

“Sharing the Good News about Jesus”

Acts 8.26-40

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How do people come to have *faith* in Jesus Christ? We’ve been talking about this recently. Last month we spent two weeks looking at the story of the man born blind, how *he* came to have faith in Jesus Christ, and we discovered a few things. First, it’s a *process*; it doesn’t just happen in an instant. Second, the *Holy Spirit* has to be working in that person’s heart. Third, *conversations* are vitally important, not just acts of kindness or service. We actually have to *talk* about Jesus – who he is and why he matters. Some of the most important conversations are the conversations *you* are having, or could be having, with people you know. And fourth, in many cases, coming to faith doesn’t take place inside the walls of a church. The blind man had a series of epiphanies about Jesus, and *none* of them took place inside a Christian house of worship, not even that moment when he bowed down before Jesus and said, “Lord, I believe.” We can’t just talk about Jesus *here*, inside these walls; we have to be willing to talk about him *out there*, beyond these walls. Today we’re going to see another illustration of how someone comes to have faith in Jesus Christ: the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, from Acts 8.

Now there are lots of interesting details in this story. Who is this guy? He’s one of the highest, most important, most trusted officials in the whole land of Ethiopia, which at that time was a wealthy and powerful kingdom, full of gold, full of warriors ready to fight. What was this guy’s job? He was the chief treasurer for the Candace, the queen. That means he had access to all the money, all the gold. Why was he a eunuch? Because he worked for the queen! He spent time with her. People needed to know they could *trust* him – not just with the money, but with the queen’s dignity and reputation. Why had he gone to Jerusalem? Apparently, because he was attracted to the Jewish religion. There were many non-Jews who were attracted to the Jewish religion, because of its strong belief in *one God* and because of its high moral and ethical standards. This man seems to have been one of those. He had gone to Jerusalem to worship – a religious pilgrimage, if you will, though he would not have been able to worship in the temple because he was a eunuch. Somewhere along the way he had picked up a copy of the scroll of the prophet Isaiah; perhaps he had purchased that in Jerusalem. Those were rare; not many people could read or write; most people didn’t keep copies of the sacred scrolls in their houses. But this man has both wealth and education: he can buy a scroll, and he can read it while his driver drives his chariot back home. Oh, and did you notice out that this man is *black*? He’s from Ethiopia. Africa. Probably the first African convert to Christianity. In the kingdom of God, *race doesn’t matter*. *Anybody* can come to faith in Jesus Christ; people of *every* race and ethnicity are welcome at the table.

Then there's Philip. There are two Philips in the New Testament – Philip the apostle, who is mentioned several times in the gospels and who was from the city of Bethsaida; and Philip the evangelist, who is mentioned several times in the book of Acts and who was from the city of Caesarea. This is Philip the evangelist. *Maybe* this Philip had met Jesus during his earthly ministry, but if that happened we have no record of it. This Philip is not mentioned by name until well after Christ has risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. That means that he's kind of like us – someone who *didn't really know Jesus in the flesh* but is choosing to follow him now. He's been appointed to be a *deacon* in the church – that happened in Acts 6 – and now the Spirit is commissioning him to do more than just perform acts of service or wait on tables. Now, the Spirit tells him: *go up to that chariot from Ethiopia*.

Here is our first important lesson this morning: *God tells us who to reach out to*. Some people are going to be more receptive to the gospel than others. You could talk to some people till you're blue in the face, and they're just *not* going to be receptive to what you have to offer them. Remember, the Holy Spirit has to be working in that person's heart. If that's not happening in any significant way, then there's *nothing you can do or say* that will *make* that person be receptive. There's no point in banging your head against a brick wall. Let *God* direct you to the people you have the potential to reach.

So Philip goes up to the chariot. As he approaches, he hears the eunuch reading from his Isaiah scroll. In the ancient world it was customary to read *aloud*; several centuries later, Saint Augustine was *amazed* when he found his teacher reading with lips moving but no sound coming out of his mouth. He didn't know that you could *do* that. Philip listens, and discerns what the man is reading. So here is our second important lesson: *Figure out where your audience is "at" before you start talking about Jesus*. Don't walk in presuming you know where their heart is. Don't just set an agenda without understanding the context. Philip listens; he hears the man reading from the Isaiah scroll; then he asks: "Do you really understand what you are reading?" Here's our third lesson: *Lead with non-threatening questions*. In this case, it's a simple question – nothing that would make the man feel defensive. It's important to note that Philip does *not* go up to the man and ask, "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior?" No – it's just simply, "Do you really understand what you are reading?" It's a question, a friendly question, but it's also, implicitly, an *offer*. If the man answers "no," then Philip has an opening.

