

“On the Road with Philip” Acts 4:26-39 1/31/16

About two weeks ago, I was sitting in the waiting area at K&W Tire, while the guys there installed a tire on my truck. I was trying to read, but the TV was on pretty loud, tuned to the “Family Feud” gameshow. A woman from one of the teams came to the center of the stage where Steve Harvey said to her, “One hundred people were surveyed and asked this question, ‘Name a place that people can’t wait to get out of.’” The woman thought for a split second, and blurted out, “Church!” Her team members clapped in agreement, while Harvey said, “I’m sure your pastor is proud!”

I inwardly groaned. Are most people just itching to get out of here on Sunday mornings? Is that that way most people think of church- as something to be endured, rather than enjoyed? Steve Harvey then shouted, “Survey Says!” And it turned out that only two people out of a hundred named church as something that people can’t wait to get out of. That made me feel a little better. It’s certainly my impression that most of the people who come to our church actually enjoy it, although I’m sure there are some who just tolerate it for the sake of a parent or spouse!

The problem is that fewer and fewer people are actually going to church at all, which is a big problem for the institution of the church. Many

of our churches have so few people coming that they are closing down, and even if the situation is not that dire, other churches are having to scale back staff and programs, and especially, mission work. As sad as all that is, the bigger problem is that fewer and fewer people are coming to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and learning how to live as his followers.

The decline of churches is a complex problem, but I believe you are a major part of the solution! Yes, you! I've noticed that the few churches in our community that are growing have members who are passionate about inviting others to their churches. And that's the only solution I can see for churches that want to stop declining in membership and begin to grow again. Now I know this solution is frightening to some of you, but I firmly believe there is no other way forward for us. Fortunately, God has left us with resources to help us with this challenge. Consider this story from Acts 8. Here's what was going on.

Just a few chapters before, the church was born when the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus' followers in Jerusalem at Pentecost. The church grew rapidly in number, but that provoked jealousy and persecution, so the believers were forced to flee the city and spread outward. One of those believers was named Philip. He went to Samaria, and figuring that the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ was for everyone, started telling

the Samaritans about Jesus, and many of them responded! This was significant for two reasons. First, most all of the early believers were Jews, like Philip. And, second, the Jews and Samaritans hated each other! But, God was at work in spite of those barriers, and many Samaritans came to faith in Jesus. Here's what happened next.

²⁶Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³²Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. ³³In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." ³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about

himself or about someone else?”³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.³⁶ 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?”

³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8:26-39)

I notice several things in this story that may help us as we try to share the gospel with others or invite them to join us in church! First, notice that God who was behind everything that happened in the story. He specifically called Phillip to a certain place and then prompted him to go over to the chariot, which was actually a slow, ox cart kind of thing. In the meantime, God had obviously been at work in this Ethiopian high court official. The man was clearly a spiritual seeker, who was returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. And he was reading the prophet Isaiah, the 53rd chapter- a chapter that tells of a coming servant who will suffer for the sins of the people! There couldn't be a more perfect opening for talking about Jesus, because it was Jesus who fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy.

When we think about sharing our faith with others, remember that God is already at work both in us and in the people to whom God will lead us. Evangelism and faith-sharing are God's work!

Second, Philip also played an important role. He obeyed God's command and followed his prompting. He went over to the cart and was able to hear the man reading from Isaiah, because ancient people almost always read aloud. Then Philip responded with a great question that invited further conversation. "Do you understand what you're reading?" he asked. The Ethiopian did not, which gave Philip a wonderful opportunity to talk about how Isaiah's vision was fulfilled in Jesus.

We can also look for opportunities to take conversations in a spiritual direction in a non-threatening way. If someone is going through a rough time, you could say, "Sometimes when I am struggling, it's hard for me to trust in God. Has your faith been helpful for you during this time?" Or, you could state, "I've found that my church is a great comfort to me when I'm going through hard times. Would you like to come with me next week?" Or, you could offer to pray for the person, and then follow-up later to see how they are doing. You get the point. Look for opportunities to turn ordinary conversations into faith conversations.

By the way, I think it's important to point out that Philip was not a religious professional. He wasn't one of the original twelve disciples and hadn't been to seminary or majored in biblical studies! He was a layperson, who Jesus had touched, and he wanted others to know what Jesus could do for them. In recent surveys, when people were asked to identify those who had influenced their decision to follow Jesus Christ, a majority of those who were not raised in the faith identified a friend or acquaintance as the one who influenced them to come to faith. Not a pastor or church staff member! Someone like you.

God is at work in faith-sharing. And God uses ordinary people to tell the good news to others. Also notice that God calls all kinds of people to the church. This was a huge struggle in the early church, because the first Christians thought that everyone had to be like them- Jewish- if they were to be followers of Jesus. The Spirit shattered that idea by drawing all kinds of people to the church! Consider this Ethiopian. He was rich, while most of the early Christians were poor. He was educated, and a man of power- the treasurer of the head of state of Ethiopia! He was a Gentile and a foreigner. He was black-skinned and from the outer reaches of the empire. In their minds, he was an unlikely candidate to join the Christian faith, but God had other ideas.

I wonder if our expectations about who will respond to the gospel may be limiting who we invite to church or share the good news with. And our reputation from years ago as the “country club” church shapes the expectations people outside have about who would be welcome here. Those expectations form barriers to our outreach. But God may want us to reach out beyond our comfort zone. To poor people who are barely getting by. To people of color, including the many Latinos in our community, some of whom speak little English. To people with mental disabilities. To people with serious doubts about Christianity.

Approaching folks who are different than us may make us a little uncomfortable, and I’m guessing that Philip was a little uncomfortable approaching such a powerful man! But, like Philip, you need to overcome your discomfort and initiate faith conversations with all kinds of people, not just people like you.

The story ends with an important reminder. Verse 39 tells us that the Ethiopian went on his way “rejoicing.” Remember that the gospel is Good News! In fact, church tradition tells us that the Ethiopian eunuch went back to his homeland and began to spread the gospel throughout that land.

Two weeks ago I was visiting someone in the hospital; We'll call him Fred. Someone else was visiting Fred at the same time, a young man Fred had influenced to become a follower of Jesus a couple years ago. The young man was an unlikely candidate to become a Christian. He was addicted to heroin at the time. His significant other was also an addict. He had spent time in jail. He was going nowhere. But that didn't stop Fred from sharing the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ with him, and assisting him in practical ways as he put his life back together. Now, this young man has a job, is a good father to his young son, and is a voracious student of the Bible. He couldn't stop talking about all that Jesus had done for him the whole time I was there! The gospel is still Good News today!

In a Peanuts comic strip, Lucy says to Charlie Brown, "I would have made a great evangelist."

"Is that so?" responds Charlie Brown.

"Yes, I convinced that boy in front of me in school that my religion is better than his religion."

"Well, how did you do that?" asked Charlie Brown.

Lucy answers, "I hit him over the head with my lunch box."

Sometimes we think that we have to hit people over the head with the gospel. The story of Philip reminds us that this isn't so. God is already at work bringing people together for faith conversations. Our job may simply be to ask a good question and let God take the conversation where he will. And to be open to all kinds of people that God may bring into our life. Then we watch to see what God will do!