

Today we continue in our summer series going through the Book of Acts. In today's passage, Luke continues to narrate how God moved in people's lives and worked through them to carry out the mission of Jesus that he gave to the disciples: to be his witnesses wherever they go. Today we see Philip, who like Stephen (looked at last week), was one of the 7 people chosen at the start of Acts 6 and given a special anointing and commissioning by the Apostles to carry out ministry. So this continues some of the story of that group of people.

Earlier in *this* chapter (8) Philip was in Samaria, just outside Jerusalem, sharing the gospel message with people there. And now, in the first verse an angel tells him to head south from Jerusalem to Gaza. Some translations will read "head south" while others read "about noon" or "mid-day" to head to Gaza. The Greek can be translated either way. It actually makes sense for the "mid-day" translation, because to say "head south to Gaza" is redundant. Everyone knew where Gaza was in relationship to Jerusalem. Regardless, there's a specific road he's to go to – the desert road, not the mountain road or the one that goes by his college roommate who he hadn't seen in a few years. The implication here is clearly that God wanted Philip in a certain place, at a certain time, for a certain purpose...though Philip undoubtedly had no idea what that was. So he went out on the journey. And there are four things we can learn from him about being a disciple on mission with Jesus – being his witnesses wherever we go.

The first thing we learn is in the first verse plus a few extra words in verse 2, where Philip is told to go toward Gaza. And what we learn is that: **God calls us to trust Him.** Sometimes God calls us to something (in fact, oftentimes God does this) and we may not know what the purpose of it is. It might seem odd...it might seem out of the ordinary, and make us uncertain or hesitant. The timing might be weird, things might not really fit with our schedule, and it might be inconvenient. And in those moments, we're so often tempted not to step out in trust. Instead, we want to stay with the agenda we've set, to stay with the comfortable, the familiar...to stay with what we are certain of.

A number of years ago, Saint Louis University professor, and Jesuit philosopher, John Kavanaugh, went to work for a month at [Mother Teresa's] "the house of the dying" in Calcutta as part of a year he spent in India getting perspective on life, and on his own life in particular. The big personal question he was seeking a clear answer for was, **"How best do I spend the rest of my life?"** When he met Mother Teresa, she asked, "What do you want me to pray for?" He voiced the request that had, in part, brought him all this way from the U.S.: He wanted prayer about whether he should return to America to become a university professor or if he should stay abroad and work with the poor. So he said to her, "Pray that I have clarity."

She said firmly, "No, I will not do that." When he asked her why, she said, **"Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of" – Mother Teresa.** When Kavanaugh commented that she always seemed to have the clarity he longed for, she laughed and said, "I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God."ⁱ

You see: sometimes, our desire for clarity and certainty hampers us and prevents us from moving forward in faith. This is true from the biggest of plans that we formulate in our heads – like who to marry, whether to adopt a child, what career to have...to the decision about what pair of shoes to buy at the shoe store...to whether or not to reach out to someone in their time of need and help them out.

Philip shows us this priority of "trusting God over seeking clarity and certainty," as he heads out of town on a journey that probably wasn't part of his plans at that moment, trusting that God is going to be with him and would be leading him.

Then, he comes across a Eunuch (yoo-nuk) from Ethiopia. The very word "eunuch" makes the skin crawl on every male on the face of the planet. Traditionally, a eunuch was a male who had been castrated, so as to significantly reduce his sexual drive and allow him to be more focused, more controlled, and more dedicated to a particular job. Usually, it was in the service of a high-ranking government official such as a king or queen, and

tragically, it was not usually done with their own consent, though there have been exceptions. Eunuchs have been found in various cultures around the world. Occasionally Eunuchs did not go through the procedure to be physically altered, though they still held the title of Eunuch. Ok, now that we've gotten through that squeamish little bit...

Philip “happens” to come upon this Ethiopian Eunuch. Luke tells us that he’s in service to the queen, and is in charge of the treasury. Now, the NIV translation we read does a good job handling this. Some translations will say that he was in charge of “the treasury of Candace,” giving the impression that Candace is the queen’s name. It actually isn’t; **The word is Kandake, and it’s a title that means, “Queen of the Ethiopians.”**

So, he works for her as a Eunuch. At some point in his life, he converted to Judaism – perhaps he came in contact with the religion due to occasional travels up to Jerusalem...or, more likely, because the Jewish faith was carried into North Africa, Rome, and elsewhere when Israel was taken captive at different times, and many Israelites would flee to other countries. We see this when the Assyrians and the Babylonians conquered Israel in the 500’s and 700’s B.C., or even in the Roman occupation that began shortly before the birth of Jesus. When these Jewish people fled their homeland into a new country, they brought their faith with them, of course, and that led to Judaism gaining a foothold in these other cultures. That’s probably how this Ethiopian Eunuch became a Jewish believer, and was reading from the prophet Isaiah when Philip encountered him.

So he’s on his way back to Ethiopia, after visiting Jerusalem for worship – which was almost certainly a journey for one of the three great Jewish feasts, such as Passover. And Philip, stepping out in trust, comes upon him and hears him reading aloud from the book of Isaiah. Philip asks him: **“Do you understand what you are reading?” (Acts 8:30)**

I want to pause here, because this gives us the second point I want us to take away from this passage. The first point was to trust God, rather than seek certainty and complete clarity. The second point is that: **Discipling someone often begins with a simple effort of care and compassion.** This is a kind,

very ordinary question that he asks him, and shows genuine concern and empathy for the Eunuch. There's nothing magical or special about the question, or the interest he takes in this man from Ethiopia. We don't need special training, or any degrees to ask a question like this. It's a question of genuine concern that ends up opening a door to share the gospel. Sharing our faith certainly won't be the result of every question we ask of another person...but by showing this concern and care, we demonstrate to people the very love that we profess God has for people. It opens doors to truly be the hands, feet, and mouth of God to the people around us.

