

In the Middle of Nowhere

[Text - Acts 8:26-40]

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In this morning's New Testament reading, we hear a story about Philip, one of the first people to extend the Good News of Jesus Christ beyond its original boundaries. It's a fantastic story, with some strange characters and some surprising twists. Philip hears the voice of an angel, takes a chariot ride with the Ethiopian Minister of Finance, baptizes him, and is suddenly whisked-away by the Holy Spirit. This story definitely contains some "other-worldly" elements; yet it has an extremely "down-to-earth" message. It's a marvelous, ancient story from which you and I can glean some fresh, new insights as to how we might further extend the Good News of Jesus Christ today.

"An angel of God says to Philip, 'Get-up and head south to the wilderness road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza.' So Philip gets-up and goes." Now, while it is strange that Philip gets GPS directions from an angel, it's even stranger that he's instructed to go *south* on the wilderness road between Jerusalem and Gaza. That's like telling him to "head to the middle of nowhere!" And Philip receives these directions while he's successfully proclaiming Christ's Good News in Samaria, the capital city *north* of Jerusalem. That Good News of Divine Love is spreading like wildfire - creating a tremendous excitement throughout that entire region. Things are really taking-off for Philip in the north; yet suddenly he's instructed to go south, into the quiet, uninhabited wilderness. So maybe the first thing this story shows us, is that the Holy One can use us in those times or situations in our lives that - on the surface - seem mundane, unpromising or insignificant.

The Good News of Jesus Christ expands and spreads, not because of big evangelism rallies with hyped-up emotion, or big-name televangelists with puffed-up hair. It's not even because of the sparkling personalities and spectacular preaching of local church pastors. [I realize that's hard to believe, but apparently it's true!] *Most*

people join a Church primarily because another person cares enough to invite them to come; and when they come, they are warmly welcomed and embraced by that community of faith.

As Philip travels down that desert road, he's prepared to offer the kind of one-on-one attention that is essential for welcoming any other traveler he might encounter. Surprisingly, he encounters a chariot. And in that chariot, there's a eunuch - the financial minister to the queen of Ethiopia, who had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home. The Spirit says to Philip, "Go join him!" So he runs-up, and he hears this man reading aloud from the prophet Isaiah. Philip asks him, "Do you understand what you're reading?" The man replies, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invites Philip to get-in and sit beside him.

Now *that* is a perfect situation for sharing the Good News: when we are sensitive to the Spirit's guidance, leading us to people who are looking for something more; and when those who are seeking, invite us to help them in their search. That is so different from those so-called Christian "witnesses" who categorically tell people that "Jesus is the answer", before they even listen to what the *question* might be! But Philip takes time to listen; and he responds, only after the man asks him directly, "About whom does the prophet say these things?" Then, "Starting with that Scripture" Philip "proclaims to him the Good News about Jesus."

Sharing the Good News of Jesus doesn't need to be contrived or forced; it can simply flow from the situations or conversations in which we find ourselves. If you and I actually meet people where they are in their lives, and actively listen to them, they may give us the opportunity to share how our faith helps us in our lives. And though it's highly unlikely that we will encounter someone sitting with Scripture in hand - searching for answers - you and I will meet people every day who have significant questions about how to cope with Life in this complex and changing world. And if we are genuine in our concern, they will probably be open to hearing about how our faith - and our connection to this community of faith - helps us deal with similar

challenges and issues. Sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in a caring and personal way, will often bring about wonderful results - as we see at the conclusion of today's story.

“As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’“What is to prevent me from being baptized?” That is a crucial question; and how one responds to that type of question is critically important. Philip could have replied, “Well, you’re an extremely dark-skinned foreigner, who may not fit the demographics of our church. Plus, you probably need a lot more theological instruction, to fully understand what baptism and our faith are really all about. And unfortunately, you *are* a eunuch; therefore, your questionable sexuality just isn’t acceptable to God!” Of course, Philip says none of these things; he simply steps into the water with that man and baptizes him; and the man “goes on his way, rejoicing!”

In order to authentically share the Good News of Jesus Christ, it is essential that we, as the Church, remove any barriers that keep people from connecting with the gracious love that Jesus Christ embodies and conveys. Here at Brecksville United Church of Christ, we do a good job of welcoming people of any social standing, sexual orientation, family make-up, religious, cultural or ethnic background. Nevertheless, there are still many people out there who may never come to experience this wonderfully inclusive Family of Faith, unless you and I personally invite them to do so. For while the Water of Holy Baptism is freely available to all, you and I must be willing to pay the price of giving-up our fears and hesitation - and boldly reaching-out to all those around us who need our compassion and care. Because it is through our compassionate caring, that the love of Jesus Christ continues to touch and transform the lives of others. And the great thing about this is, that when you and I share Christ’s love with others, that same love continues to touch and transform our own lives as well!