



“Here is...Water!”

Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 28, 2024

Acts 8:26-40, John 15:1-8

Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

The star of the show today is Philip – Philip the Deacon, as he is known, as opposed to Philip the apostle. He is among the group that has been chosen by Jesus’ disciples to minister to the early Christian community in Jerusalem.

Here in Acts 8, Philip’s star is shining brightly. He has just had great success in Samaria, where many Christians had fled in the wake of persecution in Jerusalem by the likes of Saul and others (Saul who then became Paul). Breaking through age-old hatred between Jews and Samaritans, who were not even supposed to speak to each other, Philip had been proclaiming the news about Jesus Christ to anyone who would listen, healing people as demons came out of them with loud shrieks, performing other signs and wonders, and baptizing all who desired it, even including Samaritan magician who had tried to steal the show but became a believer.

Why does God then send Philip into a context that is completely the opposite – a wilderness road on which there is a single traveler? Well, why does God send any of us anywhere, usually where we least expect to be? Because God has a plan that sometimes we are slow to understand but in retrospect becomes clear. Let's dive into this story and see if we can discover our own sense of purpose in it.

One thing we’ll notice is that the Holy Spirit’s timing is always perfect. Philip appears on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza right behind a magnificent chariot carrying a high Ethiopian official, the court treasurer who is in considerable distress, although we don’t realize it at first. The chariot is presumably going along at a good clip, so Philip has to run to catch up with it.

Who is this traveler and where is he going? The Ethiopian was not just a foreigner out for a spin. He had made the long trip to Jerusalem to worship in the temple. While his own people worshiped multiple gods such as Isis and Osiris, for some reason he desired to know the God of Israel. Perhaps he had even made the long trip to Jerusalem in the hope of also receiving instruction that would allow him to convert.

Instead, he had been turned away at the temple gates because he was a eunuch, meaning that he had been castrated. Not having yet had the chance to study the Hebrew scriptures, he was not aware of the harsh rule in Deuteronomy 23:1, which reads: “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose ___ is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.” We can only imagine his feeling of despair, after weeks of traveling, to be rejected in his desire to worship the God of steadfast love.

Castration among servants of a royal court was practiced in many ancient civilizations as a way of ensuring subservience. The idea was to deter them from engaging in any sexual activity with others in the court -- specifically, with the royal harem – and also to keep them from plotting to

overthrow the king, since eunuchs could not hold positions of ultimate authority. But the effect was to forever stigmatize these men due to their inability to procreate. They were cut off from full participation in the life of the community.

Egyptian eunuch buys a scroll inscribed with chapters from Isaiah and consoles himself by trying to read it on the long trip home.

Just before Philip arrives on the scene, the verses from Isaiah 53 the Ethiopian is poring over give us a window into his bitter disappointment:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
³³In his humiliation justice was denied him.”

We imagine glimmers of awareness sparking as he begins to draw a connection with his own experience. It’s at that very moment – perfect timing, remember – that Philip jumps into the chariot: “Do you realize what you are reading?” or, “Do you know what you are trying to know?”

The eunuch needs to know: “Of whom IS the prophet speaking?” Could it be someone like himself? This gives Philip the opening to proclaim the good news kingdom of God and Jesus Christ, the best news anyone could ever hope to hear – especially this man, in this situation. We can only imagine Philip’s excitement as he explains that God’s love and mercy are for all people, that Jesus had indeed been humiliated and crucified but had won the great victory over death so that we could know the fullness of life that God wants us to enjoy, that nothing on earth can separate us from God’s love, and that in baptism God frees us from sin and death and joins us to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And then again at just the right moment, the chariot passes by a little brook. “Look!” exclaims the Ethiopian. “Here is water! What is to prevent ME from being baptized?”

As Philip is whisked away to his next assignment, we are told that the eunuch goes on his way rejoicing – a complete turnaround from the despair that otherwise would have accompanied him on the long trip back home. As he continues reading in his scroll he would come upon these verses just a few chapters later in Isaiah:

³Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,
“The LORD will surely separate me from his people”;
and **do not let the eunuch say,**
“I am just a dry tree.”

⁴For thus says the LORD:
To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
⁵I will give, in my house and within my walls,

a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
**I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.**

Do not let the eunuch say, I am just a dry tree.

None who abide in Christ are a dry tree because his love courses through our veins as individual branches, or buds, or spurs on his life-giving vine. Because of this we all bear fruit in our own distinct way, each person being a wonderful variation of every other. Who could imagine the human race as billions of identical cardboard cutouts? Who would want a tree of identical leaves producing identical fruit? Our glory as human being lies in our difference, as God desires for each of us to be a unique and worthy expression of God's love.

Yet fear so often keeps us from affirming this, fear rooted in the loss of control. The Romans and temple leaders were afraid of Jesus because they saw him as a threat to their lock on power. I am no expert on Jewish law, but I have to think that Deuteronomy 23:1 was designed to keep out anyone who could not conform to the requirement that all males be circumcised as a representation of the covenant between God and Abraham. Lacking physical evidence of circumcision, how could loyalty to God be ensured? How about the evidence of the heart?

Persecution in every age is a response by those in control to the perceived threat of losing control. Yet, control at what price? When human beings are diminished by oppression, or rejection, or prejudice, or stigmatization, the reality is that those trying to stay in control are ultimately dehumanized by their actions -- while endurance, character, and hope, those supremely human qualities, flourish among the oppressed.

We are witnesses to all this in Acts 8 – the oppression of the castrated, their rejection by the temple leaders, and the hope that then flowers in the heart that truly desires to know God.

Philip was a remarkable person of deep faith and great courage. He baptized those whose race and religion were problematic for the guardians of the law in Jerusalem; technically Jews and Samaritans weren't even supposed to speak to each other. And he gladly received into the Christian following, which at the time was still a sect within Judaism, a man whose sexuality was a problem for the temple elite. Philip went out of his way, out of his element, to be the conduit for God's love for someone who could not have been more different.

Philip's actions today affirm that we are all living branches connected to Jesus the vine, from whom the nutrients of God's love course through our veins. As we live into our unique identity and role as twig or a spur or a bud on Christ the vine, may we, like Philip, find our calling to enable others to do the same.