

Our second reading today will come from the book of Acts. The New Testament begins with the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John which are centered around the 3 years of Jesus' earthly ministry. The book of Acts follows and shares stories from the early church after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The author of Acts is the same as Luke. It is also written to a person named Theophilus which may be a real person or simply a generic term describing the readers of the book.

In the opening to Acts, the author recalls the mission given to the disciples by Jesus. In Acts 1:8 the disciples are told that the Spirit will bless them and that they will be witnesses in Jerusalem, all over the country of Israel, and then to the ends of the earth.

In the first 7 chapters of Acts the emphasis is upon the first part of this mission. The disciples are focused on Jerusalem and throughout the country of Israel. The portion from Acts that we are reading this morning is from the 8th chapter of Acts where the disciples are being pushed out beyond Israel.

This story we are going to read will begin with Philip. Philip is one of the 7 Greek speaking Jewish Christians who were commissioned by the 12 apostles to spread the good news to the Greek speaking Jewish community. But as we will discover today, they may have thought they were only commissioned to witness to people like them. But Philip, we will discover, is going to be commissioned by God to proclaim the good news to the world beyond these established boundaries.

Acts 8:26-40 (video)

The other night Stan Sheftall told me a story about his Dad. I've asked him to share it with all of us today.

(Story about his Dad, his Dad's friend that could see, and his friend who could not. They were on the beach and his seeing friend was describing a certain attractive woman on the beach to their blind friend. He then asked Stan's Dad to describe what he saw. Stan's Dad was a dentist. When asked to describe the woman he said, "she's missing the #15 tooth.")

I asked Stan to share that story because it's pretty funny. He swears it is a true story. I asked him to share this story because I think it shows how we tend to categorize someone based on their external features. I love Stan's Dad's response in his story because he put that type of fixation with appearance into proper perspective.

In this story that we read from Acts, I am intrigued by the descriptive terms used to describe the man that Philip encounters. The man is described as an Ethiopian eunuch. Luke chooses to describe this man when he tells this story by using his nationality and by using his sexual identification. Are these 2 descriptive terms important in this story?

Well, by describing this man as Ethiopian, the author opens up the reality that the gospel message is now being pushed out beyond the boundaries of Israel. It is now time to share this story to people in Africa and beyond.

This man is also described as a eunuch. This man is a castrated male who worked as a treasurer for the queen. By identifying his sexual identify, the author is recalling the Old Testament passages which deal with sexual identity. In Deuteronomy 23 the Scripture clearly says that a sexually mutilated person is not welcome into the assembly of God.

But in this New Testament story, Philip the evangelist is awoken by an angel who instructs him to go out from the city and toward Gaza along the coast. Along the way Philip encounters this Ethiopian man. Philip finds this man reading from the Scriptures out loud. Reading Scripture out loud was the practice of reading until about 400 years later when silent reading started to become the preferred practice.

But the man is not reading from Deuteronomy words about how eunuchs are not welcome into the assembly of God. Instead this man is reading aloud from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. In contrast to Deuteronomy, the prophet Isaiah proclaims that eunuchs who keep the Sabbath will be welcomed into the House of the Lord.

The man reads this stuff and other words from Isaiah about captives being set free and he wants to know what all this means. This is when Philip sits down with him in the chariot and explains to him what he is reading. The man is excited by Philip's interpretation. So much so he asks to be baptized. He asks, "What's to prevent me from being baptized."

Philip knows that there are lots and lots of reasons why he should not be baptized. He's not from Israel. He's a member of the cabinet of the Queen of Ethiopia so his allegiance is elsewhere. And he is of the wrong sexuality. But Peter doesn't address any of those issues. Peter, instead, sees some water. Asks for the chariot to stop. And then Peter baptizes this man.

I began by pointing out how this man is described by using his exterior features. He is African. He is sexually different. But if we look past those external features we discover something else about this man. This man is a seeker of God. He is yearning to have an experience of God and an angel directs Philip to be the one to help him have this encounter.

So, this text gets me to wondering about how open we are to listen to God direct us to the places where we are called to proclaim the good news? Who is God placing in our path that God wants us to be a part of witnessing to God's good news? Whose path are we being placed into who is called by God to share good news to us?

Did you also notice how Philip was directed toward the man's chariot rather than vice-versa? The man was not told to go to Philip. Philip was told to go to the man.

So, our challenge is to be open to who God is calling us to and then going there. And I think that Allison Creek Presbyterian Church is on that path. The festival we presented last week is leading us further down a path of ministry in the African-American community.

But that is not the only path that I think we are being invited down. As we all know this area is seeing more and people moving in. Most of these people will not walk into this church on their own. We need to, instead, go to them and connect with them like Philip connected to the man from Ethiopia.

I think we need to have more and more conversations about how we go out. How we find ways to go to the places where others are and connect with them. We go out because we are driven by a desire to share the good news.

Being driven to share the good news means that we find new and creative ways to do ministry. Ways that I don't think we really know fully yet.

But I think that God is clearly using the people of this faith community to go out. And that is very exciting. Because if God is choosing you then that means that God is also equipping you.

We have been given an old message of God's love in Jesus Christ. Folks around us are seekers. Folks around us are reading the Bible some. But they need us to break the chasm that many of them have toward churches and toward Christians.

God is calling us to be the ones to cross that gap and share the good news in new and creative ways.

As we go out God will give us what we need. AMEN.

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-Given: April 29, 2018 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

FAITH FORMATION

- As you come to the station with the rocks, write on the rock the name of someone that God is calling you to reach out to and cross a boundary
- Turn left on the peace trail
- As you come upon the “Love Thy Neighbor” prayer station, reflect on who you have a hard time reaching out to because they are different than you
- As you come to the station with the prayer cloths, write the name of the person or the group that you are called to reach out to and offer a prayer for courage to reach out to them
- As you come to the waterfall, imagine that person being baptized in your presence.