

The Story of Phillip the Evangelist
 (A First-Person Sermon)
 Acts 8:26-40 (TEV)
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 Oakland Avenue PCUSA
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Acts 8:26-40 (TEV)

26 An angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get ready and go south to the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This road is not used nowadays.)

27/28 So Philip got ready and went. Now an Ethiopian eunuch, who was an important official in charge of the treasury of the queen of Ethiopia, was on his way home. He had been to Jerusalem to worship God and was going back home in his carriage. As he rode along, he was reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

29 The Holy Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to that carriage and stay close to it."

30 Philip ran over and heard him reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah. He asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

31 The official replied, "How can I understand unless someone explains it to me?" And he invited Philip to climb up and sit in the carriage with him.

32 The passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: "*He was like a sheep that is taken to be slaughtered, like a lamb that makes no sound when its wool is cut off. He did not say a word.*"

33 *He was humiliated, and justice was denied him. No one will be able to tell about his descendants, because his life on earth has come to an end.*"

34 The official asked Philip, "Tell me, of whom is the prophet saying this? Of himself or of someone else?"

35 Then Philip began to speak; starting from this passage of scripture, he told him the Good News about Jesus.

36 As they traveled down the road, they came to a place where there was some water, and the official said, "Here is some water. What is to keep me from being baptized?"

38 The official ordered the carriage to stop, and both Philip and the official went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord took Philip away. The official did not see him again, but continued on his way, full of joy.

40 Philip found himself in Ashdod; he went on to Caesarea, and on the way he preached the Good News in every town.

My name is Philip, and I have returned from the past to tell you my story with the hope that you may be drawn closer to the living God. I know that the Bible's introduction of me to you does not come until my election as one of the first deacons in

the early church, so I will not bother you with any extra information earlier than that time in my life. Just let me say that I was greatly honored by being chosen to be a deacon, and those of you who are being asked by your Congregational Officer Nominating Committee to consider serving your church as a deacon or an elder or a trustee will know exactly what I mean.

I also know that you have a tendency to confuse me with the man named Philip who was one of the disciples of Jesus. I WAS NOT THAT PHILIP! So, perhaps it would be helpful to you if you and I would follow the lead of the early church historians in referring to the disciple of Jesus as **“Philip the Apostle”** and in referring to me as **“Philip the Evangelist.”**

Now, you must understand that it is very difficult for a person such as I am to tell you my story without sounding as if I am bragging, and I apologize in advance if that is the way that my story comes across to you.

One of the things that you will have to accept about me is that I was one of the most REVOLUTIONARY followers of Jesus in the early church. I am aware that when some of you hear the word “revolutionary” that you immediately think of terrorists, but that is not exactly what I mean. When I use the term “revolutionary” I use it in a good sense as you might use it in thinking about something new and exciting and different.

THE FIRST WAY THAT I WAS REVOLUTIONARY was not really myself but involved my daughters. The revolutionary part of it was that when my four daughters became grown, they followed in my religious footsteps and they all became preachers! Now because you live in the United States in the 21st century when feminism plays such an important role, and because you are Presbyterian Christians and your denomination

ordains women just as it does men, you may not think that my four daughters being preachers is very revolutionary. However, all you have to do is pay attention to the news reports on your television sets that come out of the Middle East, and you will get a pretty clear picture of the secondary role of women in that part of the world. I assure you that in the male domination of the first century in the middle eastern culture, women being preachers was unheard of! It was revolutionary!

THE SECOND WAY THAT I WAS REVOLUTIONARY was involved in my breaking a religious and cultural and societal barrier that had caused anger and hostility for literally hundreds of years. I am talking about the wall of distrust that had existed for years between the Jews and the Samaritans. No doubt some of you remember that centuries before Jesus, when Assyria defeated the nation Israel, the Assyrians moved the upper classes of Jews to other areas of their kingdom and brought in foreign peoples to live in Israel. That was the way they kept down revolt! These foreign people remained in the land for years, and they began to lay claim to the heritage of the Jews. You get a picture of the continuing hostility between the peoples in the story that Jesus told which you now call “The Parable of the Good Samaritan.”

