

So...What's Stopping Us?

[Text - Acts 8:26-40]

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May 6, 2018

In this morning's New Testament reading, we hear the story of Philip, one of the first people to extend the Good News of Jesus Christ beyond its original domain. It's a fascinating story, with some strange scenarios and curious characters. Philip hears the voice of an *angel*; takes a chariot ride with an Ethiopian *eunuch*; and at the end is suddenly whisked-away by the Holy Spirit! Yet in spite of all its mystical elements, this story conveys some marvelous, down-to-earth insights on how you and I can continue to extend and share the Good News of Jesus Christ today.

The story begins: "An angel of God said to Philip, 'Get-up and head south to the wilderness road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.'" Right from the start, this is a bit strange. Not only is Philip getting GPS coordinates downloaded from the Cloud, he's being told to go *south* on a wilderness road between Jerusalem and Gaza. That's like telling him to turn left in the middle of nowhere. And Philip receives this instruction while he's proclaiming the Gospel with tremendous effectiveness in Samaria, the capital city *north* of Jerusalem. People's lives there are being restored; amazing signs and wonders are being performed; and tremendous excitement and enthusiasm is spreading throughout that entire region.

Things are really going well for Philip in the North; yet he's suddenly directed to go south - away from the crowds and activity - into the quiet emptiness of the wilderness. Nevertheless, it is in that isolated wilderness that the Holy One is able work through Philip to accomplish something tremendously significant; just as the Holy One can use you and me in those quiet times or places of our lives - in situations that might, initially, seem unpromising or even discouraging.

One thing this tells us about sharing the Good News, is that it doesn't have to be some spectacular, high-powered presentation to convert the masses. More often it's a quiet, one-on-one process. And while large evangelism rallies may drum-up a lot of emotional enthusiasm, that excitement can quickly fade-away; and the long-term effectiveness may be minimal. Perhaps this is why the majority of people who join a Church indicate that they do so because of a personal invitation from a friend.

Authentic Church growth doesn't happen because of big evangelism events, or beguiling televangelists. It's not even because of the sparkling personality or spectacular preaching of the local church pastor! Most people join a Church primarily because another person cares enough to invite them to come; and when they do come, they are warmly welcomed by that community of faith. That's by far the most effective and natural way to extend to others the loving embrace of Jesus Christ.

As Philip wanders down that wilderness road, he sees a chariot. And in that chariot, there's a eunuch, who happens to be the financial minister to the queen of Ethiopia. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home. "Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.' So Philip ran-up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' *And he invited Philip to get-in and sit beside him.*"

Now *that* is a perfect situation for sharing ones faith: when we allow the Spirit to lead us toward those individuals who are looking for something more in their lives; and when those who are seeking or struggling invite us to help them in their search. That's completely different from those Christian "witnesses" who automatically tell people that "Jesus is the answer", before they even listen to what the *question* might be! Philip takes time to listen; and he only responds after this man specifically asks him, "About whom does the prophet say these things?" "*Then Philip began to speak, and starting with that scripture, he proclaimed to him the Good News about Jesus.*"

As this story shows us, sharing the Good News of our faith doesn't need to be contrived or forced; it can simply flow from the situation or conversation in which we find ourselves. And when you and I are willing to meet people wherever they are in their Life's journey, they may give us the opportunity to share our faith with them. And while it's highly unlikely that we will ever 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 increasingly complex and troubling world. When we do meet someone who is struggling with these type of concerns, we may find that they are open to hear about how our faith, and how our connection to this community of faith, helps us deal with similar problems and issues. You and I are called to share the *Good News* of

Jesus Christ. And when it's done in a personal and caring way, then *good results* will happen, 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’s an extremely crucial question; and how one responds to that type of question is critically important. In this instance, Philip could have said, “Well, you are an extremely dark-skinned *foreigner*, who may not fit the profile of our church. You probably need a lot more theological instruction, to make sure that you really understand our faith in its *truest* form. And unfortunately you are a *eunuch*; therefore, your questionable sexuality is certainly not acceptable to God. Sorry, but that’s three strikes against, just off the top of my head.” Of course, Philip says none of those things; he simply and joyfully baptizes that man; and the man “went on his way rejoicing!”

In order for Christians to truly convey the Good News of Jesus Christ today, the Church must consistently work at removing any barriers that keep people from connecting with the gracious love of Jesus Christ. Here at Brecksville United Church of Christ, we do a pretty good job of welcoming among us people of any social standing, sexual orientation, family make-up, religious or ethnic background. However, 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.

Sharing the Good New of Jesus Christ doesn't have to be a scary, or strange, or strained thing for us to do. After all, we have a remarkable story to share: the on-going story of the Holy One's amazing compassion and care for us, and for all people. It's a story that we celebrate here every week; and it's a story that we can take from here and convey to others every day - through our living, through our listening, and through our loving acceptance of all people - wherever we may find them.