

Psalm 22: 25-31
Acts 8:26-40

“Pushing the Boundaries”

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A congregation was struggling. They had been in a slow, steady decline for a number of years. They were stuck, like many urban churches, with a building that was too big and a congregation with resources that were too small to meet the obligations imposed by just the UPKEEP of the facilities. “The only hope for us is to get more members” the leaders agreed. So they began to plan for a vigorous plan of evangelism.

“Without some new members, we won’t survive another 10 years,” they explained to the remaining members. “If we don’t have a large influx of people joining with us we won’t be able to keep a roof over our heads.” “It would be horrible if we had to sell this property; why some developer might turn it into a restaurant or an art museum.” “That’s what happened to my sister’s church out in California. We have to protect these cherished buildings!”

So the church hired a consultant in evangelism. Goals were set. A series of classes were held to teach members how to become evangelists. Then they fanned out into the surrounding neighborhood, knocking on doors and handing out pamphlets. . . .

Frankly, all the efforts, though well-intended, yielded paltry results. . . . It is a rather typical story of churches who, out of a sense of panic, and who find themselves in “survival mode,” attempt to finally ‘get into evangelism.’

But today in the book of Acts we heard another evangelistic account that tells us another story about how to “grow a church.” At first glance, today’s lesson from the Acts of Apostles seems to be a story about evangelism. Someone – an Ethiopian –is being evangelized. But when we listen to this account of the conversion of the Ethiopian, the story becomes a kind of judgment on the ways we THINK we OUGHT to evangelize.

For one thing, please notice that this account of Philip going out into the desert to evangelize is in no way initiated by Philip. This was not Philip’s idea, nor his intention. Philip is actually hiding out in the region of Samaria during a persecution of the church back in Galilee, and around Jerusalem. He did not go out into the desert to “win people for Christ.” He went out there to keep his head down when the Jewish authorities, with the assistance of the Roman troops were attempting to destroy the beginnings of the Christian church.

While in Samaria – a place where Jews would normally not dare to venture – Philip receives a strange order through an angel: Go out to the middle of the desert at noon, the hottest part of the day in that desolate area. (Perhaps it should be pointed out that in the Acts of Apostles, angels only appear when God wants to do something so strange – so against our natural inclinations – that God must send a heavenly messenger to order someone to do it! That apparently is the case here, when the angel confronts Philip.)

So Philip does what he is told, even if he is not quite sure why he is doing it. He does go out into the desert and there he meets the Ethiopian, a man from the farthest reaches of the known world. Ethiopia, of course is in northern Africa, yet farther south than Egypt; and it is more than likely this traveler being Ethiopian would be noticed because of his ebony skin – he was likely a black man.

The plot thickens when the book of Acts tells us the Ethiopian was a eunuch, and a court official of Candace, the queen of Ethiopia – in fact, he was the court treasurer. Now, things are getting interesting This Ethiopian could not be a part of Judaism because of his ethnic background. Plus, he was a eunuch – an anathema to a Jew.

So the man Philip meets on the road to Gaza is a representative for a number of marginalized and excluded persons. That means the account more than hints that it is God's will that foreigners as well as eunuchs – people who were considered "unclean" - are to be welcomed in the house of the Lord.

Still, the Ethiopian must have been a man who was respected and trusted, and his high position was reflected in the fact that he was riding in a chariot – the limo of that day. He was on his way home FROM Jerusalem, says the text. But his GPS must have been broken, or Siri must have misunderstood him, because if he is in Samaria he is heading NORTH from Jerusalem instead of SOUTH toward Ethiopia. Or maybe he was just as distracted as someone 'texting' would be, because the scripture says he was seated in the chariot READING from the prophet Isaiah. Then again, his chariot may have been driven by a chauffeur.

Strangely – or is it providentially – the Ethiopian has with him in his chariot a scroll from the prophet Isaiah. Was the scroll merely a souvenir from Jerusalem, or was he truly "a seeker"? It must have been the latter, because he was trying to read the scroll – a difficult task for someone who likely had never seen Hebrew before, a language that is read right to left. He is able to decipher something about a "suffering servant", but cannot make anything else out of what he is reading – it's all a mystery to him.

And this is where Philip comes in. . . . The Ethiopian sees Philip out in the desert and asks him to read and interpret the meaning of the scroll. Philip informs the Ethiopian that these words from Isaiah surely refer to Jesus. He suffered as a servant for us, and yet now, in his resurrection, has been vindicated by God. The Ethiopian asks Philip, “Well, what is there to prevent me from becoming a part of this movement called ‘the people of the way’ I am hearing about?” Philip hesitates; after all, this man is from Ethiopia, a place far, far away. He has responded well to Philip’s interpretation, sure - but at this point this visitor doesn’t know much about Christ.

