

“Seeing Past the Boundaries”

Based on Acts 8:26-40

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Over the past few weeks, we have been celebrating the power of faith in the name of Jesus. We looked at how Peter healed the man born crippled by using the name of Jesus. We talked about how Peter had been given faith by God to use the name of Jesus this way. We were encouraged to use the gift of faith that God has given us and to use the name of Jesus to manifest healing and salvation in the lives of others. We claimed the task shared by Peter to be witnesses of our experiences of God and to tell our stories.

Today, and for the next few weeks, we will be challenged and supported to go out in ministry wherever the Spirit leads us. We will be encouraged to make connections with others, to give support, to be engaged in mission. We will be invited to discover and use the spiritual gifts given to us. This focus on claiming and using the gifts God has given to us will lead up to the day of Pentecost, when we will be consecrated to go forth into the adventure of following the Spirit into new forms of ministry. I am excited about what might be stirred up within us in the weeks ahead, and where it all might take us. So, let's get started.

Today we hear about the story of Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch. I want to begin our exploration of this event by identifying Phillip. Who was he? In those days, the church in Jerusalem was growing so fast that it was difficult to manage everything. Specifically, according to Acts 6:1, the Greeks were complaining to the Hebrews that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. So the apostles called the community together and said that they needed help in managing the affairs of the church. The community selected seven people to do this work, the work of a deacon. One of the seven was Stephen. You may remember that Stephen was brought up on false charges and ended up being stoned, the first Christian martyr. Phillip was also chosen to be a deacon. It is his story that we hear about after Stephen.

We find Phillip in Samaria preaching the gospel. He was there because the church in Jerusalem was scattered due to persecution, led by a man named Saul, who one day would have his name changed to Paul. So Phillip was in Samaria and had a fruitful ministry. Many people came to belief and were healed of their diseases as God worked through Phillip. The church being well established in Samaria, the Spirit sends Phillip to this wilderness road where he encounters the eunuch. He then is sent by the Spirit to the Mediterranean coast to preach in the towns there until he arrived at Caesarea. Phillip was on the move. Those deacons didn't limit themselves to waiting on tables! Whatever the Spirit led them to do, they went and did. They didn't resist by saying, "That's not my role, I can't do that, I don't want to go." Well, maybe the other five deacons did, but not Stephen and certainly not Phillip.

One day an angel came to Phillip telling him to go to the wilderness road that leads to Gaza. This was not Phillip's idea. He was minding his own business. It was God that initiated this move. Later, as Phillip was walking down the road, he saw a chariot. The Spirit prompted Phillip to run after and catch up with that chariot. In these two instances, through an angel and through the Spirit, God prompted Phillip to go and do something. And see how Phillip quickly responded. When the angel told him to take the wilderness road to Gaza, he got up and went. When the Spirit prompted him to catch up to the chariot, he ran up to it. He didn't ask any questions. He didn't do any push back against what he was sensing God was calling him to do. Leaving Samaria and taking the wilderness road to Gaza was not a part of Phillip's plan. There was no strategy involved. He didn't ask questions like, "Why are you sending me out into the wilderness? Who will I find to minister to except maybe a band of robbers who will beat me up? You want me to go by myself? Too dangerous." No, Phillip just went where he felt the Spirit was leading him and trusted that God knew what God was doing. He didn't understand the rationale, but Phillip believed that God can open doors for ministry in the unlikeliest of places sometimes.

Now when Phillip catches up to the chariot he hears the person sitting in the chariot reading from the prophet Isaiah. The Spirit didn't say to Phillip, "Ask him what he's reading." Phillip wasn't a robot who

couldn't think and act without being told what to do. God set up the meeting but then Phillip took over from there, responding to the situation he found himself in. Phillip asked a question that is not unusual when reading from the Bible. "Do you understand what you are reading?" The Bible has always been a confusing collection of writings. It has always been hard to understand. So Phillip wasn't being conceited or arrogant, like "Look at this rube trying to read this stuff. He doesn't have a clue. I need to help this poor guy." No, that is a perfectly legitimate question.

The eunuch's answer said a lot about his character. He didn't say, "No, I got this. Why, you think you're an expert?" He wasn't defensive in the slightest. It was with humility and a good dose of wisdom that the eunuch responds by saying, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" I love that question. The eunuch wasn't looking for a teacher, someone who would spoon feed him the answers. No, he wanted a guide who could help him learn for himself. There is a difference between a teacher and a guide. A teacher is an expert in a particular field of knowledge. The teacher is capable of passing that knowledge on to those who want to gain that knowledge. Teachers are critical to the passing on of knowledge. They deserve the highest respect. But guides are not experts necessarily. A guide is someone who has some experience and who can walk alongside you, to point to the better direction and to warn you of potential hazards. If you are going into uncharted territory, it's one thing to be taught about the territory. It's another thing to have someone who has been there and who can guide you into the uncharted territory. Guides walk with you. Someone once said that the church needs a lot less teachers and a lot more guides. Teachers are important. They give us knowledge. But guides help us get from point A to point B in life. They can help us get through the uncharted territory of scripture, helping us discover the treasures buried in its pages.

