

Isaiah 53:1-7

Acts 8:26-40

May 3, 2015

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Late one Saturday night a number of years ago, I was in the waiting area of the emergency room at Duplin General Hospital. A friend and I had taken someone there. We were sitting in the waiting room, along with a number of other people. We noticed one particular woman who seemed especially anxious and upset. Occasionally she would get up and walk around. She came by where we were sitting and asked us, "Are you from around here?" Then she went back to her seat.

Something told me to go over and speak to the woman, who was a total stranger. She told me she and her husband had been out for dinner. They were headed home when he began having chest pains and shortness of breath. They got to the emergency room as quickly as they could and her husband was taken back for treatment. She hadn't heard anything about how he was doing and was very upset.

She and I talked for a few minutes and prayed together. Then the nurse called her to go back to be with her husband. My friend and I spent the next few hours waiting with the person we had taken to the emergency room. I thought about how we had gone to Kenansville with one person, and God had given us the opportunity to help someone else, as well. A few weeks later, I preached at the Hallsville Presbyterian Church for one of their fall revival services. After the service, the woman and her husband came out and spoke to me. He was doing fine. I don't know that I've ever seen either one of them since.

Have you ever had a similar opportunity or experience to share your faith or help someone? Have you ever found yourself in a situation, wondering why you were there or even how you got there, only to be given the chance to speak a word of encouragement or to share your faith or to help someone in a difficult time? Nancy and I had a good friend in seminary who used to tell us about how long it took her to do her grocery shopping. She said total strangers would approach her in the grocery aisle and pour out their troubles to her. She asked us, "Do I have some kind of sign painted on my forehead or pinned to my back that invites people to start talking to me?" Actually, I think she has a gift of compassion that somehow people sense in her — and that God uses her in unexpected situations to help other people.

People don't always think about God leading them for a particular purpose when they say, "I guess I was in the right place at the right time." They might think it's just "luck" or "fate" or "coincidence." Something like, "You know, it was just my good fortune to be there where it happened!" The story about Philip in Acts 8, however, doesn't have anything to do with luck or fate or coincidence or good fortune. It has

everything to do with being led by the Holy Spirit and being open to the opportunities for service and ministry at the Spirit's leading.

When a minister receives a call from a church's Pastor Nominating Committee, she must meet with the Examinations Committee of the presbytery's Committee on Ministry. One of the first things the minister is typically asked in that examination is, "Tell us about your experience of Christian grace, your sense of call to the ministry, and your sense of call to this particular congregation." It's interesting how many people talk about looking back over their lives and recognizing God's presence and God at work all along the way. When I meet with newly elected elders during elder education, I always enjoy listening to the life stories they tell about their own experiences of God's grace and God leading them to the point where they say "Yes" to being an elder for our congregation.

Those experiences illustrate the message of the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch: *God puts us where he can use us and God uses us where we are.* You could look at life as nothing more than a collection of chance happenings or coincidental occurrences, and resign yourself to a life of randomness and uncertainty. But our faith teaches us that we worship and serve the God who is sovereign over all of creation, including our lives. God calls each and every one of us to share our faith and the good news of Jesus Christ. God puts opportunities before us every day. God's Spirit will lead us where God wants us. What we do when we get there is up to us. The question is: Will we recognize that we are in the right place at the right time? You've heard it said that life is what happens when you've made other plans. You could hear that in a very pessimistic way. Or, you can open yourself to the Spirit's guidance, so that your life becomes an instrument of God's grace where God chooses to work.

The full title of "Acts" is "The Book of the Acts of the Apostles." It has been suggested the book could truthfully be called "The Book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit." This story about Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch on the Gaza road is a good example of the Spirit at work in spreading the gospel. William Willimon writes, "the restless Spirit has other things in mind for Philip." And then he asks, "So who is the real protagonist of this story?" Is Philip the main character who makes these things happen? Philip sets out at an angel's prompting and joins up with the Ethiopian's chariot at the Spirit's urging. As Willimon points out, "If the good news is being preached out there, it is the work of God, not of people."¹

However, there is no heavenly voice thundering out of the clouds — no shaking of the chariot — no striking the Ethiopian eunuch to the ground. Instead, the Spirit works through Philip, who runs up to join the chariot and asks a simple question, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The Ethiopian is willing to be led by Philip into a new understanding of God's Word — and Philip is willing to be led by the Spirit as he talks with a stranger on a deserted road.

