

**Acts 8:26-40** <sup>26</sup>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." (This is a wilderness road.) <sup>27</sup>So 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 <sup>28</sup>and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. <sup>29</sup>Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." <sup>30</sup>So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" <sup>31</sup>The eunuch replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. <sup>32</sup>Now 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. <sup>33</sup>In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." <sup>34</sup>The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask, does the prophet say this – about himself or about someone else?" <sup>35</sup>Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. <sup>36</sup>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?" <sup>38</sup>He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. <sup>39</sup>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. <sup>40</sup>But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Acts 8:26-40

04/28/2024 – Saginaw First United Methodist Church

"On Listening Deeply"

Rev. Amy Terhune

A woman went to see a divorce lawyer. Adamantly, she told him, "I want to divorce my husband immediately!"

The lawyer asked, "Do you have any grounds?"

"Yes," she said, "about five acres."

"I mean, do you have a grudge?" the lawyer questioned.

The woman shook her head, "No, just a carport."

Then the lawyer asked, "does he beat you up?"

"No," the woman replied, "I get up before he does."

Exasperated, the attorney demanded, "Madam, why do you want a divorce from your husband?"

"Because," she complained, "it is impossible to communicate with that man!" [previous story adapted from "Hear, Hear" by Paul W. Kummer, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Okay, honest truth: how many of you are feeling sorry for her husband right about now? Me too. But if the truth were told, we should also know that we are all that woman sometimes.

"I just can't seem to figure out God's will for my life, God's call on me. I don't know how I find my niche in living my faith." Ever said that? I have, to which the Holy Spirit generally responds:

And you work how many hours?

And you are involved with how many other organizations

And you have how many television sets in your house?

And you chauffeur your kids how many different places?

And you have what playing on the car stereo everywhere you drive?

And your honey-do list is how long?

And you spend how many hours on social media?

And you only get how many hours of sleep?

And you say you can't discern God's work in your life?

Well, isn't that a mystery! How can God communicate with people who aren't listening?

It's a question we need to answer, but I want to start in the scripture lesson, because it is here that we are introduced to two men who found themselves and their identity as God's beloved children by practicing the essential art of communication—listening.

To begin with, the story involves three main characters. The first—the glue that holds this whole lesson together—is the Holy Spirit. The Ethiopian Eunuch tells Philip “How can I understand what I'm reading unless someone guides me?” What we realize, even if he doesn't, is that guidance is in evidence at every turn in the narrative. It is the Holy Spirit who orchestrates this encounter from beginning to end. It is the Holy Spirit who directs Philip to a wilderness road and prompts him to join the caravan. It is the Holy Spirit who seems to give Philip the words to say. It is the Holy Spirit who happens to provide water on a desert road and participates in the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch. And it is the Holy Spirit who, long before Gene Roddenberry or the USS Enterprise could ‘beam me up, Scottie’, already has the capability to successfully transport one from the desert to the city in a matter of nanoseconds, resulting in Philip's rather sudden and disconcerting experience: he ‘found himself’ in Azotus, way north of Jerusalem.

Please don't be put off by the fantastical nature of this account. It's not a scientific documentary. It is meant to portray something spiritually profound. “He found himself...” That is a particularly revealing turn of phrase. And as we've already said: this narrative is all about two men who “find” themselves when they open themselves to divine communication through the work of the Holy Spirit. Those two men are the other characters in the text.

Philip is a little bit of a mystery. Jesus had a disciple named Philip, who brings others to meet Jesus several times in the gospels. There was also Philip who was a Hellenist and one of those we heard about last week in Acts 6, who, along with Stephen, was chosen to ensure that the resources of the Christian community in Jerusalem were being shared fairly. Scholars are pretty divided on which Philip this is. Since Saul and his cronies are persecuting the church, the disciples have been scattered, while the Apostles stay in Jerusalem. Given that he starts from Jerusalem and heads to Gaza, he may be an Apostle. Given that he's “scattered”, he may be the deacon. For our purposes this morning, we can accept either answer. What matters more is that Philip takes the upheavals in his life in stride. Normally in scripture, when one finds themselves in the wilderness, it's usually because they're lost. To his credit, Philip accepts the call and embraces the lostness, thus allowing himself to be God's instrument in ‘finding’ another.

On the wilderness road, he meets the final player in the drama—the Ethiopian Eunuch. We never get his name, but we get a surprising amount of detail. He is a Eunuch, which likely means that he was born into a very poor family that gave the child up to genital mutilation in order to provide him a more secure future in service to a queen. This was a very common practice in ancient times, and it appears to have worked, as he is the Secretary of the Treasury and Chairman of the Federal Reserve all rolled into one. The fact that he could travel to a distant land to pursue an interest in a foreign religion, the description of his chariot, and the evidence that he could afford to purchase a scroll of Torah at a time when literature was always copied by hand and was, therefore, extremely expensive, all lend merit to the notion that he is wealthy. The fact that he is a high court official, has the ability to read religious texts in a language other than his native tongue, and is open to intellectual dialogue lend further merit to the notion that he is extremely well educated. This man is powerful in nearly every worldly sense of the word. His need is in spiritual matters, not material means.

