

"THE QUEEN'S ACCOUNTANT"
Acts 8:26-40
May 2, 2021
York Center Church of the Brethren
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Have you ever noticed how people in the Bible are always doing something? They hardly ever sit still. Especially in this book. No wonder it is called the **Acts** of the Apostles. After Jesus rose from the grave, he gathered his frightened and confused disciples together and promised them that they would receive God's power. He told them that they will be his witnesses in their old stomping grounds of Jerusalem but also in all of Palestine, even in the enemy country of Samaria, and beyond that into the whole world.

After Jesus ascended to heaven, two angels showed up and said, "Hey! Why are you guys just standing there looking up into the sky? You have work to do!" So, they went back to Jerusalem, chose a new disciple to replace Judas, and they prayed and waited.

In a few days, the Holy Spirit arrived in wind and fire on the day of the Jewish celebration of Pentecost and they were off and running. And they never seemed to stop.

This morning we are introduced to Philip. He was not one of the original disciples. He never sat at the feet of Jesus, never broke bread with him, never met him in the flesh. But his heart burned with passion for Christ, and he was considered by others to be a man of great faith and wisdom.

As the faith community began to grow the disciples realized they couldn't do everything in the young church by themselves, so they called out seven men to serve as deacons. Philip, who was Greek, was an outsider in the Hebrew world, but he was called to serve. The job of the deacons was to run the food pantry, to wait on tables, to make sure the widows and orphans were fed and cared for. But before the young church could really take off persecution began. One of the deacons, a devout young man named Stephen, was stoned to death. The Christians scattered to avoid being thrown into prison, or worse.

Although at first this dispersion seemed to represent a failure, it actually turned out to be a blessing because the gospel which was born in Jerusalem was now carried to the ends of the earth. The Christians scattered to other towns, cities, and countries, and they each carried the message of Jesus Christ with them. Philip ended up in Samaria and since there was no food pantry for him to run, he began to preach.

Anna Carter Florence gives us this description: *"Philip turned out to be really good at this preaching thing- a first century Billy Graham, and his first time out, too. He had the moves, he had the words, he had the miracles- Philip was a star. He was also a man after Jesus's own heart, because he wasn't afraid to cross the line into Samaria where no self-respecting Jew would be caught dead in those days; in fact, Philip was the first Christ-follower to leave the old neighborhood."*

Peter and John, back in Jerusalem, heard about Philip's success. They heard that one of their deacons traded in his apron for a pulpit. They heard about how the Samaritans had actually accepted the word of God from a rookie and were baptized, which sounded like mission impossible to them. But the reports were true, Philip, the deacon had converted a whole city of Samaritans. Who would have thought?

It was a major coup for the Christians, their first big missionary success. I bet Philip the deacon couldn't wait for his next preaching assignment. When he saw the angel of God coming toward him, I'll bet he thought, 'Oh boy, here we go. I'm off to tackle another huge city for Christ. But you know what the angel said? 'The wilderness road. Jerusalem to Gaza. Desert. High noon. Be there,' (1)

Maybe Philip thought he was being punished. After all, no one in their right mind would be found on a desert road at high noon. Anna Carter Florence suggests that this alone is our cue to suspect that God is involved. "In the Bible," she says, "God is always behind the really insane ideas."

So, Philip is on the wilderness road in the desert and lo and behold, he sees a chariot and in that chariot is an exotic and powerful man, the CFO of Ethiopia, trusted right hand man to Queen Candace, her accountant. And if that wasn't enough to set him apart, the man was also a eunuch. This was an important distinction in those times. Eunuchs were men, often chosen in childhood, who were castrated. They were given important jobs in royal households, usually guarding the king's harem.

The Old Testament book of Deuteronomy (23:1) makes it quite clear that eunuchs could never be members of the Jewish faith community. Although it was not their own choice to be made a eunuch, they were still rejected and humiliated. As Philip approached the chariot, though, he was giving life to the words of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah who wrote that one day God would welcome the eunuch and give him a name as a child of God. (56:3-5)

Philip hears the man reading the words of the Hebrew scriptures out loud. That alone would have thrown him for a loop but toss in the fact that this man was a foreigner, and a mutilated outcast, and Philip probably wanted to run in the other direction. But he didn't. Instead, he approached the chariot and asked, "Do you really understand what you are reading?"

Luke, the writer of Acts, doesn't report that the Ethiopian was surprised to see some guy running alongside of his chariot in the middle of nowhere. Instead, as powerful, wise, intelligent, and wealthy as he was, he was also humble, he replied, "How can I understand unless someone guides me." This man knew his limits and he knew that all of his power and wealth could not interpret the words of scripture for him, so he welcomed Philip's assistance.