The fact that I went into the area of Samaria preaching the Gospel was very revolutionary. And I must confess that I did not do so on my own, but rather I definitely feel that it was the leading of God’s Holy Spirit that caused me to do it. Perhaps it was in response to the words of Jesus when Jesus told us followers that we would be his witnesses “...in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8)

THE THIRD WAY THAT I WAS REVOLUTIONARY was involved in the story that was read earlier in this service, the story of the Ethiopian. And I am told

that this story is really more revolutionary for you than it was for me simply because you live in the southern part of the United States. The story of the Ethiopian involved the overcoming of the racial barrier between black people and white people. If you want to know the truth of the matter, I thought nothing of it! But, enough about me. Let's get on with why I am here.

The story of the Ethiopian has many interesting parts to it.

Probably the first thing that catches your attention is the word "angel." You do not need to imagine a shining being with feathery wings when you see the word "angel," for the English translation of the Greek word which Luke used is really the word "messenger" or "agent."

The word "angel" is really a word which both the Old Testament and the New Testament used to express the intervention of God in the affairs of human beings. In the Old Testament God sometimes used a plague to intervene in the affairs of human beings, such as in the story of Moses dealing with the Egyptian Pharaoh in the Exodus story. And sometimes God used a person to intervene in the affairs of human beings, even on occasion using a pagan or an unbeliever, such as in the story of God using King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia.

At any rate, I felt the leading of the Spirit of God to head south on the road to Gaza. And it was there that I had the intriguing and delightful experience in the story of the Ethiopian.

THE FACT THAT THE ETHIOPIAN WAS RIDING IN A CHARIOT TOLD ME SOMETHING IMMEDIATELY. It was as if you were going to meet a person at the Charlotte-Douglas Airport and he or she arrived in a private, personal Lear Jet!

You would know that this was not the ordinary, run-of-the-mill, Greyhound-bus-kind-of-person! Most people in my day would have been traveling as I was...walking.

A SECOND VISIBLE DISTINCTION OF THE MAN IN THE CHARIOT WAS THAT HE WAS BLACK. As a matter of fact, he was so black that his skin color had a slight blue tinge to it. And that told me that most probably he was an Ethiopian, the land that your 21st century has come to call the Sudan. It is the country that was just in your newspapers recently concerning all that has gone on in the area of Dar Fur.

Incidentally, one of the things that I have never understood about your country is the distinction that those of you who are white make between a black person who speaks with a distinctive “southern drawl” and a black person who speaks either with a British accent or some other foreign accent. One would assume that you would deal more kindly with one’s fellow-countryman than with a foreigner, but for some reason that I have never understood, the American white person shows more respect to the Ethiopian or the Nigerian Black than to the American Black. Have you ever noticed that? I am told that it has something to do with slavery and guilt and economics. But you would know that better than I.

A THIRD CHARACTERISTIC OF THE BLACK ETHIOPIAN IN THE CHARIOT IS ONE THAT I REALLY HATE TO MENTION, BUT SINCE YOU PRESBYTERIANS HAVE BEEN TALKING SO MUCH LATELY ABOUT HUMAN SEXUALITY, I WILL DO SO. The Ethiopian was a eunuch. In other words, he had been castrated so that he was no longer able to reproduce himself through offspring. In your 21st century medical terminology, you would call it a rather crude type of vasectomy.

Now, the reason that this is told you in today's passage and the reason that we need to understand it is this: **Under Old Testament laws, persons with physical deformities were definitely discriminated against and were "second class citizens."**

Under New Testament grace, on the other hand, in Jesus Christ we are all acceptable on an even basis as forgiven sinners.

