

“Looking for a Big Win”

Rev. Tim Forbess

June 19, 2011 - Trinity Sunday

Acts 8:26-40

I bring you greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, whose love for us is without condition and without end.

When I first heard the word “eunuch” I thought someone was saying Eunice who was struggling with a lisp. Maybe the story about a sultry afternoon with an Ethiopian eunuch is not a narrative that you reflect on often and, if not, maybe it’s worth a bit of consideration.

Philip – not one of the original disciples, but clearly a devoted disciple. He had converted to “the way,” the group of Jewish men and women who were following in the shadow of the prophet that had lived among them named Jesus. Philip was a member of the first church—not First United Methodist or First Baptist – but the very first church community before the denominations and divides were born. Philip entered the ranks of ministry as a deacon in Jerusalem – and a deacon you are aware is someone who has devoted his life to a ministry of service to others.

Philip was a caregiver – he visited the Jewish widows and took food for the hungry that were from the house of Israel. Daily, Philip’s meals on wheels cart went buzzing through the warrens of the old city delivering matzo ball soup and a little nosh to the shut-in’s. His prayer shawl was worn but his message was new. He was one of the earliest to devote his whole being to serving God through a ministry of caring for others, from his own church, who had legitimate need.

Had a phone call one day with Dale Patterson and we were talking about how much rain we’ve had. Then we were talking about the times when we didn’t have rain at all. He told me about a time when he was in his little fenced garden chopping the grass out of some dry corn when a smart aleck salesman stopped by. “Corn looks a little yellow,” the guy said. “Yeah,” said Dale, “I planted yellow corn.” “Doesn’t look like you’ll get more than half a crop,” he said. Dale responded, “Well, won’t matter since I planted twice as much as I need.” As the guy turned to leave he said to Dale, “Not much that separates you from a fool.” And Dale responded, “Just that fence.”

It's what attracts us to Philip. Nothing separates him from the people that he is called to serve. In metropolitan Jerusalem, the Jewish community decided to imprison these of their own - the Jewish men and women who were a part of another church called "the way". Armed soldiers were doing house searches for members. Philip decides to get out of town -- let things settle a bit. A strategic plan -- a decision to go to Samaria, a place where a Jew would never be looked for and subsequently never be found. It was a life saving goal.

It's Samaria, God-forsaken, unclean, undesirable Samaria that Philip makes a trade from a towel and apron to the pulpit. Preaching can't be that hard, he thought. He had seen an Anglo, middle aged, southern pastor of a small United Methodist Church in Dayton do it, and he knew he could at least do that well. First sermon in hand, he mounts the pulpit and tried out his new craft. Beginner's luck. He was Billy Graham, Martin Luther King, T. D. Jakes, and Louis Farrakhan -- maybe a little of Oprah and Montel, too -- all wrapped up into one. Philip, in week one of the revival, had everyone there singing "Just as I Am" in four part harmony! He converted the whole city. Men, women, children, the young, the old, the strong and the weak people from Samaria all became saved, every body came to the rail -- and Philip felt pretty good about himself. God was doubtlessly happy.

So an angel of the Lord comes by and pays a visit, and as a door gift brings a message. It's at this point in the scripture that God becomes a Bishop, the chair of the search committee, and Philip starts to discuss his profile. You can hear the excitement in his voice -- you know my team and I went to Samaria, and we got everybody to the rail. Successful? We built the first Christian church in the region, and we established food pantries, and schools, developed a second-hand chariot business for those who need a little help getting to work. Hired our own wheel maker! He was using the second person plural -- but he was talking about the first person singular. He was saying we, but he meant I.

Seems to me that I'm ready for a bigger city, something a little more than ol' out-of-the gate Samaria. Let's make a plan and we (I) can work up to getting salvation to every city, think of it -- Jerusalem.

The bishop of the universe had a different vision, a trait known to bishops even until today. I've got just the right spot for you -- Go to this wilderness

road, where no one is – be there at high noon, and wait. Philip becomes distressed and says to the angel, “You’ve got to go back to the Bishop of the universe, and advocate for me – I can get everyone in a town to the rail, and my baptism business is outrageous!” The angel said, “Look, I don’t write this stuff, and I don’t have a connection to the internet – so don’t be shooting the messenger, being a messenger angel isn’t all that easy you know.” A little curious, humming *Just as I Am*, and thinking about his evangelistic tour that would be kicking up any day, he sets off for this spot on the wilderness road. He wondered who should chair his advance team.

