

Sermon 5-2-21
Paul Purdue preaching

Widening the Circle

Philip was a culturally Greek Christian, perhaps named after the world conquering Greek Emperor Phillip of Macedon. Phillip of Acts was one of seven original deacons and earned the moniker "Philip the Evangelist." In time, Phillip's four daughters would be named as prophets. (Acts 6 & 21)

During a time of disruption, the church's axis began moving away from Jerusalem. Luke reported that *those who had been scattered moved on, preaching the good news along the way*. Philip, heeded Jesus' call "to go to the ends of the earth", and headed north to Samaria. (Acts 1; Matthew 28) Most pious Jews and Christians considered Samaritans as less than equals, righteous, or orthodox. Nothing raises our unspiritual hackles like an intra-church, inner family squabbles. Despite generational religious rivalries, Phillip carried the peace of Christ north and baptized Samaritans into Jesus' big-tent family! When the good news of the growing Samaritan mission reached the apostles in Jerusalem, they sent Peter and John to investigate.

After the Committee on Investigation returned to the home office, a messenger from the Lord spoke to Philip, "Take the Jerusalem road (west) into the wilderness (towards Africa)! Propelled by the Spirit, Phillip "moved on". "At the same time", the secretary of the entire Ethiopian treasury and special attaché to Queen Candice of Ethiopia was heading home from a pilgrimage to the Jerusalem temple. The secretary of the treasury drips with power, prestige, and privilege. Ethiopia was a global trading power. The treasury secretary rode in a luxury chariot with a driver with room for two passengers and a large scroll. Chariots were the fastest vehicles on earth. No ruler would go any faster than a four horse chariot until Abraham Lincoln headed to Washington by train in 1861. The treasury secretary cruised under a canopy while reading a scroll, perhaps one that they bought in Jerusalem. At that time owning any book, much less the lengthy Isaiah scroll, spoke of great wealth. Until Guttenburg revolutionized printing, only millionaires owned scrolls. It was a power move to read the precious hand copied vellum scroll while riding in a chariot. But, perhaps one becomes secretary of the treasury by never wasting time.

It is easy to miss the whole point of Luke's story if you do not realize that Luke described the Ethiopian person as an eunuch five times. That eunuch traveled 1590 miles from Addis Ababa to Jerusalem in order to worship is shocking. Why would a eunuch go to the temple or buy a scroll? Did they not know the Levitical rules about gender identity? Deuteronomy 23 and Leviticus (18-21) state "no (eunuch) can belong to the Lord's assembly." If they did know the ancient rules, do you think they kept their status closeted at church? The Ethiopian eunuch was riding home from a church that said "you do not fully belong!" But, hear the Good News, the Holy Spirit blows the church in new directions- the grace of God breaks down every loveless barrier! The church's transformation begins as one person, Phillip the Evangelist, listens to the Spirit

and pushes against long trusted boundaries. Indeed, Philip will run alongside one called “unworthy”!

Now in antiquity, no one sat around watching Tic-Toc videos or reading the New York Times on their smartphones. If you had a precious book, you shared it by reading it aloud! All reading was done aloud- the Bible itself was not meant to be read alone but shared in the synagogue and church. So the treasury secretary read the prophet Isaiah aloud. The Holy Spirit told Philip, “*Approach this carriage and stay with it.*” “*Go near and join them.*” “*So Philip ran to the chariot.*” Running up to the royal carriage is risky! What if the horses trample you or the guard draws their sword as you run towards the queens’ chariot? Ponder this: the Holy Spirit sent Phillip to run alongside and “stay with” one the Bible said “*did not belong!*” Who are we running alongside today? Who are we staying with? Who are we evangelizing with the Good News of God’s love, our deepest embrace and their sacred worth? Where is Love sending you?

Phillip, like any good evangelist, asks questions, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The Ethiopian person replied, “Without someone to guide me, how could I?” The eunuch invites the evangelist to climb up into the chariot, and they talk about the scriptures together! So let’s explore Isaiah 52-53 together.

“Awake, awake, put on your strength, church! Put on your splendid clothing, Jerusalem, you holy city.” (Synchronistically, the treasury secretary was returning from worshiping in the holy city!) But listen, the scroll says, “The uncircumcised and unclean will no longer come into you.” (Stop the blasted chariot: If we do not stay with the Eunuch and feel the soul shaming sting of being told they do not belong because of their sexual status, perhaps we have not yet see them as a person: a beloved child of God- created in the very image of God. Perhaps, we see their sexual status as a eunuch, or their race as Ethiopian, or their class as a millionaire, or their situation as an immigrant. Sexism, racism, and many other oppressive yokes begin with a dehumanization of the other as less than people of God!

