



THE REAL TREASURE
Acts 8:26-39

Using your imagination, let us construct the following scenario. Right after church today, Ray, Doug or Lois receives the following prompting from the Holy Spirit. “Get into your car and go towards Ephrata. Pick up Route 222 North. Go toward Reading and get off at State Road. As soon as you get off the ramp – you will find a Chinese Buddhist. He is a vice president for Sovereign Bank. He will be sitting in a red Jaguar vehicle with a flat tire.” You are to go and knock on the window. The man has just called AAA with his cell phone and is waiting for the tow truck to arrive. While he is waiting – he is reading from a Bible given to him by a Christian missionary (maybe the Conklins) at the recent Olympic Games. You see a church bulletin in the passenger seat. He is reading from the gospel of John about the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”

You inquire “Does that story intrigue you?” He replies “Yes, it does. Who is this Lamb of God? Is there really such a person or is it a myth?”

You ask if he really wants to know about God. He shares that despite his accumulated wealth and position – he still hungers and yearns for something more. You tell him about the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – and the possibility of new life in Jesus Christ – the real treasure.” You share how you have sacrificed everything for the joy of knowing Christ – and serving him.

He responds to the invitation. You pray with him. However, he spots a water fountain in front of the Berkshire Mall in the distance – and asks if you could baptize him right now.

You get into his car – and upon reaching the fountain, wade into the waters of the fountain with him. He confesses that Jesus Christ is the only Son of the living God – and you pour water over his head – make the sign of the cross on his scalp – and baptize him in the name of the ‘Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.’ Almost immediately, the Holy Spirit directs you back to New Holland. This new brother in Christ joyfully returns to China and spreads the good news about Jesus Christ.

Wow! What an incredible story! Well, something like that is taking place in our lesson today.

As we open our lesson today we observe that Philip the Deacon and Evangelist is given another opportunity to share the good news of Jesus Christ. How the Holy Spirit sets up this opportunity is truly amazing. Let us dig in.

In this lesson today we are also introduced to a most unlikely candidate for membership and baptism at First Church – at least according to prevailing cultural though at that time – an Ethiopian eunuch.

On the surface – these two individual are so different you wonder how they got in the same story and became brothers in the Christian faith.

Philip was a Greek Lay person who was called – and set-apart to be a deacon in this new community called Christians. He is not to be confused with Philip who was one of the original 12 disciples.

He first appears upon the scene in the 6th chapter of the book of Acts. Having the heart of a true servant of the Master – he becomes a waiter and serves the widows of the Jewish community. He becomes part of the Meals on Wheels of the Jerusalem community. He was a Hellenistic Jewish believer.

This means he was a Greek-speaking person who worshiped the God of the Jews. As persecution comes upon the faith community he is driven by the spirit into the Samaritan region. After the death of Stephen, the torch of leadership passes from Stephen to Philip.

Philip was a layman who becomes one of the most effective evangelists in the history of the Christian church. He reminds me of Harry Denman, who was a well-known lay evangelist in the United Methodist church.

Philip preaches the gospel among the Samaritans – a group for which there has been deep-seated hatred between them and the Jews for centuries. Philip and those with him do such a great job that a revival breaks out and it is called the ‘Samaritan Pentecost.’ The wind – spirit – and fire of the Holy Spirit is quite evident among them. Peter and John were sent from Jerusalem to evaluate the work – and were so impressed that they went back to Jerusalem to share the good news. These two nations or territories – once hated enemies – become one body in Christ Jesus.

So, then – without any warning or fanfare – in **verse 26** Philip is instructed by an angel “Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. This is the desert. In other words this is a desolate, good –for-nothing place. Now we know Philip is not a United Methodist because he does exactly what he is requested to do. So, he arose and went. We know from the biblical witness that our Lord cared for the crowds but he also cared for the individual that the Temple and the prevailing culture had written off. He loved those marginalized by the world.

We know from the call of Abraham and Sarah it is God’s intention to reach the world. That is inclusiveness at its very best. It is God’s will that none should perish.

God starts local – with one family – one people – one nation – but never stops. We stop. We are detoured. God never is.¹ God keeps his covenant – his promise.

Shortly before his ascension to sit at the right hand of the Father Jesus gave his great commission to the disciples – and commanded them to go into all the world – and make disciples of all nations – baptizing in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.² He further promised the gift of the Holy Spirit – which would empower them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem – Judea – Samaria – and to the ends of the earth.³

It was on the Day of Pentecost in **Acts 2** that the Holy Spirit descends on the apostles and other believers to guide them into all truth and to enable them to testify on his behalf. They would continue his ministry and mission. The Holy Spirit not only enabled them to be Jesus' witnesses – and to tell the Jesus' story with power and truth – it filled and clothed them with his presence and power. The Easter story would continue. It could not be defeated.

