

“LOVE—TOUGH AND SENSITIVE”

Acts 8:26-40 April 29, 2018

In a recent “Pickles” Sunday cartoon strip, Nelson starts talking to his grandmother while she is watering the flowers. He confesses, “I don’t like school. My teacher is mean.” Grandma replies, “Oh, that’s too bad.” She continues in the next frame, “But you should try to be like this flower, Nelson, and bloom where you are planted.” Moving to the next frame she advises Nelson, “No matter where I put this flower, it blooms, it doesn’t whine and say, ‘Oh, I don’t get enough sun!’ or ‘Poor me, I don’t get enough shade!’ As she’s pointing to the flowers, she adds, “It just keeps on doing its best, no matter what.” In the next frame Nelson replies, “This flower is plastic.” Grandma answers, “Yes, there are many lessons to be learned from Mother Nature.”

Now I’m not even going to try to interpret what that might mean but feel free to put your own interpretation on it !?!?!?

Recently Discipleship Ministries adopted a new campaign slogan, “See All the People.” There are many things to appreciate about this campaign: The catchiness of this phrase, drawn from a simple children’s rhyme, the call upon disciples in the United Methodist Church to see those in need, those who might look different, those whom some have rejected. The encouragement to move our ministries outside the walls of our churches and into the places in our communities where people gather.

The campaign is about doing more than seeing all the people. It’s about calling upon disciples, like Philip, to jump into the heart of whatever situation we find people. Jump in there, even if it is messy. Jump in there, even if it is dangerous. Jump in there, even if it is costly to us. Jump in there, even if

some might judge it to be irreverent or unholy. Get in there with the lost, the lonely, the forgotten people of the world. Go physically into the places and spaces people who don't yet know the saving love of Christ inhabit and share the good news!

We've heard the story read, but let's take a moment to review so that, as we begin this sermon series titled, "By the Power of the Holy Spirit," we are clear on the issues at stake for Philip. (Note that this is not Philip, the Apostle. This is Philip the Evangelist, who was chosen along with Stephen and the rest of the "seven" to care for the poor in Jerusalem [see Acts 6].

An angel of the Lord directs Philip to leave Jerusalem and go to Gaza. Yes, THAT Gaza, which is located in the part of the Palestinian Territories known today as the Gaza Strip. So Philip headed out. On the road to Gaza he came upon an Ethiopian eunuch who happened to be the treasurer of the queen's court who was returning from a visit to the temple in Jerusalem. This eunuch is Jewish, a product of the strong Jewish community in his home country of Ethiopia (a faith community that continues to thrive to this day). This is why he is reading the book of Isaiah.

Now this in itself is worth pondering. He is clearly an educated man. Not only is he in charge of the entire treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, but he is literate and he possesses a personal copy of the Hebrew scriptures. But as a eunuch, this would have been a person who was ritually unclean and therefore prohibited from entering the Temple. Another commentary by Jackson Henry noted that the eunuch must have been a man of great faith, to have gone all this way to visit the temple where he could not go in. Not one would have talked to him there because he was unclean.

This is the scenario, then, in which Philip, at the Spirit's prompting, stops his journey in order to ask if the eunuch understood what he was reading in the book of Isaiah, and the eunuch invited him to climb into the chariot to join him in an impromptu Bible study.

Last Sunday I shared Rev. Dawn Chessser's story about her mother's declining health and loss of names with her Alzheimer's. Again this Sunday I will continue with her story, this time about her son and her mother. "Recently my twenty-two-year-old son has been wrestling with who he is and what he believes. As my son, he grew up in the church, was shaped by the teachings of Jesus Christ, and attended church every Sunday. But like so many other young people, once he left home he stopped going to church. Often when he comes to visit me, or when I go to visit him, he asks me hard questions about my faith.

As I have been dealing with my mother's declining health and the crisis that it has brought in our family, both of my sons have been calling me to offer their support. The status of my parents has caused my younger son to ponder anew the aging process of his own parents, and his own eventual death.

The first week I was here he asked me to watch a movie that featured the Jewish tradition as central to the characters' lives and the plot of the story. As I watched it, he wanted to talk about Judaism and how it was different from Christianity. Then after reading a preview of my preaching notes for Easter and the Easter season, he asked me why Christians believed that Jesus was God, when other religious traditions don't consider their primary teachers to be God incarnate. Yesterday he called me to ask me what I believed about salvation.

Rev. Chessser writes: I am glad my son asks me these hard questions. I told him I was happy to talk about these things with him, but that I also thought it

would be helpful for him to find a local church where he could explore his questions with others who are seeking to grow in their faith and understanding. Even as I suggested that. I wondered if he would be able to find a community in which his hard questions would be not just welcomed, but engaged, and in which no one would try to spoon-feed him answers or try to lead him to Christ in a way that does not respect his journey so far or the beliefs with which he is wrestling.

At the opposite end of my youngest son for me right now in terms of difficult conversations stand my mom and dad. Both are facing the hard realities of their changing situation and declining health. Mom was recently hospitalized with congestive heart failure. She spent nine days in the hospital and almost three weeks in a rehabilitation facility. Because she also suffers from moderate stage Alzheimer's disease, and has little command of her working memory,, she was constantly confused about where she was, what had happened and who everyone around her was (including her family at times). She was, in a word, scared. She asked multiple times every day if she was dying. My father and brother and I patiently explained that she was sick, but she was getting better and was not going to die. And then we'd add, "Well, not today we don't think. I mean, we are all going to die."

