

Evangelism, Philip-style

Our first reading this morning, from the Book of Acts, tells the story of how Philip proclaims the Good News about Jesus to an Ethiopian, a high-ranking official of the court of the Queen of Ethiopia—and how Philip’s proclaiming leads to the Ethiopian’s belief, and conversion, and baptism, and going on his way rejoicing. In a way, this whole story is an example of how to do *evangelism*—how to share Good News with people in a way that can open up their hearts and bring joy to their spirits and transform their lives—and it’s an example that we could rejoice to learn from.

I think what makes this story so vivid, and such a good example of sharing Good News, is that Philip does not just run up to the Ethiopian and start talking about Jesus at him. Instead, Philip creates the conditions where the Good News isn’t just words that the Ethiopian hears, but is an experience the Ethiopian can share. Philip makes the Good News something the Ethiopian can know from the inside out, from his own thoughts and feelings—and not just some kind of external information that’s plunked down in front of him and demands his decision. To paraphrase the Epistle reading from last week: Philip gives Good News, not in word and speech, but in truth and action. And that is why it makes a difference for the Ethiopian’s life.

Philip is able to present the Good News to the Ethiopian not just as information but as experience, because he creates a relationship with him. And Philip is able to create that relationship because he meets the Ethiopian where he is—literally and figuratively, Philip goes out to the Ethiopian’s own turf, and brings Good News into relevance to the Ethiopian’s life.

One day an angel said to Philip, “Go out to the Gaza road.” Now that was a wilderness road, out on the edge of town, out on the edge of the livable area, out on the edge of Philip’s comfort zone. And when a chariot came rolling by, the Spirit said to Philip, “Go meet up with that chariot.” The Spirit didn’t say, “Wait here until the chariot comes to you,” or “Flag down the chariot and see if you can get it to stop,” or “Tell the chariot-driver to change direction and drive the chariot the way *you* want it”—the Spirit said, “Go join the chariot.”

So there’s Philip, running alongside the chariot, huffing and puffing for breath, and he hears the Ethiopian reading aloud from the Book of Isaiah a passage about suffering. And what Philip does next is wonderful: He asks the Ethiopian a question. He doesn’t say, “I know what all that means.” He doesn’t say, “I can tell you about someone even better than Isaiah.” He doesn’t say, “Everything you know is wrong and I have all the right answers.” He asks a simple question, “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip lets the Ethiopian set the agenda for their first conversation; Philip lets the Ethiopian identify the question that is most important, the thing he’s really seeking, for his heart and for his soul. The Ethiopian asks: “About whose suffering is the prophet writing? His own? Some other prophet’s? Maybe even *my* suffering?” Because Philip gives him the space to do it, the Ethiopian can name what’s really most important to him—and that creates a connection, where Philip’s sharing Good News about God’s love in Jesus through the Spirit is not just abstract words, but a concrete response to the Ethiopian’s own deep need. Philip makes the Gospel *real*, because he gives the Ethiopian Christ-like love by meeting him where he is and creating a relationship.

And I think that is precisely what we in the Church are called to do today. Like Philip in the story, it is the Spirit’s gift to us to empower us to go out, out beyond our building, out into our community, out to the edge of our comfort zones—out where we can meet people where they are, and open up the space for their questions, their hopes, their fears, their dreams, their needs, their sorrows, their joys—out where we can open up the space for relationships, and in relationships we can proclaim Good News about God’s love, and Christ’s life, and the Spirit’s power, not just as abstract words, but as concrete realities people can touch and feel and experience.

And I think that is especially important for us now, at this particular moment in our country and in our church. You know, a lot of people these days who are outside the church think of church people, think of believers, think of—let’s use the word—*evangelists*, as pushy and annoying. A lot of people outside the church think that church people have no interest in them other than to come up and tell them what they have to believe and how they have to behave and make them sign on to a creed and hand them a list of rules and regulations they have to

follow. I think that's one of the reasons why "No church affiliation" is the fastest-growing demographic in the American religious landscape today. It's not necessarily that people don't believe in God or don't want a spiritual presence in their lives, but that people see churches as organizations and institutions that are more about their own orders and rules and regulations than they are about making a difference for good in people's hearts and in the world.

So what can we church people do about that? Well, one of the things we can do is take a lesson from Philip. We can reach out to people, not leading with our creeds and rules and regulations, but building up relationships, relationships in which people feel free to raise their questions and name their needs, relationships in which we can explore *together* how the Good News of God in Christ makes a difference for the way we live and work and be in the world.

We can do that as a church, with programs and events that we put on as a congregation. I think of our Noon Lunch program, where we meet people at the point of their need—and we don't make them listen to a sermon before they get their lunch, but we do make it clear—if by nothing else than the large cross on the wall of McCracken Hall—we do make it clear that the reason we offer this lunch is because of our devotion to the love of Christ, our intention to love our neighbors as Jesus told us to. Or I think of an event we did in my last congregation, something we called "Theology and a Pint," where we held discussions about biblical and theological and religious topics, and we held them in a local Irish pub, where we drank beer and had fun and invited all sorts of people to join us—and we didn't discuss things just to push the church party line, but to let people ask questions and try out ideas and see what Good News they could recognize in their own lives, in their own words. As a congregation we can go out and meet people where they are and create relationships that embody Good News.

But I think we can do that even better as individuals, as faithful Christians living our Christ-like lives in the midst of the ordinary workaday world. Philip didn't need a congregational evangelism program to go meet the Ethiopian—and neither do we. We can proclaim Good News in our words and our actions every day, in every time and place we go. The mother who holds her infant close and makes sure he feels safe and valued and loved is creating a relationship that proclaims the love of God. The student who joins a service club in school as a way to live out Christ's call to love our neighbors as we love ourselves is creating a relationship that proclaims the love of God. I knew a man who said that the most important bit of evangelism he ever did was in his office: It was at a time when his company was going through some downsizing, and positions in his office were being cut, and everybody in the office was fearful and anxious for their jobs—except for my friend, who was concerned about his job but never actually got *anxious* about it. One day a coworker said to him "Why are you so calm? Everybody else is going kind of crazy, but you seem very grounded, very centered." And my friend said "Well, I think it's because of my prayer practice. Every day, once in the morning and once in the evening, I spend twenty minutes sitting in silence, reciting a Christian mantra." And the coworker said "Christian mantra? I've never heard of such a thing." And my friend said "I use a verse from the Prayer Book: 'This is the day the Lord had made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.' I say that for twenty minutes, and it kind of sinks into my mind, and for the rest of the day I know that, no matter what happens, God's creating power is there to bring good possibilities out of anything. And that helps me stay grounded." And his coworker said "That sounds kind of cool. How can I learn that?" And it was then, and only then, that my friend invited his coworker to come try out his prayer group. He met his coworker where he was, and let him express his own need, and into that need he spoke Good News. That's the way to do evangelism—that's the way Philip does evangelism—and that's a kind of evangelism we all can do, every one of us, in all the strange and wonderful places the Spirit calls us to go.

Our story this morning ends when the Holy Spirit snatches Philip away, and Philip finds himself at Azotus, and since he's there already he goes on toward Caesarea, proclaiming Good News at every turn along the way. We can be like Philip in that way too: never quite sure where we'll end up when the Spirit catches us; but trusting that, wherever the Spirit takes us, we will always meet questions, and we will always make relationships, and we will always be able to go on our way rejoicing. And for that, let us give thanks and praise to God. Amen.