

An Occurrence on a Wilderness Road

Caldwell Presbyterian Church

May 6, 2012

Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Acts 8:26-40

Let's begin this morning with a quick flashback to our childhoods. When you were a kid and you had lost something, what was the first thing your parents told you to do?

"Retrace your steps." Right?

And, if you are anything like me, you lose things at this stage in life as or more often than you did as a kid. Let me rephrase that: We temporarily mis-locate things. Ok, I admit that I made that word up. But it fits, doesn't it? I don't know which is worse. To lose something outright, which is what we did as kids, sometimes taking the punishment for it. Or to know that – whatever the object is - it's really not lost. We know it's somewhere, safe and sound. We just can't recall where.

Perhaps our growing propensity to temporarily mis-locate things is because we are so darn busy all the time. We're on the move and we're moving fast. In a sense, that can be said of the apostles in the book of Acts in the New Testament. They, too, were on the move.

We read from the book of Acts in these weeks of Eastertide to remember how the church began to spread after Christ's death and resurrection. Jesus told the apostles to go out into the world, teach, baptize and make disciples of all nations. So, they got busy, beginning close to home and then spreading out, farther and farther from their home turf.

These stories in Acts provide some of the most inspiring reminders that, in Christ, God's church was made open to all. Two weeks ago, we considered the story of how the Apostle Peter heard God's call to put away old, restrictive Hebrew norms and traditions. Peter came around to God's new instructions. He immediately made new Gentile friends in the faith and the church spread through them.

Today in the eighth chapter of Acts we are given another story of another early church leader, Philip. With God's guidance, he reaches out to a very unlikely convert, a man

who was “different” in many ways ... but whose thirst for faith understanding could not be quenched.

This story resonates with our church and our times in many ways. Let me highlight three truths that can shape our efforts to reach others in faith in the here and now.

* * *

The first truth of this story gets back to that timeless practice of retracing our steps and how, by doubling back, we can sometimes find important things – or even people – that we might have overlooked or temporarily lost.

When we think of the book of Acts, the first two names that come to mind are probably Peter and Paul. But they are far from alone in pushing the good news out into the world. The Apostle Phillip led one of the most important early “mission trips” stretching beyond Jerusalem in the days following the martyrdom of the apostle Stephen.

Philip is known for evangelizing in Samaria to the north of Jerusalem. But, first, God sent him the opposite way. As Acts tells it, an angel directed Philip to double back. “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”

There, Philip encounters eunuch, a male who had voluntarily been castrated to become a trusted official and aide to the queen of his native country of Ethiopia. This particular eunuch had done well, advancing to become treasurer over the queen’s entire estate. Philip found him on what scripture says was a “wilderness road.” He was on his journey home after visiting Jerusalem to worship. As he rode along in his chariot, he was reading aloud from the prophecy of Isaiah, the same text we heard Linda read earlier. In those verses, Isaiah wrote:

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken from the earth.

In these Eastertide days, we recognize the one Isaiah wrote about, don’t we ... the lamb of peace, led to his death ... shown humiliation, denied of justice, at least earthly justice, his life on earth taken from him even as he gave himself up? It is the Christ, is it not?

As Philip heard the eunuch reading, he asked: “Do you understand what Isaiah means?”

“No,” the eunuch replied, “I need someone to guide me.”

And so the two studied the word together as the eunuch’s chariot traveled down that bumpy wilderness road. They came to a well. The eunuch asked if there was any reason he could not be baptized. Philip baptized him. The two parted ways and the Ethiopian eunuch spread the gospel to the south as Philip headed back to the north and eventually to Samaria.

This story begs the question: What happens when we, as the church, double back? What happens when we retrace our steps? What happens when we look intentionally for something we might have overlooked along our way?

We might be doubling back in the sense that we are rethinking the meaning of scripture. Or, rather than going abroad, far and wide, we might be retracing our steps closer to home to find new friends in faith that are right down the road. Or, we as the church at large can and should double back for those the church may have lost thought is harsh and un-loving views on issues such as race, class or sexuality.

What happens when we fail to double back like that? We can miss opportunities to grow God’s church that are right under our nose, that’s what. That’s just one message that came out of the recent PCUSA Multicultural Church Conference. As I wrote on my blog, Jesus said “Go out into the nations.” But, as one conference leader said, in today’s highly transient world and today’s pluralistic America, “The nations have come to us.”

One example of that is my new friend, Rev. Dr. David Nzioka. Two generations before David was born, his grandparents in Kenya heard the preaching and teaching of Scottish Presbyterians, missionaries to that country. Today, David gives thanks for the church that evangelized his grandparents, his parents and then saw to his theological education and training for ministry.

David now leads a thriving largely African congregation ... but it’s not in Kenya. It’s in Kansas City. The nations, indeed, have come to us and, by one estimate, as many as 1 million new immigrants are within reach of our denomination, if we want to try to reach them. Here in Charlotte, we might ask, what nations have arrived on our doorstep? What more can we do to welcome them in through our open doors?