Yet for all that, he is not conceited. He is willing to admit he needs guidance, to ask questions, and to accept help from someone obviously beneath his status when it's offered. Keep in mind that as a foreigner, a gentile, and a eunuch, he has three strikes against him by Jewish law. He would never have been allowed to go any further into the temple than the chaotic outermost court of the gentiles, where all

the sales booths are set up and all the scholarly debates take place. It's hardly conducive to worship or a spiritual experience, yet he has journeyed for months by caravan across the desert to worship there. What an extraordinary man he must have been.

As Philip encounters him, we are told that the Eunuch is reading from the prophet Isaiah. We wouldn't be told that unless it mattered. The passage quoted is from Isaiah 53, which is the description of the suffering servant. Even today, Christian scholars interpret this prophecy as foreshadowing the ministry of Jesus. But ancient readers of Acts would have implicitly understood something we may not. Isaiah will move on from chapter 53 to describe a vision of the future kingdom of God's reign following the ministry of the suffering servant. By time a reader gets to Isaiah 56, they would know that Isaiah has this to say:

In the translation of scripture we read this morning for the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), vs. 33 reads: In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.... But other translations, including the New International Version, that vs. 33 reads like this: In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.... That matters because the Eunuch identifies with this suffering servant. He, too, will not have descendants – that is, children. By the time we get to Isaiah 56, we hear these words:

“Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, “The Lord will surely separate me from his people”; and do not let the eunuch say, “I am just a dry tree.” For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts...” As the Eunuch learns about Jesus Christ through Philip, he is manifesting the kingdom Isaiah describes—the foreigner and the eunuch finding acceptance and welcome from God. ‘What is to prevent me from being baptized?’ he finally wishes to know. Will those same things that kept him from worshipping in the heart of the temple keep him from Christ? We know the answer and so does Philip. Recalling Jesus' words to the disciples in Acts 1:8 that they are to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the very ends of the earth, Philip breaks down every wall. This Eunuch represents the ends of the earth—geographically, spiritually, socially. From a distant land and an outcast's status, he will FIND HIMSELF at the centermost heart in the Kingdom of God—a baptized, spirit-filled member of the family of God.

From there, Philip ‘finds himself’ whisked away to preach to a whole new group of gentiles, and the reader of Acts is launched into the kingdom vision of Isaiah. Chapter nine sees the Damascus road transformation of the persecutor Saul into the Apostle Paul—the greatest evangelist the world's ever known—which leads into chapter 10 and good old Saint Peter's vision whereby he learns that if he's going to carry Christ to the world, he's going to have to eat with the world, which means he's going to have to leave behind Jewish purity laws and open wide the table of God.

Ground-breaking inclusion, radical grace, a whole new world vision, and awesome love and acceptance—that is what Christ's Kingdom is supposed to look like according to the record in Acts. And those who find themselves, according to the record, do so when they pay attention; when they listen to the still small voice of God and allow themselves to be used to advance this new vision.

This past week, in Charlotte, NC, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church has been meeting after it was delayed from 2020. I've been reading the briefs, studying the resolutions, watching the proceedings, and I can honestly say that I've never seen a General Conference like this. We're not really making the news as we have before, perhaps because the newsmen would rather cover our fights than our progress (or maybe because there's some big trial going on in NYC). For the first time in my memory, there are not contentious, rancorous, malicious rants from the floor. There are

not protests in the galleries or endless nitpicking of legislation. There's an energy that you can feel even over the livestream – one of holy purpose, of mutual respect, of spiritual renewal. God is moving. The Holy Spirit is at work. I'm reading about it. But even more, I'm feeling it. And day by day, resolution by resolution, our delegates are reshaping the church to be less US-centric, and stripping away the language that denied the gifts of the LGBTQ community and that prohibited marriage and ordination for our LGBTQ siblings in Christ. And for so many of us who were not sure we would ever see this day, we're not applauding, mostly because our hands are too busy wiping away tears of gratitude.

So let's bring this home. It might interest you to know that the root word of obey goes back to "obaudire" – that is, to listen. What that suggests is that obedience is merely about giving someone power over us, but about valuing their leadership enough to care about what they have to say. It's to listen deeply. To be an obedient church, then, is to follow Philip's lead in listening to the Spirit, in placing ourselves in God's hands. It's about trust. We cannot make disciples, we cannot transform the world, we cannot dream big, we cannot impact our community until we've put ourselves in a position to listen deeply. For this moment, the United Methodist Church has allowed God to pull us out of the echo chamber of fear and division. We lament a schism in our church. But I cannot lament where God has taken us this week. As a church, we have work to do. In the US, we are overwhelmingly white, and a significant majority of us are over 50. Which means we're not meeting the needs of younger generations or of more diverse populations. We must keep listening. When you pray, my friends, by all means, lift your fears, your concerns, your loved ones, your needs. But leave yourself time to sit in God's presence and see what God's Spirit might tell you. The future of the church depends on our willingness to listen deeply. Do you hear? Amen.