

Sermon delivered by Pastor John V. Carlson on May 6, 2012

Acts of the Kingdom: Making Disciples

Yr. B, Easter 5

Acts 8:26-40

We Presbyterians have a profound ambivalence about the subject of evangelism. The mere thought of going door-to-door with a religious message can remind us of sorts of things we'd rather do. Being chairman of Evangelism on Session is the one job that people have less enthusiasm for than being chairman of Stewardship. Somehow, asking people for money is easier than giving them the good news about Jesus.

And yet, the very last thing that Jesus tells his disciples before being taken into heaven is: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." And so making disciples becomes the single most important goal of the Apostles in the Book of Acts.

And so we have this conundrum: we *know* how terribly important is the great work of spreading the gospel and making new believers in Jesus Christ, but we hardly know where to start. We certainly don't want to force ourselves and our faith on someone else (because we don't like it when someone does it to us). But underneath all this lies another concern: most of us don't really feel up to the task. We don't feel adequate. Truth be told we don't feel comfortable talking about our faith with other Christians, much less strangers.

But my goal today is not to make us feel guilty about what we're not doing; what I *do* want is for us to think together about the great challenge of spreading the gospel and making disciples in this troubled world, and how we *do* fit in.

And our lesson this morning from the Book of Acts can help us do just that. It's a wonderful story of both spiritual inspiration and human interaction, picturing the Apostle Philip's coming upon an Ethiopian eunuch riding along in a chariot, studying the Hebrew Scriptures, which Philip interprets to him, and then baptizing him. I remember vividly learning this story as a child in Vacation Bible School, although I can't recall particularly what point was being made to us; I do feel relatively confident we children were not told anything about what a eunuch is. What I seem to remember most about the story is the dramatic ending, in which Philip is "snatched away" by the Spirit and winds up in a city miles away. But in this case, the ending of the story may not be as important as the beginning, which also has a somewhat miraculous tinge to it. Listen again:

Then 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." But in hearing this, let's not think "heavenly winged creatures, but rather, let's focus on the fact that in Greek the word "angel" is the same word as "messenger. And the message here is about how God guides Philip to another location where people hear the good news. In the language of scripture, the word "angel" means that *God* is guiding Philip's faith and ministry; God's also guiding the growth of the church.

And then the author makes a point of saying that this road "is a wilderness road." And immediately we should be reminded that there is sometimes danger in taking the gospel to new places. In some parts of the world, that means physical danger, but for us, sometimes the wilderness road we are on brings us a spiritual or emotional challenge: we may need to grow in order to share the good news and to encourage others to become disciples of our Lord. Sometimes we need to learn how to work with new people or people we don't feel comfortable with yet. Or we need to explore new ideas or have old comfortable ideas challenged. We may need to learn a new skill, or activate an old one. Like Philip, we may hear God whispering in our ear to go down a wilderness road. So, says the author of Acts, "he got up and went." And as he travels he comes upon a character that may seem strange and exotic to us: a eunuch from Ethiopia, a court official of the queen, in charge of her treasury. Acts tells us, "He had come to Jerusalem to worship...and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah." And though he seems exotic, there are some things about him we might recognize: He's a man entrusted with great responsibility. He's riding in a chariot, so he has access to wealth and the trappings of power. And yet, he is searching. His position and his authority have not satisfied him spiritually: he has come to a foreign land and a new religion to find meaning.

But there is more we should know about him: He is foreign, of course, and our own culture knows something about the problems of how to welcome those who arrive here as strangers and outsiders. Perhaps more importantly, the passage makes a point to say this eunuch had been to Jerusalem to worship; but as a castrated male, he would not have had access to the Temple in Jerusalem. Amazing, isn't it, how these ancient texts have a way of forcing us to look at our own practice of hospitality, who we welcome and who we don't, who belongs and who doesn't.

So Acts then tells us the "the Spirit said to Philip, 'go over to this chariot and join it.' And there it is again, the reminder that the Spirit is always moving and shaking. This is the Scriptures' way of saying that, in the Book of Acts, the Apostles are always listening for God's guidance, always under the direction of the Spirit. Remember last week we noted that the Holy Spirit is the single most important character in the Book of Acts. The Apostles do nothing without the direction and empowerment of the Spirit.

And of course, Philip goes. And that brings us to the fundamental point about making disciples: it's taking the risk of sharing the most important gift that we have, our faith. Philip says to this stranger in the chariot, "Do you understand what you're reading?"

And it's Philip's boldness here that is so striking, especially to most of us Presbyterians, who are reluctant to initiate faith discussions with anyone, and most especially with total strangers. I would not claim to be an exception. We are loath to be seen as forcing our opinions on someone else. We don't like it when someone tries to do it with us. But what is more disturbing is that we are almost equally reluctant to talk about our faith even among our friends. People who have had deep spiritual experiences, including having a vision or hearing God talk directly to them are frankly often afraid to share it with someone else. If we go to a Bible Study class, we want to hear the instructor talk, but we don't want to talk about how the passage affects us personally. Very few would be open to being a part of a faith sharing group. And I think this is the crux of our problem with evangelism: How can we be expected to talk about our faith with strangers if we won't talk about it among ourselves?

But I think we're starting to change the culture a little bit around here. On Session, for example, we have been slowly but steadily moving to

making a larger part of our regular meetings times of study and faith sharing. Now we begin with a time of sharing and prayer, lifting up personal and congregational concerns for prayer. We include a time of Bible study that people are participating in more and more. Elders are learning to share amongst themselves, and the important thing is that it makes a difference in how we work together.

But if Philip's boldness is striking, the eunuch's response is equally challenging. He says, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And here, you see, is a great question for the church. For we have become quite accustomed in recent years to wringing our hands and worrying about the decline of the church—attendance and membership. We look around us on Sunday morning and wonder where everyone is. We bemoan youth athletic leagues and sleeping in late on Sundays. But we have done very little to reach out and find those people and to go and minister to them. We expect to open our doors on Sunday and say, "Here we are, come visit" —and then think that people will just show up. Not gonna' happen. We need to rethink. We need this story of Philip going down a wilderness road, spying someone who needs more than this world can provide, and going up to him and saying, How can I help? Now in our defense, we're running the clothing closet, and opening the building to AA and Al-Anon, and sending youth and adults on mission trips. I'm proud of all of this, and you should be too. But it ignores the fundamental question of how are we going to spread the Christian faith in this community?

Well, there's one more piece of help that Philip can give us before we leave this story. After the eunuch tells him what he's reading, the author of Acts says, "Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus." And take note, please, that there is no explanation here of the passage here; the details of what Philip said were not especially important to the author of Acts. What *was* important was the fundamental message of the gospel—the good news about Jesus. So: What's your version of the good news about Jesus? What's most important to you about our Lord and Savior? Is it that he forgives sin? That he is a friend to the friendless? That he heals the sick? That he is God's son, come to earth? That he rose from the dead. Think about it for a minute...what is most important to you? Then I want you to find someone else, and tell them, what the best part of the good news of Jesus is...for you. Right now. Consider me the angel voice in your ear. Find someone and just say one thing that is important to you about the good news.... Now, that wasn't so hard, was it? So go and make disciples.