

July 9, 2017

TEXT: Acts 8:26–40

TITLE: Do We Understand?

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The beginning of the church's proclamation and the dissemination of the Good News of Jesus Christ began at the Pentecostal epicenter in Jerusalem and it spread to all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth, according to the Book of Acts. In the last recorded words in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' commissioned his disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations." It was never Jesus' intent for the Good News to remain the sole possession of the chosen people of Israel, but that it would be made known and available to everyone. However, in reality, even some Jews were being excluded from this new Jewish religious experience known as The Way. So, it only made sense that all people of Jewish descent be given the opportunity to unite as one in the family of God, before it was presented to others who were excluded and marginalized.

And so Phillip, one of the seven originally chosen to care for the widows and to distribute goods to the poor, went down to the city of Samaria to proclaim the Messiah to the Samaritans, people of Jewish descent, who were not accepted by the Israelites, as they were considered racially and ethnically impure, marginalization at its best. There's nothing new under the sun, SUN or SON. Today, people are judged, marginalized and excluded based on their race, ethnicity, country of origin, sexuality, gender and gender identity, economic status and yes, even their political belief.

Travel bans are in being proposed to exclude people from Muslim countries from entering the US in order to keep us safe; however, we stand a better chance of being killed, hurt or maimed by a disgruntled or unstable country person. People are not welcomed into churches, communities, or positions based on their sexuality or gender identity. And people who have the least continue to descend further into poverty, while the 1 percent with 90 percent of the wealth in the world are getting richer by the day. And in many places of worship, the congregants look the same, are fairly homogenous in terms of their social status and they are okay with that—the gospel of inclusion of only those who are just like me is the good news of the day. That's not the gospel Phillip and the others were preaching.

Sadly, exclusion and marginalization seem to be humanities way of dealing with the unknown. Those who the majority group deems as different are pushed to the side, not included in the mainstream, as if doing so would diminish their standing or their access. But God is no respecter of person; in Christ there is no Greek or Jew, no male or female, no black, brown, white or any other designation. In the kingdom of God there is room for everyone, regardless.

The spirit of God was doing a new thing and making room for all of God's people. After Phillip's evangelistic experience in Samaria, the angel of the Lord commanded him to go South in the heat of the day, and take the wilderness road from Jerusalem to Gaza.

Wilderness roads are emblematic in scripture—the Israelites spent nearly 40 years in the wilderness before coming out; John the Baptist resided in the wilderness calling people to repentance, Jesus was driven into the wilderness before he began his earthly ministry; it was on a wilderness road that Saul was blinded by the light and he became a follower of Jesus Christ.

Many of us have had wilderness experiences; many have been called into deserted and desolate places. It's often in those places where we can hear from God, God has our undivided attention and we are no longer distracted by the cares, worries, and enticements. One commentator states:

“Phillip’s (His) destination is a desert road, that place that is no place. It is the in-between space that constitutes diaspora...Roads are about survival, moving from one place to the next and searching for life possibilities or at least running from the forces of death. Luke has already shown us God in Jesus who was comfortable with roads....this is a God who wills to be found on the road in order to transform it, collapsing near and far, domestic and foreign onto the body of the Son. There on the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza, from the near and known to the distant and unknown, Phillip will again witness a God whose love expands over every road and transgresses every bordered identity. The Spirit is Lord of the road.” (Willie James Jennings, *Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible – Acts*, pg.82)

As I think about the mission trip I am about to embark upon, traveling to a continent that was the home of my ancestors, I am prayerfully considering what I will learn about myself and most especially about God while on the road. Will I experience God in a different way; will I understand that the advantages and creature comforts I have are distractions that keep me from really seeking God? Will I realize that being blessed by God is not a matter of the house I live in, the car I drive, overabundance of clothing and things I possess, but that God's blessings transcend the material and are truly all about the spiritual. Will I be able to see the spirit of the Living God embodied in the people I meet, in the worship I experience, in the breaking of bread with brothers and sisters who reside in the one of the poorest countries in the world, but who have the joy of the Lord in their hearts? Will I see God at work in them and in me; will I be moved to chase after them, in order to see God in a different way?

On a desert road in the heat of the day, Phillip is instructed by the Spirit to chase after this Ethiopian man who is returning from worship, riding in a chariot, reading aloud from a scroll from the Prophet Isaiah. This man, a eunuch was over the entire treasury of an Ethiopian Queen. This man of color, although physically impaired, from all indications was educated, wealthy, trustworthy and spiritually curious. In spite of all his attributes, more than likely this man was not allowed to enter into the place of worship because of his physicality; the color of his skin was probably less of an impediment.

According to the law in Deuteronomy, physical eunuchs were excluded from the people of God. However, the Prophet Isaiah (56) points to a time when eunuchs and foreigners

will be included, and God's house will be a house of prayer for all people." And yet, this man, either of Jewish descent or a seeker, is returning from worship, reading the word of God—he is seeking after God and God sends Phillip to seek after him.

God seeks after those who diligently seek after God; and the word of God assures us that it is God's desire that none be lost; so we can assume that God seeks after the lost, the least and the left-behind. It is incumbent on each of us to do the same. However, we are often reluctant to engage others whom we deem as different from ourselves. Part of the problem is we fail to see them as equals, rather than seeing the Spirit of God that rests, rules and abides within them; we get tripped up on the physical, social and economic differences. That's why it's easy to walk past someone who is obviously in need on the street; it's easy to turn a deaf ear to the one crying out for help; it's easy to treat a stranger with indifference. Do we understand that those are the very people we are commanded to chase after, for as much as we have done it to the least of these, we have done it unto Jesus Christ.

Phillip runs alongside the chariot the Ethiopian is riding in, catches up and queries: "Do you understand what you are reading?" to which the man replies: "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

We are called to guide, to be examples, to love and to feed all of those who are seeking to understand what it means to be in relationship with Jesus Christ. To be in relationship with God dictates that we be in relationship with one another, willing and open to respond to the leading of God's Spirit, even and especially when the Spirit give us imprecise direction. Now let us be warned, our obedience when God's instruction and direction are imprecise will lead us down some dark road, but God will be our protector. Obedience will take us to some sorrowful places, but God will restore the joy of God's salvation. Obedience will result in finding ourselves in strange and new lands, but God is the creator and sustainer of all the earth. Obedience will result in us dying to self through the sacrament of Baptism and rising out of the waters as new people, cleansed, and renewed by the gracious spirit of God.

Brothers and sisters, God has chased after each and every one of us in our brokenness, and is healing us and making us whole and now commands us to LIVE the Gospel good news; to break down barriers and walls that separate, to stand up for righteousness and justice, to be instruments of peace and reconciliation and to see others as our equals, siblings in Christ and to accept one another just as we are, perfect in the sight of God. Receive and understand that! Amen.