The house next door to us recently sold to a gal making her first home purchase. I chatted with her briefly the other night as I was working on our home. And based on that first conversation, my guess is that there will be a number of opportunities for my family to ask her simple questions that show kindness and compassion as she learns about owning her own home and learns about the neighborhood. Just letting her know we're there if she needs anything shows kindness and compassion. And from there, who knows what kinds of conversations might take place.

But those kinds of conversations and relationships often start with a simple question that expresses interest in the other person, as well as care for their well-being.

The third point I want us to take away from this passage is that **Philip meets the eunuch right where he is, in terms of his faith and spirituality.** The man was reading a passage from Isaiah, which is a prophecy Jesus fulfills. So it is an open door to a conversation about Jesus, and his death on the cross, and his subsequent resurrection, which all comprises the Good News that Luke says Philip shared with him. Philip doesn't seem to have backed up and talked with him about Creation, or Moses, or the Israelite history, or anything like that. There's an open door to talk about Jesus, and he does.

We may not always have the opportunity to jump right into a conversation about the cross of Christ. I have another neighbor who lives across the street that my family and I have gotten to know over the last 4 years. We've established a relationship with him where he knows we are there for him, that

our family cares for him, and we've tried to be a blessing to him. And we've let him bless us. For instance, he loves to give our kids chocolate candy bars; sometimes if I'm at his house he'll give them to me to take to our kids...and usually the chocolate makes the whole journey across the street. But in our conversations, I've learned that he believes Jesus is a prophet...that he's a great teacher. That's where he is in his understanding of Jesus. So that's where I'm starting the next conversation when the opportunity arises to talk about matters of faith. I don't need to get into Creation or theology about free will or the providence of God and all that. He just needs some clarity about Jesus. So that's where I'll start. This is what Philip does with the Eunuch: he starts right where he is.

Now, most people aren't sitting around reading Isaiah 53, wondering what it's about, when we happen upon them. **But they are wondering where to find hope, or joy, or healing, community, or something else.** For instance, if you meet someone who is looking for hope in some situation in life, it's an opportunity to let them know that you've been in that kind of situation, too...that you've wondered about hope in the midst of the challenges of life...and you've come to a place where you are able to have hope, no matter the circumstances. You probably don't even have to ask them if they'd like to hear more. Just saying that, they'll probably ask you about this source of hope, or maybe it's joy, or what it is that gives you a rock solid stability in life in spite of the ups and downs. And so Philip models meeting people right where they are, and connecting with them in that place.

Lastly, we see that: **Philip leads him to faith in Jesus.** We know this because the Eunuch wants to be baptized right then and there. And Philip does it. This is awesome. It's so un-Presbyterian to baptize on the spur of the moment when a person desires it...and I love it. This guy asks to be baptized, and Philip doesn't say, "You bet, but first we need to get approval from the Apostles..." or, "Baptisms have to take place in the presence of the church, so let's turn around, go up to Jerusalem, and get with the other believers." I'm not saying that oversight of Baptism is bad, or that doing baptisms in front of the church is wrong...but sometimes, in our efforts to administer the Sacraments "rightly" as John Calvin put it, we make it difficult to take action when the Spirit is clearly moving in someone's life in a deep and profound

way. And clearly, God had touched this man's heart with the message of Jesus.

You can call it evangelism if you want (though I know that word is scary to a lot of Christians), but what we see here is really the beginning of discipleship. Philip has gotten together with this guy, through a providential appointment that all came about because he trusted God when God's plans probably didn't jive with his own. He's genuinely inquired about his well-being...and he's met him where he is spiritually, but then walked him closer to Jesus from that point. And the result is this guy becomes a follower of Jesus. This is how God most frequently works to bring the Good News to someone: through people like you and me, who are open to the Spirit and trust God when the Spirit leads us to do something we might not expect...and through that step of trust God brings us into contact with people who need the Good News of Jesus Christ.

So, my encouragement to you today out of this passage is to: **Be a "Philip" to someone this week.** Step out and trust God to lead you...genuinely express an interest in someone else and let them know that you care about their situation in life, meet them where they are (no expectations/judgment) and even express how you've been in similar shoes and can identify with their challenge...and look for ways to share with them that you've made it through and now have great hope, stability, joy, and so forth...And the door will open to share with them about the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Wouldn't that be awesome? Wouldn't it be a joy to lead someone to a place of faith as Philip did here? I don't know all the details of how God wants you to spend the rest of your life, just as John Kavanaugh was looking for the answer to that question in his year in India. I do know that no matter where you are, no matter what you're doing, no matter who you're with, Jesus charges us with being his witnesses. That's our mission. If we're going to carry it out, it's going to take stepping out in faith and trusting God. That's the first, all-important step, and the others flow right out of it. So, I pray that this week, you'd trust God to work through you to be his witness here in Kirkland, or wherever you are, so that the Good News of Jesus Christ would be shared and God would touch someone's life through you. Let's

pray...Amen.

ⁱ I've taken this mostly from the first of these two links, but the second one influenced it as well, and is more personally connected to Kavanaugh himself:

<http://crossroadcounselor.com/2010/05/18/trust-mother-teresas-prayer-for-the-clinger/>

<http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/faith-and-character/faith-and-character/jesuit-philosopher-recounts-time-with-mother-teresa.html>