So after a while, as Phillip guided the eunuch through the scroll of Isaiah, showing him how Jesus fulfills the prophecies found there, they saw that they were approaching a small stream in this desolate wasteland of desert. And the eunuch shouts, "Look, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" How does Phillip respond? If you had a Bible

open in front of you, you might notice a footnote after that question. You might also see in the version you are looking at that the verse numbers go from 36 to 38. Vs. 37 would be in the footnote. Why is that? The earliest copies of Acts do not include vs. 37. But there are also a number of excellent copies that are still pretty old that have it. People who study all the different copies of the Bible that have been made over the centuries are confident that vs. 37 was added in. But since it appears in so many copies it ought to at least be in there as a footnote. The verse in question goes as follows, “And Phillip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ And he replied, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’” So, what was the barrier that prevented the eunuch from being baptized? If you include verse 37, all that was needed was belief in your heart that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. No class, no trial period to prove your holiness. It’s a pretty low bar. But if you don’t include vs. 37, it appears there is no barrier at all.

Now let’s just stop and consider who Phillip is about to baptize. How should we identify this man who was riding in the chariot? So far, I have identified him as a eunuch. Whether he was born a eunuch or was castrated, we don’t know. But his sexuality is ambiguous. He could be identified as an Ethiopian. Ethiopia is south of Egypt. It may have been the common view in those days that Ethiopia was at the edge of the earth. And everyone from Ethiopia has black skin. He could be identified as a high level government official. He was in charge of the queen’s treasures. This is a high level of responsibility that requires a great deal of trust. We can’t identify him by his name, an irritating omission. So, this man could be identified by his ethnicity, by his sexuality, by his social status. But how did Phillip identify him?

Patrick Johnson suggests that this man should be identified as a God seeker whom God is seeking. His ethnicity, status, and sexuality were secondary to his core identity: God seeker. And guess what? Phillip was a God seeker as well. They both shared a love for God and a desire to understand the scriptures. All the other potential barriers of race, status, and sexual identity were overcome by a common identity as seekers of God. Phillip saw in this man a fellow God seeker. All other barriers were lowered. They could make that common connection. There

were no barriers to overcome for this Ethiopian eunuch to be baptized and be a part of the community. I love that.

So what can we learn about doing ministry? Just a quick review to end this talk: first, we see that God initiates and leads ministry. Our responsibility is to listen for God, to sense the prodding of God's Spirit, and then to follow that prompting with trust and courage. Doing ministry from this perspective is like going on an adventure into uncharted territory with the Spirit of God as our guide. How cool is that? Second, doing ministry is more about being a guide than being an expert. Yes, some people are given the gift of teaching. I believe that is one of my gifts. It has a critical function in ministry. But what is needed is not more experts, but more guides. In fact, all of us, even those of us who teach, need to be guides for others, to come alongside to talk about our experiences of life lived under God's direction, to suggest ways of moving forward and dangers to avoid. We have to do life together. We can be guides for each other as well as those who are new to this God thing. And the third and final thing we learn about doing ministry is to sit with the question, "How do we see others?" It's a question of identity. How we see others can put up obstacles to connection. When I see you, I see someone with black skin, brown skin, white skin. When I see you, I see a rich person, a poor person. When I see you, I see a professional, a factory worker, a day laborer, a beggar. When I see you, I see a straight person, a gay person, a queer person. When I see you, I see a conservative, a progressive, a Republican, a Democrat, a fan of Fox News, a fan of MSNBC. I could go on and on with this, you get the idea. How we see people can set up barriers that prevent a connection from taking place. These are barriers that we raise simply by how we identify other people. But what if we saw people as seekers of God? That's what you and I are. Sure, not every person in the world seeks after God. But I think it's safe to say that everyone seeks after meaning, seeks purpose, seeks belonging, seeks love. What if we could notice the differences, appreciate the differences, even celebrate the differences, but focus on our common identity? It seems to me that if ministry is about making connections with others, as Phillip made a connection with the Ethiopian eunuch, then it is going to take looking for a source of connection rather

than being sidetracked by all that tries to divide us and that aborts connection from even having a chance.