Philip accepted the invitation to climb into the chariot and off they went, with Philip telling the man about Jesus Christ. They come to a pond, which is pretty unusual in the middle of the desert, and the Ethiopian says, "Here is water, what prevents me from being baptized and becoming a

follower of Jesus Christ?" Philip responded, "Nothing at all." And he baptized him.

As soon as the man rises out of the water, Philip is gone, whisked away by the Holy Spirit. The Ethiopian goes on his way, rejoicing and praising God. Here we see the Easter faith reaching to another continent to the remote region of Ethiopia all because the eunuch was willing to ask for help and Philip was willing to give it. You can be sure that when this man returned to his home, he told everyone who would listen- maybe even Queen Candace- about the grace of Jesus Christ.

Reading scripture with this man changed Philip's life and it changed the church too. Philip saw quite clearly that there was nothing to separate this man from God, not the Jewish rules that excluded eunuchs, not the words of scripture that he didn't understand, not even Philip himself. When the Ethiopian requested baptism, Philip didn't stop to call the big guys back in Jerusalem to ask about the church's stance on baptizing Ethiopian eunuchs. He didn't study the issue for a few weeks. Instead, empowered by the Holy Spirit, Philip just did it. And one more soul was added to Christ's expanding family.

Once again God's Holy Spirit pushes the faithful to move beyond their comfort zone, to push down one more barrier, to open one more locked door so that God's love and grace can be poured out for all creation. When the Holy Spirit said, "Get up and go!" Philip could have said "no thank you." This man was way beyond Philip's worldview and experience- he was exotic, he was cultured, he was a different color, he was a foreigner, he was wealthy and powerful, and most distressing of all, he was a castrated male. But Philip didn't worry about all that stuff, he just told the man about Jesus and went where the spirit led him.

There is constant action in this story- get up and go, he got up and went, reading in the chariot, running to the chariot, asking a question, interpreting scripture, baptizing, rejoicing, proclaiming, snatched away. You may have noticed that God doesn't let us sit still- either physically or spiritually. The Bible is one long story of calling, of moving forward, of journeys to new places. God is forever inviting, encouraging, challenging, and sometimes even dragging God's people to where they need to be.

The beautiful thing about faith and the infuriating thing about faith is that God meets us where we are, but doesn't leave us there. There is nothing wrong with where we are- God has led us here- but God always has more plans for us, more dreams for us, more purposes for us.

The disciples of Jesus thought they had hit a dead-end on the day he died on the cross. They had a few days to sit and mourn but then he appeared and gave them work to do. Maybe that is why he ascended to heaven right in front of them. They could see that he was no longer physically on the earth, but they were- so **they** had to continue his work.

Growing in our relationship with Christ is a life-long process. Like any good relationship it grows stronger, fuller, deeper, richer over time. The longer you know someone the more you learn about them. And one of the

things we learn about Christ is that he expects a great deal from us. And he gives us the gifts we need to meet those expectations.

Sometimes we would rather not exert ourselves. Sometimes we feel inadequate. Sometimes we think we have better things to do. But the call is always there, always before us, always within us. In scripture, like our text for today, Philip didn't seem to have much choice. Luke writes, "the Holy Spirit snatched him away." We know there are others in the Bible who said "no" but usually that was not the final word. One way or another, they followed God's call.

God's call will often surprise us. Just as it did for Philip. God will often call us to places we never wanted to go, to be with people we had no intention of ever meeting. God's call will frighten us, and it will thrill. And sometimes God will call us to be right where we are, doing exactly what we are doing.

The book of Acts is thick with the presence of the Holy Spirit. The power of the Spirit is seen in the movement of wind and fire; it is heard in dreams and whispers. People are propelled here and there. It is the force behind their preaching and teaching, baptizing and welcoming.

Wherever the Spirit shows up, things are going to change; they have to change because the Spirit is God's revolutionary power. It is the breath of Christ breathed out on the world. And it will not allow you to sit still.

Philip had spent enough time in relationship with Christ that he recognized the power of God when he saw it. He didn't understand it all, but he knew who was behind it. So, he trusted. The same is true for us. The longer we are in relationship with God, the more we learn to recognize the working of God and the calling of Christ.

This story shows us how much we need each other. Sometimes you are the Ethiopian with lots of questions and sometimes you are Philip who knows where the find the answers.

The beauty of the family of faith is that this is where we learn the stories of faith; here is where we learn to recognize the actions and the voice of God; here is where we help each other interpret our calling. This is the place where we encourage each other to keep moving forward with God, to keep asking questions and searching for answers. In this place we are free to doubt and to wonder.

Together we grow in our faith and break down the human-made boundaries that try to keep us apart and try to limit Christ's love.

"Then the angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go!'"

May it be so with us.

Amen.

End Notes:

- 1- "Do you really understand what you are reading?" Anna Carter Florence, from 30 Good Minutes, October 10, 2004.