I expect that Philip replies rather sheepishly, “Well, we have this thing called baptism.” “It is a requirement for membership.” “But unfortunately we must have water in order to have a baptism and we are standing out here in the middle of the desert at noon. Oops – no water! Suddenly the Ethiopian points out a spring of water bubbling up right here in the middle of the desert. Philip baptizes him and the kingdom of God expands – it expands out into this wasteland in Samaria, and then presumably all the way to Ethiopia.

Let’s remember, the Acts of Apostles is clear that none of this was Philip’s idea. This strange evangelistic encounter was not the result of church programming and planning, nor the result of hiring a consultant in evangelism. All of this happened at the instigation of the Holy Spirit. So Philip is obedient to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. He does what he is told, even though it all must have seemed odd to him; in fact, it challenges all of his presuppositions and ‘flies in the face’ of all that he has been taught as a faithful Jew. Yet, he not only witnesses to the “good news about Jesus” (v.5) by what he says, but also witnesses by his gracious actions toward this earnest inquirer – he baptizes him.

In these Sundays of Eastertide, we have noted that the risen Christ returned to his disciples and revealed himself to them. They did not come to the risen Christ; the risen Christ came to them. All of these appearances to the disciples were at the initiative of the risen Christ. So it is that I have come to realize that this is probably why the lectionary has us read this text from the Acts of Apostles this Sunday. It reminds us that the initiative for sharing the scriptures and the faith is brought to us by the Holy Spirit.

The risen Christ continues to be on the move – leaving from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and now in confronting the Ethiopian – and it goes on all the way to the ends of the earth. We were promised in the first chapter of Acts that this would occur: Jesus clearly says, “But you will receive the power when the

Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8).

In this account of Philip and the Ethiopian, that promise is clearly fulfilled. The expanse of the reign of God has broken now even beyond the bounds of the disciples. And the Ethiopian has been brought into the fellowship of the church. All of this is the work of the prodding, pushing and pulling Holy Spirit.

Let’s think about this: Philip has fled Jerusalem during the great persecution that arose after the death of Stephen. Philip fled out to Samaria. No doubt Philip likely would have rather stayed in Jerusalem, the capital city – the place where important events in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus had occurred.

Yet Philip soon discovered that the risen Christ was at work far beyond the bounds of Jerusalem. Sometimes that is what we too discover in our efforts to reach out in mission and ministry. We are surprised to find that in the moving away from the church – this building – this center of safety – we are actually moving closer to where Christ is really active. So it seems like the risen Christ is always and forever “pushing the boundaries.”

Our church today is being pushed, prodded and sometimes pulled by the Holy Spirit to join the risen Christ with his work in the world. Will we, like Philip, be obedient and go where we are being led? It is so easy for the church to become misled into thinking that the purpose of the church is the church and our buildings. It is embarrassingly easy for us to limit the boundaries of God’s reign to the boundaries of our fellowship. Most of us know one another by face, if not by name, and we are comfortable with ourselves here. So can we be open to the leadings of the Holy Spirit pushing us out beyond our comfort zones?

A recent book on giving patterns of American Christians and their churches, entitled, *Passing the Plate*, reports that our churches, over the last couple of decades, are keeping more of their financial resources within the congregation. They are spending more of the money they receive on themselves: They are maintaining their own ministries; sending less and less to needs beyond their own doors. And they are spending more on maintaining their facilities.

The study shows not only that American Christians are giving a lower percentage of their income to the church, keeping their resources to themselves, but that their churches are basically doing the same thing. How does that compute in the face of the risen Christ’s call to push our boundaries?

Sure, we might be able to hunker down here – just us and Christ, our best friends along with Jesus – were it not for the prodding, pushing and pulling Spirit that wants to take us to places we would not have gone without the Spirit’s

initiative. Perhaps you noticed, in the accounts we have read and shared in the past few Sundays that the risen Christ is always in motion, moving quickly from one place to the next. Surely this implies that if we are going to worship the risen Christ, then we must be willing to move where Christ is in action. Perhaps this constant movement of the risen Christ accounts for why Philip, once he has baptized the Ethiopian, is quickly snatched away and taken someplace else. There is something about the risen Christ that is always moving, and thus moving us to the margins.

No doubt Philip was surprised that even out in the middle of the desert, even talking to a man from a faraway place – a man who wasn't even Jewish - the Holy Spirit was nevertheless active. Could this account of Philip and the Ethiopian be the account of what constitutes true evangelism, and mission, and worship? Maybe one point of the account is that after Jesus Christ has been raised, we are no longer permitted to differentiate between when and to whom we tell the story of Christ – to whom and where we enact the ministry of Christ – and when and where, and with whom we worship Christ.

For the Holy Spirit not only gives birth to the church, but also extends the reach of the church by sending the church to places we would not go without the Spirit's plodding. The Holy Spirit is the power of God to expand the embrace of God to every corner of the world. That cannot be accomplished if the church is merely buildings. It can only be accomplished if the church truly is the people of God. And if WE are ready and willing to be engaged in "pushing the boundaries." Amen.