On several occasions, during periods of more lucidity, she and I had longer conversations about dying. I reminded her of her faith and the things she's said to me in the past about her beliefs. I shared my own beliefs about death and dying. But none of this alleviated her fears. And the truth is, I'm scared too. I don't have any answers. I have hopes. I have the promises of Jesus. I have faith that the Holy Spirit connects us in mysterious ways, and that this connection continues into the life that is to come.

Is it okay for pastors to say that they don't have all the answers? Is it perhaps more helpful to just engage in the questions people have right where they are? Can we try to be open and listen as people reach to find their own answers? I believe that answer is yes. I don't have all the answers, just as you don't, but we are on the journey together to learn and grow as mature Christians. My prayer is that we learn from each other and our faith walk is blessed as we search & seek the truths together. As a pastor I learn so much from reading, studying and preparing my messages and for Sunday mornings' Bible Study. That still doesn't mean I have all the answers or that you will agree with my interpretations. That's okay because sometimes we have to agree to disagree. With God's help we seek His answers in His Holy Word and are blessed because of it!

The fact that we have Philip reaching out to respond to the eunuch, who is an unclean man, is radical. And the fact that Philip not only talks to him, but climbs into the chariot with him, is an act of radical discipleship. He risks his own ritual cleanliness by putting himself in close proximity to the eunuch. It is through this radical outreach with no concern for what it might cost him that the eunuch is transformed.

Being available for impromptu Bible studies is a witness to the faith. Being willing to climb into the chariot with the "unclean," the confused, the different, the lost, the hurt, the doubters, the cast-off, the angry, the needy, the scared, the dying, and indeed, any person who looks or feels or believes or acts differently from the way we do is a very real and present need in our communities. And it is a witness to the faith.

The Spirit leads Philip to assume the posture of Jesus. He gets into the chariot with the guy. He sees him. He touches him. He engages the questions

he has about the scriptures. He doesn't reject him, as all the others have done, probably all his life. He accepts him, listens to him, and offers himself in loving responses without a specific purpose or agenda, other than to share his thoughts and his personal experience. As Philip and the eunuch study the passage together, Philip is able to open the scriptures to the eunuch in a new way, through the lens of his own faith experience through Jesus Christ.

We too have to be willing to join the Spirit in its work, going where it leads us and listening deeply with not our own ears, but Christ's. The sign of God is when we are led where we did not plan to go. Bold discipleship means putting ourselves at the disposal of the Holy Spirit for as long as we are needed, only to be snatched away to another part of our journey when this same Spirit leads us to serve somewhere else.

Have you noticed the simplicity of the witness of Philip that led to the conversion of the eunuch? He told him "the good news about Jesus." The pattern of directness is well established. Andrew simply said to Peter, "We have found the Messiah." Philip said to Nathanael, "Come and see." Mary announced to the disciples, "He is risen." A bit later Paul will say to the jailor in Philippi, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." Is it possible that we see so few conversions because we make the message too complicated? (1 John 4:7-21)

Next to John 3:16, the phrase "God is love" may be the most commonly-known and widely used reference from the New Testament. Everyone-or nearly so-believes that God is love. It sounds like a terrible heresy to suggest otherwise. Yet, we must be quick to say that this is also the most misused phrase in the New Testament. In the popular mind, God's love is mushy and soft; it allows anything and looks the other way when we might be embarrassed to have God know what

we're up to. But this is not the kind of love of which John writes. This is costly love: "God sent his only Son...to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." As Bultmann once said, love is not a sentiment; it is an event.

The writings of the New Testament stress for the readers that those who live in this costly love will show it by the way they treat others. Just as it was a sacrifice for God to give love, so it will be for those who claim to be Christian. John may have been writing in part to counteract the influence of the Gnostics who focused on what it means to "know." For the Gnostics, "knowing" was an intellectual pursuit, a philosophical ideal. Not for John. To love is to busy oneself with the hurts and sorrows and needs of others. Anything less is a sham. And if we realize how much God loves us and how dearly it cost God to make that love visible in the world, we will not try to excuse ourselves from caring for others.

Those who believe that love by deed is sufficient need to hear "God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God." Deed and word are inseparably linked. We can easily convince ourselves that if we just do works of love it will become apparent that we are Christian. John would tell us differently. Words, as we have seen in the reading from Acts, have power. So as we do our deeds of love we should be sure that the reason we do them is clear. And that can only be certain if we speak of the faith that is centered in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

God's love is not saccharin or cheap. The cross is the heart of it all. There the love of God, constant and sure, is seen most clearly. The kind of love God expects to see in us is tough. As with divine love, it is not cheap and mushy. "It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends" (I Cor. 13:7-8) Love is also expansive. It doesn't draw unnecessary

limitations, excluding people from the church. Regardless of their background or situation in life, when they have professed faith in Jesus Christ they become part of the family.

This brings us back to one of the most delicious moments in all of the New Testament when the Ethiopian eunuch asks exactly the right question. Too familiar with restraints, barred from vocations of family and faith, reduced to the role of governmental cipher, he can't help but put his request in the negative, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" What a setup for, by and in the Risen Christ. "Nothing," Philip says, "nothing at all." My God, what a morning!