But it's not just a multicultural thing, this business of doubling back and retracing our steps on behalf of the church. Here at Caldwell, so many of our members have, at one time or another, been on their own wilderness road. Cast aside by the church. Alienated by the church. Or simply let down by the church, a church in some other place at some other time. Because of who they are. Because of how they read the Bible. Or maybe because of mistakes they once made.

The story of Philip and the eunuch reminds us that some of the strongest believers can be found out there on the wilderness roads, the kind of roads we might travel when we double back, when we retrace our steps. That is the first truth that we find in this story.

* * *

The second is this: That our faith is always claimed by the written word of God, but our faith is not fully formed until we explore that written word in community.

The eunuch knew he needed Philip to sit beside him in the chariot and unpack Isaiah's prophecy and how it pointed to Christ. We are no different. We need each other to share our journey with and through the written word. We can't discern its full meaning all by ourselves. In fact, the most dangerous kind of faith is the kind that reads the word in isolation, the kind that brings only one perspective or experience to scripture, the kind of faith that has made up its mind about what the gospel means before really unpacking it.

That, friends, is what the community of faith is all about, isn't it? That is why we come here every Sunday. Yes, we love to sing and pray and pass the peace together. But worship is not worship without the word. The word compels and challenges. It convicts and comforts us. It is the light on our path and the wind at our back.

But it is fully those things only when we bring our hearts and our minds to it, when we consider the text in context – its historical and social context then and its proper interpretation now. And it is fully alive only when we read what others say about it and when we experience how others experience it. That is how we grow in faith, not by ourselves. Yes, personal knowledge of scripture is important. But our growth in faith goes so much further when we see and hear the gospel through the eyes and ears of the other – whether that means crossing lines of gender, class, race, ethnicity, age, faith, denomination, sexuality, education, geography or experience.

The Bible is unique in that, as one book, we can read and reread it for all the days of our lives and it still yields new truth and it still speaks a new word into whatever we are facing.

For all these reasons, we as a church are called to avoid taking our study and spiritual formation for granted. This congregation combines almost countless combinations of perspectives and experiences that can illuminate the word of God. We are hip deep in theologically trained members and friends who can bring their learning to bear.

But we should avoid ever thinking that our past Sunday school or other experiences in study and spiritual formation suffice. Scripture never rests on its laurels, nor should we.

Today, just after worship in the Fellowship Hall, you are invited to a forum to discuss what new education and spiritual formation offerings we might undertake. I hope you will come and contribute and then take ownership of whatever new ideas emerge, that we all might be able to explore the gift of faith in community, whether that's in large study groups or small ones, just as with Philip and the eunuch that day in the chariot on the road back to Ethiopia.

* * *

The third and final truth that jumps out of this story is yet another affirmation that God's church is meant to be inclusive rather than exclusive.

The Ethiopian eunuch was probably the last kind of person Philip might have sought to become a believer. Since he had just traveled to Jerusalem to worship, it's clear our Ethiopian friend was a student of Judaism and not of Christ, though he was not Jewish in ethnicity. In fact, he was dark-skinned. He was from a nation that was distanced from the life, travels and influence of Jesus, at least at that point. He was rich and influential, a stark contrast to the social status of the first Christians, who were marginalized at best. In all of these ways, the Ethiopian eunuch was an "insider."

But he was also an "outsider." As a castrated male, his sexual identity set him apart from both women and men, Jews and gentiles. Through he was a student of Judaism; he probably was not allowed to enter the Temple in Jerusalem because he would have been considered unclean. And though he was devoted to reading what we know as the Old Testament, he lacked an understanding of the scripture and therefore the authority that came with knowledge.

As I said, the Ethiopian eunuch was probably the last kind of person Philip might have sought to become a believer. But he was the kind of believer that the church often needs the most. He brought passion and profound curiosity to his faith. As both an "insider" and an "outsider" he brought a fresh perspective to the community of believers. And in his multi-faceted identity – to be sure, a rare mix of ethnic, sexual, professional,

national and socioeconomic markers – his welcome into the church would send a loud and clear signal that all are welcomed into the body of Christ.

Thanks be to God, then, that Philip listened to the angel who told him to double back and go down that wilderness road. Thanks be that Philip listened when the angel told him to approach the stranger in the chariot. Thanks be that the stranger invited Philip to read the word of God with him, rather than reading it in isolation.

Thanks be to God that the eunuch asked if there was anything, anything at all, to prevent his being baptized? Thanks be that Philip joined him into the body of Christ as the kind of believer the church needs, just we will do today as our sacred privilege.

And thanks be that the eunuch then went on his way, rejoicing and spreading the good news of a community of faith that might be known then and now by a simple promise: “God invites. We welcome. All.”

Amen.