Just listen to the Old Testament book of Leviticus:

And the Lord God said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'None of your descendants throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of God.' For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease of scabs or crushed testicles; no man of the descendants of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the Lord's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God." [Leviticus 21:16-21; RSV]

Thank God that the **Old Testament Law** has been overcome by **New Testament grace.**

Otherwise, WHO WOULD PREACH FROM THIS PULPIT?!!! Which is another way of saying that God does not judge us or rate us by our physical appearances, by our outsides, but rather **in Jesus Christ we come to realize that it is what is in our hearts that matters.** And that is another sermon all by itself!

***A FOURTH CHARACTERISTIC OF THE BLACK ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH
IN THE CHARIOT WAS THAT HE WAS A VERY HIGH-RANKING
GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL.***

He was the treasurer to the Queen,
the "Joseph" to the Pharaoh of Egypt,
the Prime Minister of Great Britain,
the Secretary of State to the President of the United States.

Through this man's hands traveled the wealth of a great African nation, and he was evidently competent and trusted and reliable. Is there any person to whom you would feel comfortable in saying:

“Take all of my money and assets, and
do with them as you think best,
because I trust you” ?

The treasurer to the Queen of Ethiopia was such a person of trust.

PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTIC OF THE BLACK ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH IN THE CHARIOT WAS THAT HE WAS WHAT WAS KNOWN AS A “GOD-FEARER.” A “God-Fearer” was a person who, while not accepting fully all of the laws of Judaism (including the rite of circumcision), at least attended the Jewish synagogue and at least read the Jewish Scriptures in awe and respect of the Jewish God, YAHWEH.

So, there you have it: the Ethiopian was a “God-Fearer,” and when I met him, he was reading aloud from the book of Isaiah. Here was a man of importance...
a Black man...
a eunuch...
a high-ranking government official
a “God-Fearer”...

and I, Philip the Evangelist, had been led to him by the Spirit of God.

If there is any one thing that I would have you remember about myself, Philip the Evangelist, perhaps it could be capsuled in one verse of Luke's story in Acts:

“Then Philip opened his mouth, and
beginning with this scripture, he told
him the good news of Jesus.”
(verse 35)

Someone has said that there are just **two ways** to spread anything in which you are interested. **The first** is to live it yourself, and **the other** is to talk about it.

Now, I have been observing the preaching of your interim, bald-headed preacher's interpretation of Holy Scripture for you Sunday after Sunday, and it is obvious that he preaches the former:

that each one of us must live our faith in Jesus Christ day by day in our actions and our attitudes involving ourselves and other people.

The weakness of your interim, bald-headed preacher's interpretation of Holy Scripture Sunday after Sunday is his lack of emphasis upon *the need of Christians to talk about their faith to other people!* **Does your interim, bald-headed preacher ever ask you to talk to people about your faith in God?**

To be sure, one of the things here in your United States in the 1800s that made the great *abolition of slavery* movement spread across your nation was the fact that Abraham Lincoln lived his belief about emancipation. He was possessed by the idea of the freedom and the emancipation of human beings held in slavery.

But Abraham Lincoln not only lived it in his life; he talked about it again and again:

...in the Cooper Union address, in the Lincoln-Douglas debates, in the inaugural addresses, and in speeches before Congress. He talked it everywhere he went...

[The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 9, Nashville, The Abingdon Press, 1954, p. 115]

And so, the idea of the emancipation of the slaves spread in part

by the power of the **example** of men such as Abraham Lincoln

and also by the power of their persuasion by **words**.

Someone has said that there are just **two ways** to spread anything in which you are interested. **The first** is to *live it yourself*, and **the other** is to *talk about it*.

Have YOU ever told anyone about your faith in God?

It is my guess that I am remembered down through church history as Philip the Evangelist, not only to distinguish me from Philip the Apostle, but also because I, Philip the Evangelist, am remembered as one who “...**told him the good news of Jesus.**” (Verse 30)

Have YOU ever told another person about your faith in God?

Have YOU ever invited another person to come to Oakland Avenue PCUSA Church worship?

If you have not done **BOTH** of these, then you are lacking in your discipleship, and this is one lesson that you can learn from the story of Philip the Evangelist.