(But hear the Good News): “*How beautiful are the feet of a messenger brings good news, who proclaims salvation.*” The Holy Spirit is always sending people like Philip and his four daughters to stay with those told they do not belong, to stand up for those cast aside, and to rebuke scribes who tie up heavy burdens instead of breaking oppressive yokes! (Matthew 23; Acts 8-10, 15)

(Phillip and the treasury secretary read on and find Isaiah’s Good News) “*Look, God’s servant will succeed. They will be exalted and lifted high. For even though many were appalled because God’ servant appeared disfigured and dehumanized, God will astonish many people and silence rulers. The gatekeepers will come to see what they haven’t seen before and ponder interpretations they haven’t heard before. (Oh, that is sweet, progresssive, and old time theology!) God’ servant possessed no splendid form for us to see, no desirable appearance. God’s person was despised and avoided by others; they suffered. They were like someone from whom people hide their faces, and we didn’t think about them. (Oh, if you ever feel like you did not quite belong, you are*

not welcomed home, or you matter less than the first chair clarinet player, hear how God carried all our human griefs and alienations on the cross.) *Even though we believed that God struck that person down, God uses this Crushed One to save us all! We are made whole by their wounds and liberated by their unjust sentence! The Lord's plans come to fruition through people who others said did not belong!* (I imagine the eunuch, the evangelist, and Jesus' weeping with hope in that chariot. Jesus always seeks the lost, those labeled least and counted as last. Indeed the Risen Lord comes alongside us and runs alongside us helping us shatter every oppressive yoke! (Matthew 16, 18)

The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, about whom does the prophet say this? Are they talking about themselves or someone else?" Luke does not give us a canned answer for us to turn into another rule. The evangelist and the eunuch just chat about the good news about Jesus as they move on. Indeed, Isaiah is talking about Jesus, Isaiah, the eunuch, and the evangelist. God is going ahead of us, with us, and working through us! (Paul uses "in Christ" over 200 times!) Indeed, the once excluded Ethiopian eunuch may have become Christ to Philip and for us today! "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mathew 25)

So when the chariot came to some water, the treasury secretary said, "Look! Water! What would keep me from being baptized?" Do you notice how even this powerful elite does not demand full inclusion? The excluded one allows the church off the hook by providing Philip an easy way out of a messy Levitical situation! Perhaps, knowing past church discrimination, they do not want to risk getting their hopes up? Who stands in the church doorway fearing one more rejection? Oh, how we privileged people love to pretend everything is alright! We blabber on about our Ethiopian friends and the eunuchs who come to our church. Is not Jesus' grieving and maybe growing angry at our hardened hearts? (Mark 3) Listen for the deep hurt. Jesus always listened for the deep hurt! Listen to how people know to ask, "What would keep me from being baptized, or being ordained, or getting married?" Are we running alongside the chariot? Are we proclaiming the good news that many church folks have not yet heard? Do we know that Jesus "is our peace; who in human form has made us one and has broken down the dividing walls between us; by abolishing the law, commandments and ordinances, so that God might create in Christ Jesus one new humanity, thus making peace and reconciling us into one body through the cross." (Ephesians 2.) Are we running those counted out with a radically inclusive theology like that? Are we evangelists of Love?

"What would keep me from being baptized?" the eunuch asked the evangelist. I imagine Philip just whispered, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God- nothing- not nakedness- nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God given in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8) So the treasury secretary orders the driver to stop. The eunuch and the evangelist go down to the water. Philip baptizes the eunuch as a sibling in Christ. *When they came up out of the water, the Lord's Spirit suddenly blew Philip onto a new journey.* One evangelist, One conversation, One Spirit-filled moment and: Philip, the eunuch, and the church were changed forever! *The eunuch never saw Philip again and*

each went on their way rejoicing. Philip found himself somewhere else and moved on preaching the good news until he reached Caesarea, where he would raise 4 prophesying daughters!

Oh, friends, who are we running alongside today? Who are we staying with? What oppressive yokes are we breaking? Oh, may the Holy Spirit send us out of our safe spaces to blow down every excluding barrier so we might help others find their sacred worth in God's amazing Love! May the Love of God so deeply transform us that we become evangelists of that Radical Love! Amen.