The eunuch's answer is not just "no," it's a request for help. "How can I," he says, "unless someone explains it to me?" Philip now knows: *this man is curious*. He's eager. He's hungry. He's willing to listen, willing to learn. A *perfect* opportunity. Which brings us to our fourth important lesson: *wait for an opening*. Don't try to force an opening. We're not trying to shove anything down people's throats. But if you are given an opening, *seize it*. Don't waste the opportunity; it may never come again.

The eunuch invites Philip up into his chariot, and shares with him the passage he's puzzling over. It's from Isaiah 53, one of the four "suffering servant" songs that appear in the latter portion of the book. Those of you who have been in my Monday night class are familiar with these songs; we've talked about them, three times now. The rest of you may or may not be familiar with them; I don't know. These four passages refer to a "servant of the Lord," a chosen servant, whose purpose is to bring justice to the nations, restore the lost tribes of Israel, be a light for the gentiles, and bring salvation to the ends of the earth, and who is faithful to his mission, despite being beaten, mocked, and spat upon. He is

despised and rejected; his appearance is marred; he suffers great affliction. He is pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities; he bears the sins of many and makes intercession for the transgressors; by his wounds we are healed. To someone who doesn't know Jesus, these are puzzling passages; scholars through the centuries have debated, "Who is Isaiah talking about?" But to those who know Jesus, the answer is obvious – these four songs offer a prophetic summary of what Jesus will do, what role he will play in God's great drama of salvation, and how Christ's death on the cross brings salvation and life to all those who place their trust in him. The eunuch is puzzling over a few verses in the fourth and final of these songs: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent so he didn't open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was taken away from him. Who can tell the story of his descendants because his life was taken from the earth." The eunuch is able to read all the words, but they make no sense to him. He says to Philip: "Tell me, about whom does the prophet say this? Is he talking about himself or someone else?" This is the opening Philip has been waiting for. Luke tells us, "Starting with that passage, Philip proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him." We aren't given the words that Philip says, but it's clear that his evangelistic efforts are successful: they come upon some water, and the eunuch asks to be baptized. The Spirit of the Lord has been at work through Philip's words to him – and the kingdom of God once again increases by one.

So we come to our fifth and final lesson of the day: *When you're given an opportunity, offer the gospel of Jesus Christ.* Don't just hand the responsibility over to someone else. Notice what Philip did *not* do. He did *not* say, "Come to church with me," or "Let me go fetch one of the apostles to answer your question." No, Philip was ready and willing to do the job himself. He knew the scriptures well enough so that he was able to answer the eunuch's questions on his own. Remember: he's a *deacon* in the church. He's not a rabbi, not a priest, not a pastor. He hasn't been to seminary or Bible college. He's an *ordinary guy* in the church of Jesus Christ, set apart by the church leadership for a particular ministry of service, and he's also called by God's Spirit to *share his faith* with other people. That's a calling we've *all* been given; remember, Jesus tells *all* his followers not to hide their light under a bushel basket, but to put it on a lampstand, letting it shine before others, that they may see it and give praise to our Father who is in heaven. That instruction applies to *all* those who worship and serve Jesus. *God is going to give you opportunities to share your faith with other people.* The Spirit sometimes beckons you to share what you know to be true about Jesus with other people. Your job is not to just invite them to come to church with you; your job is not to point people to folks like me and let *me* deal with all their questions – no, sometimes that task falls to *you*. Recently I heard about a series of conversations between a member of this church and a couple members of that person's extended family – conversations about *faith*, conversations about *Jesus*. That is *exactly* what I'm talking about. There are people in *your* sphere of influence, people who *you* have the potential to reach with the gospel of Jesus Christ. *You are Philip* – and somewhere in your life there's an Ethiopian eunuch whom you can help lead to faith. Somebody who's *curious*. Eager. Hungry. Willing to listen. Willing to learn. Who is that person in your life? Who has God placed in your path? If you're listening, God will tell you who to approach. Let God guide you to that person. Lead with non-threatening questions. Wait for an opening. Then, when the opening presents itself, *share the gospel*. Talk about Jesus. Who he is. Why he matters. Let the Holy Spirit lead you. And watch with joy as the kingdom of God increases by one.

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