

Pastor Jon's Sermon from Sunday, May 2, 2021

Text: Acts 8:26-40: Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

“The Holy Spirit Moves the Church to be More Inclusive”

I had two unique ministry experiences this weekend I want to share with you.

First, I travelled to the UP of Michigan on Friday to do a graveside service for Elaine Anderson, Dennis Anderson's Mom. I offered to help them after Elaine died in December from Covid 19, and they took me up on it, because the local Pastor couldn't do the service. I drove along the north shore of Lake Michigan. It was a beautiful drive.

Elaine was the Postmaster in Seney, MI, for much of her career. But before that she was a Rations Officer in WWII. She was active at Grace Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod in Germfask teaching Vacation Bible School, Sunday School, and baking pies for the church's annual bazaar. After retirement she volunteered at the Seney National Wildlife refuge, teaching classes and leading tours. I got up there early and walked the holy ground where Elaine spent much of her life, including the refuge. At the service I proclaimed the promise of resurrection for those who die in the faith. After the service I asked, “Where can I find a good pasty on the way home?” They said, “Dobbers” in Escanaba.

Then on Saturday, I had the honor of baptizing Caleb and Ben Abendroth in their home on their one-year birthday. They are the children of Nicole and Ryan Abendroth, members of Our Savior's, and grandchildren of our staff member Jennifer Hurley and her husband Brian. Caleb and Ben started off as triplets with brother Jack. They were all preemies. Jack was born before Caleb and Ben and sadly died 2 hours after birth. We had a blessing of remembrance for Jack with his ashes present, and then baptized Caleb and Ben. I welcomed Caleb and Ben into the body of Christ, the body we all share. It was a joy to be a part of this day. Nicole and Ryan and their whole family showed me what grace looks like as they loved on those babies. You can read Nicole's article in “The Voice” this month about their journey.

As I sat down to write this sermon, I reflected on the fact the church is still living out the calling to baptize and proclaim the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

Recall in the book of Acts chapter one, after Easter, Jesus appeared to the disciples in Jerusalem. He promised that they would receive the Holy Spirit and that they were to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

You too have received the Holy Spirit in your baptism and are called to be witnesses to Jesus in your everyday life. At home, work, school, online, and in public.

In our first reading from Acts today, the good news of Jesus is expanding to the ends of the earth. The Holy Spirit is pushing the early church to be more inclusive and welcoming to all.

Philip, one of the early converts to Christianity was originally appointed by the 12 disciples along with the likes of Stephen to manage the daily distribution of food to widows and the most vulnerable people in the community. The 12 disciples couldn't keep up with this feeding work so they instituted a division of responsibilities so the 12 could devote themselves to prayer and sharing the Word.

Eventually, like Stephen, Philip became an evangelist. His first mission was to Samaria where he shared the story of Jesus death and resurrection to the Samaritans. Philip, who had a Greek name, was hand-picked for this call... Samaritans and Jews didn't like each other... but Philip didn't have this baggage.

Then, in our lesson for today, an Angel said to Philip, "get up and go toward the south to the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he got up and went. Not knowing why he was on this road, he encountered a chariot on the way. This time the Holy Spirit nudged Philip to go over to the chariot and join it.

In the chariot was an Ethiopian Eunuch, the treasurer of the queen of Ethiopians. He was on his way home from a religious pilgrimage in Jerusalem. He was a God-fearing foreigner. Not only that, he looked different. He had dark skin. Did you know that the word "Ethiopian"

in Greek is a combination of two Greek words meaning Burnt Face? He also was a Eunuch, and in the Torah (first 5 books of Old Testament), Eunuchs were to be excluded from the Jewish Temple.

The Ethiopian Eunuch was reading the Prophet Isaiah chapter 53 about a suffering servant of God. Philip asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" How can I unless someone guides me?" Philip then accepted the invite to ride with the man in the chariot and teach him.

This is a beautiful image of accompaniment. Riding with someone in a chariot, listening, dialoguing about God. It was a long ride to Africa. The man asked, who is this scripture about? Philip then told the Eunuch the Easter Story... of Jesus death and resurrection. They must have also talked about baptism.

When they came to some water, the Eunuch said, there's water, what is to prevent me from being baptized. So they got out and Philip baptized him. And the Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing, and Philip was teleported to another town.

Are we listening to the Holy Spirit's call to continue to share the Gospel to all people? Or do we feel it is someone else's job?

The lesson reminds me of all those people in my life who taught me the faith and answered my faith questions. It also reminds me that following Jesus is more than words. Philip did as the angel told him. He physically went to this deserted road. He followed the nudge of the Holy Spirit to go up to the chariot.

May we listen for the Holy Spirit calling us to stretch ourselves and the church to be more inclusive and welcoming to all.