutes I've ever witnessed on an Oscars stage.

I have to admit that I wasn't expecting the best speech of the night to come from Tyler Perry. I'm used to thinking of Tyler Perry when he's dressed up like Madea and being comedically ridiculous, so having him stand on the Oscars stage and practically bring me to tears just was not something that I anticipated. He was presented with the Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award for the mountain of work and care he has provided for others during quarantine, on top of his constant striving for social justice and equity. I'm going to do my best to summarize his speech as best I can, but there were so many highlights, I wish I could just play the whole thing.

He talked about how his biggest goal in life has always been to meet someone in their humanity, wherever they are, to meet them there. He shared a story about a woman that he met outside of his production studio

who was homeless, and he was planning on just giving her some money and being on his way, but she asked him if he had any shoes, because hers were falling apart. He brought her inside the studio to wardrobe and they were standing in the middle of this room that was entirely covered in stuff, from costumes to shoes to wigs and the middle of the room was the only space they fit. He found her some shoes, and she finally looked up from where she had been staring at the floor the whole time and she said, “Thank you, Jesus my feet are off the ground.” She told him that she expected him to hate her for asking for the shoes, and his response was, how can I hate you when I used to be you. He knew what it was to be in those falling apart shoes and to struggle to find hope. He reflected that it was his mother, sharing with him what it was like growing up in the Jim Crow South and then witnessing her continue to experience hatred and pain through threats at the Jewish Community Center where she worked that instilled him in the absolute necessity to refuse hate and to refuse blanket judgment.

He closed his speech with an invitation, an open invitation to anyone who wanted to meet him in the middle, because in the middle is where healing happens, where people are seen. He invited anyone who wanted to help lift someone else’s feet off the ground because at the end of the day, when we refuse hate, when we meet others in their humanity, when we dare

to lift someone else's feet off the ground, we make the world a better place, a place of hope, a place of love, and a place of acceptance rather than that blanket pall of judgment that so many of us are guilty of. In his own way, Philip was presented with a similar situation as the one that Tyler Perry found himself in, though the issue at hand wasn't shoes and needing to get your feet off the ground, but scripture and needing to get your whole self in the water.

Now, one thing I want us to take note of before we dive into our story this morning is that the Philip we're dealing with *isn't* the Philip of the disciples. Rather, this is a different Philip, one of seven men in the book of Acts who are elected by the disciples for the express purpose of going out into the world and taking care of others, particularly others who weren't a part of the Israelite Jewish community. So, Philip's whole job, whole mission, whole ministry in some ways is meeting people where they are, meeting them in their humanity, but as we all know, even when that's the express goal, we aren't always great at rising to the occasion when it greets us smack dab in the middle of the road.

There is nothing about this situation that screams logic. Philip has been directed by the Holy Spirit to head south out of Jerusalem into the wilderness. So he goes, out into this place of discernment and wandering

and what does he find? He finds a chariot, holding the head of the Ethiopian queen's treasury, who happens to be a eunuch, a frequent status of men in high courts in order to keep those close to the queen from being a threat to the her chastity or marriage, who also happens to be studying a scroll of scripture. So, what is Philip supposed to do here? Honestly, what actually happens is kind of the last thing that you expect to happen.

Because here's what could have happened, even with Philip's call to care for others within the kingdom of God. Philip could have taken one look at this chariot and said no way, no how am I bringing the gospel here. Here you have someone who is nothing like Philip, he's a foreigner, for an entirely different continent. His skin color would have been different, his accent would have been unfamiliar. There's no logical explanation for why he is around Jerusalem, he's a member of a foreign leaders court so he could be just like the Romans, *and* he's a eunuch. He's other. He's different. The world would say he's less than, he's not whole. He's damaged. From where Philip is standing there is every reason why we would tell him he's totally justified in having his first response be hatred and judgment. And maybe that sounds extreme, but think about it, you meet someone on the street of a different skin color, with a foreign accent, who you know nothing about, what's *your* first gut instinct and thought?

Yet what does Philip do? He meets him in the middle. He gets in that chariot and asks if he wants to learn about what he's reading. He meets this foreign stranger in his humanity, seeing in their chance meeting in the middle of nowhere an opportunity to spread the gospel a little wider. And again, he runs into a chance to kind of mess the whole thing up. In response, the eunuch sees water and asks if there is anything that would prevent him from being baptized? Now, if we're in Philip's shoes a whole world of questions might come to mind. What's his motivation? Does he really believe? Should he be baptized if we'll probably never see him again? Maybe he just wants to be baptized because it's the "right thing" to do. He hasn't gone through all the right steps, maybe he's not ready. But instead, Philip meets the thirst of the gospel where it is, in middle of the desert, by the side of the road. He offers the waters of baptism, the radically inclusive love of God to a stranger with no ulterior motive or hope beyond showing someone in need of the gospel that they are beloved and seen by God. Because of who he was, his identity, his physical makeup, there is every chance this eunuch thought he would never have a place, a home, somewhere where he was accepted and seen, and yet, Philip gives him the gift of just that. He sees him, accepts him, and then has the audacity to show him that God does the exact same thing.

This is what happens when we do, honestly, exactly what Tyler Perry proclaimed from that Oscars' stage. This is what happens when we refuse hate and we refuse blanket judgment, the gospel gets not only heard but spread and it creates joy and hope in the world, beyond the corners of our comfort zones. And the thing is, deep down *we know this*, but we so rarely act on it. Far too often, our initial gut instinct is to respond to our siblings with judgment, fear, and sometimes just flat out hate. Hate because of their skin color, hate because of their gender identity, hate because of their sexual orientation, hate because of their ethnicity, hate because of the way they express their faith. I mean, the writer of 1 John kind of nailed it, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters are liars." It's not something we want to sit with, it's not something we want to own and yet it sits there staring at us from the black and white pages of the Bible that we claim to live by and put our trust in. When we say we love God, but then spew hatred into the world, we make liars of ourselves.

Every single person you have ever met, ever loved, ever hated, ever judged, ever accepted was created by God, is beloved by God. That woman who asked Tyler Perry for shoes? Beloved by God. The Ethiopian eunuch? Beloved by God. Tyler Perry? Beloved by God. Philip? Beloved by God. That person you just went off on on Facebook? Beloved by God. That

family member you have disowned or who has disowned you? Beloved by God. Immigrants? Refugees? Beloved by God. Transgender kids and those transitioning? Beloved by God. African-Americans? Asians? Beloved by God. Police officers? Beloved by God. Republicans? Democrats? Beloved by God. The person on the street corner? The person sitting right next to you? Beloved by God. I could keep going.

If we are going to be people of God, proclaim that we are God's children, then hatred has no place amongst us. And I know, we can all find our justifications and our reasons and our excuses, and so many of those are founded in fear...fear of difference, fear of change, fear of the other. Well, "there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." It is bold and audacious to be people who refuse to hate, who refuse to judge, who refuse to live in fear of the beautiful children God has created, and I know some days we just don't feel bold and audacious, but fellow children of God, we need to be, for the sake of our own hearts and for the sake of our siblings. Hatred is exhausting. Fear is exhausting. Judgment is exhausting. Love is freeing. Meeting someone in the middle is freeing. Lifting someone's feet off the ground is freeing. Philip met someone in the middle of the desert and ended up with his feet in the water for the sake of the gospel. May we all be bold enough, audacious enough to do the same. **AMEN!!!**