Long about noon, a royal chariot rumbled down that old road outside of Gaza. Its passenger was a eunuch, effeminate, embodying shame, he was impotent and a social deviant. Neither a man nor a woman but something monstrous, alien to human nature, said Lucian and similarly Josephus. This scripture reading, God fearing Ethiopian eunuch is reading out loud texts from Isaiah. This, the Queen’s banker, is sexually mutilated and therefore not whole. Though eunuchs were known for their stunning good looks and for their brilliance, to Jews they were untouchable, could worship but never enter the temple and could never praise God in community or in public.

The eunuch is reading from Isaiah out loud, which demonstrated to all that he could read. This beautiful, brilliant, wealthy, not male not female person is reading the Hebrew bible. Philip stops humming. He looks to the bishop of heaven and says, “You brought me out here for this?”

Didn’t Philip remember the story of the lost sheep? Didn’t he remember the story about the shepherd that left the flock of 99 for the one, and the celebration of finding that sheep so much so that a party was thrown? Didn’t he remember the story of the woman who lost a precious coin, so she empties out her whole house until she finds it, and she invites all of her neighbors over for a party to celebrate it? Didn’t Philip remember the story of a prodigal son whose dad had lost him and killed a calf and celebrated with the whole town that his son, who was lost, was now found?

Or maybe he was thinking about the other story that reminds us of Samaria, the Good Samaritan. How this unclean non-Jew took care of a beaten man because the others on that road that day wouldn’t run the risk of becoming unclean. It is against every instinct that Philip has to go to this guy. It has been breaking every rule that he has ever been taught to touch him. The tone in the text suggests that he really just wanted to stay inside his fenced in

garden. But our God is one that breaks down barriers that we work so hard to build and protect.

His address isn't very nice. "Do you even know what you are reading?" The eunuch is a little surprised and says, "How can I know if no one will teach me? I'm on my own out here – your doors are always locked and I'm not welcome in your church. You've seen me before and you looked the other way, you could have made a difference and instead you made a different decision." Philip accepts the invitation to sit next to him in the chariot and shares the story of Jesus with him. A sheep is led to the slaughter – his mouth stays closed when he is before the shearer. In humiliation justice was denied him...this is Jesus. This story could stop here – but God has a way of making it go further. Is the eunuch reading a story in Isaiah about Jesus or about himself? Are we reading a story about a eunuch or about ourselves?

In the middle of the desert, dead center in the midst of nothing but dust and dry land, the eunuch says, "Look, there is a pool of water. What is to keep me from being baptized?" God's pushing wouldn't stop. Philip baptized the eunuch.

This changes Philip's life and ministry --it isn't about converting a city to do evangelistic crusades and teach four part harmonies. The Bishop of Heaven knew that Philip's heart had been corrupted by ego and distanced from the apron of service; he was stuck in the first person singular, and forgotten the third person of the trinity. Philip forgot the spirit and, when we forget the spirit, the spirit will find us and teach us again our place in the presence of God.

This text tells us a brilliant story – that our call isn't a call if it isn't about teaching – telling that story, sharing that word to all of this world of ours. And our call isn't a call if it isn't about baptizing – telling those who go under those baptismal waters that on the other side is not a dry towel, but a soaking love of God that will never leave them. Teach them and tell them God loves them. No matter who "them" might be.

And the text writer is worried about us so the story is repeated in the verses that follow ours. Were we to read on, the next story in Acts Chapter 8 is the persecutor Saul on the wilderness road to Damascus, given sight through blindness, on the wilderness ROAD, and then is baptized, embraced by the

love of God. Look at what God is doing – the unlikely man or woman, on a desolate road, using a disciple to teach a life changing lesson, and baptized to secure the relationship.

My family of origin is interesting at times and not so interesting at others, which I appreciate. We like order. Jack and Myra Forbess get out of bed at the same time every day, eat the same thing for breakfast while sitting in the same chairs at the same table for over 50 years now. Change will depend on nothing short of God.

One day they were late coming home from work. It amounted to headline news. My sister and I asked for an explanation – we had a right to know. The trailer next door had burned. Jack and Myra Forbess borrowed money from the credit union, purchased new clothes for the whole family and paid off the debt over time. They wouldn't have mentioned it to us if we had not asked. My mother explained it this way – “when you lose everything you have, the last thing you want is what someone else wants to throw away.”

I would have been afraid. Afraid of not knowing the burned out family, of not intervening into their crisis, or maybe just assumed that someone else would take on the task or a government program would provide the service. I suspect that my mom and dad weren't exactly comfortable.

But I do believe this about them. If God sent them to a wilderness road to baptize a eunuch, if God sent them to a Damascus Road to bandage the eyes of an oppressor -- I think they would have gone. And when I look in the mirror every day with the face of their aging son, I'm hopeful that I would do the same.

But if I couldn't, could you? Would you offer him Christ?

Amen.