So, the wind, Spirit, and fire would not allow them to sit around the campfire and roast marshmallows – and speak of the good ole days of the past. It drives them out into the world to be his salt – light – and leaven. So from its very beginning at Pentecost – the church is multi-national or international. St. Luke makes it very clear that 16 different nations and languages were present at the day of Pentecost.⁴ This Spirit-driven development allows them to go into the world – to reach all the world – which was God's plan from Abraham on.

So this brings us to the Ethiopian eunuch in our lesson today. There has been an historic connection between the nation of Israel and the territory of Ethiopia from the time of Solomon.

The royal court of Ethiopia had been drawn to the wisdom of Solomon and Jewish monotheism. There has been a Hebrew or Jewish population in Egypt or the Upper Nile region for centuries. We know the Holy Family fled to Egypt to escape the terror of King Herod.⁵

Eventually, the Jewish or Hebrew Bible was translated into the Greek in a famous publication known as the Septuagint. This version of the Bible was read by many who we would call 'seekers' or 'God-fearers' today. The pagan religions had left so many empty and weary in their spiritual quest to know God. So here we see the prevenient grace of God at work – drawing men and women to himself through the power of his word.

So this man is quite different from Philip. He is **black**. He's a **foreigner**. He is **rich**. He has a powerful position. He is the Minister of Finance for the royal family of Ethiopia. He is a eunuch. He is an outsider in almost every way. He is different geographically - ethnically – religiously – sexually. He knew the meaning of the words "Not wanted – No admittance." There were barriers everywhere he looked.

However, as he reads the Jewish scriptures it shares in **Jeremiah 29:13**, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” This he did.

However, he reads in **Deut. 23:1**, that being a eunuch he is prohibited from entering the Temple to worship. He is one of them – those kind. However, he also reads in **I Kings 8:41-43** that God encouraged all foreigners to come to Jerusalem to the Temple and pray.

Now, imagine the hope and joy that must have arisen in his heart and spirit when he reads **Isaiah 56:4-7**, “For this is what the Lord says:

‘To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose what pleases me
and hold fast to my covenant;
to them I will give within my Temples and its walls
a memorial and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that will not be cut off.” Wow!

We know that this Ethiopian eunuch is reading from the book of Isaiah in **verse 28** of our lesson today. The eunuch probably thought, “Wow! That is me.” So off he goes on a religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Temple.

So he goes to the Temple – and what a disappointment it was. This Ethiopian eunuch comes to drink the Living Water – but leaves thirsty. He comes to eat the Living Bread – but goes home hungry. He comes to have his bonds of bondage broken – but leaves as paralyzed as ever. Not one person in Jerusalem told this eunuch about the life-changing power of Jesus Christ. They were too busy with other things.

So we find our friend on his way back to his native land – still seeking and confused. Since God seeks those who seek him – God will not allow this opportunity to slip by. God decides that Philip is the perfect instrument to touch and guide this truth seeker. We know Philip is full of the Holy Spirit. Philip is knowledgeable about the scriptures. He was a Hellenistic Jew – thus allowing him to speak to this eunuch in Greek.

God has broken the heart of Philip from racism and prejudice when he ministered to the people of Samaria.⁶ Philip had a heart and passion to save souls – regardless of race – color – country – creed.

So Philip teaches the eunuch that the ‘He’ in Isaiah’s words is **Jesus Christ**. Philip shares how Jesus knew rejection, humiliation, injustice, false reports. He shared how Jesus experienced all these human experiences – but yet won the victory. Then all the hunger and thirst of this man’s soul and spirit found its total satisfaction in the person of Jesus Christ. All the walls and barriers fell at the name of Jesus Christ.

Every research report I read from both secular and religious sources – share there is great spiritual hunger in America and in the world – but like in our lesson – very few found relief here at the church or Temple. They go away disappointed – and hungering and thirsting even more. We must do more to reach them.

So Philip and the eunuch go into the water as complete strangers – different in almost every human category – but come out of the water as brothers in Christ. This Minister of Finance has found the ‘real treasure;’ a personal relationship with the Living God of the universe and salvation in his only son Jesus Christ.

We know from Saint Irenaeus that this Ethiopian eunuch went back to his native country telling the story of Jesus and his love. This is how the Holy Spirit got the seed of the gospel planted in Africa.

On this All Saints’ Sunday – we remember those – like Philip and the unnamed Ethiopian eunuch who witnessed to the gospel – have been instruments to take the message of hope and salvation to the uttermost parts of the world.

May God give us grace and courage to do the same. Amen and amen.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATION: The Message Bible with its Translator**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1700.

² Matthew 28:19.

³ Acts 1:8.

⁴ Acts 2:9-11.

⁵ Matthew 2:14-16.

⁶ Acts 8:5-13.