One of our beloved seminary professors, Wellford Hobbie, came to teach in Richmond after serving for years as a pastor in the church. He talked to us about two different ways of looking at what happens day to day in a minister's work in the church.

Wellford said, “You can try to plan each day and be irritated by what you see as people and situations that *get in the way* of ministry — or you can approach each day, recognizing that the people and situations you will encounter *are* your ministry.”

This story from Acts 8 about Philip and the eunuch reminds us that God calls *all of us* to ministry and gives *all of us* opportunities for service. This Philip who went down the deserted Gaza road is not Philip the disciple. Instead, he is one of the seven “men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” who were chosen to “wait on tables” and take care of the widows in the church, so the apostles could focus their attention on preaching teaching God’s Word.

Philip and other believers had to leave Jerusalem because of the persecution of the church. But guess what? As it turns out, Philip found himself in Samaria, where the hated Samaritans lived. When he proclaimed God’s Word to them, lo and behold, the Samaritans listened eagerly and believed the gospel! Then Philip found himself walking down a desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza, sharing the gospel with a stranger. As soon as he was done there, he found himself sharing the good news to all the towns on the way to Caesarea. God was using Philip where he was and Philip was making the most of being in the right place at the right time.

A speaker at a preaching conference I attended several years ago said, “When people in your town want to know who God is, they don’t read theology . . . they look at your church.” He wasn’t talking about the church *building*. He was talking about the church as the *people*. And in a few minutes, this church will scatter across our community as we go back to our homes. Tomorrow the church will be in school and on the job and involved in community activities.

One year, during the Sprunt Lectures, Dr. John Trotti was the speaker at an alumni luncheon at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond. Dr. Trotti was the seminary librarian at Union for thirty-four years. [Side note for all of you UNC fans: He had a bumper sticker on his car that said “I may live in Virginia but I’m a Tar Heel at heart.”] He talked about his love of the seminary and how much he enjoyed all of the people he had met over the years. But he also made this comment, “[My wife] Joan worked as an office manager in an engineering firm for twenty-three years and over those years told me time and again, ‘You don’t live in the real world.’ The people with whom she worked were nice, but the atmosphere in the working world is harder, more competitive, more judgmental than in this place of grace and love.”

I’m sure you face many situations out there in the “real world” that challenge you and your faith each day. Maybe you wonder from time to time why you are in the situation you are in. Maybe God is giving you an opportunity to make a difference in someone’s life. Philip didn’t stand on a street corner, haranguing people as they walked by. He didn’t get in the Ethiopian’s face and wag his finger in a judgmental way. But he didn’t ignore the stranger on the road, either. Instead, he trusted the Spirit and followed God’s lead. He asked the Ethiopian eunuch, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

The Ethiopian eunuch believed and wanted to be baptized. This royal official represents the far reaches of the world: he is from a different culture; he is a different race; he looks different; his being a eunuch might have made him think he could never belong or be accepted. At home in Ethiopia, he was a man of great authority — the Secretary of the Treasury for the queen. In Jerusalem, he was more on the margins because of the walls that had been thrown up in his way. But he was someone who was searching for God. He had been to Jerusalem to worship. After he heard what Philip had to say about Jesus Christ, the eunuch asked, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” The answer is, “Nothing! Absolutely nothing at all!”

Look at what God is doing in this part of the Book of Acts: the hated Samaritans hear the good news and believe it; a mysterious royal official from a far-off place wants to be baptized; Saul, the zealous persecutor of the church, is claimed by Christ and becomes the apostle to the Gentiles; Cornelius, a Gentile Roman army officer, and his whole household are baptized by Peter, the apostle to the Jews. All of this is done with the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit. All of this is done in the right place at the right time.

Philip shows us that ministry is for *all* believers. The Ethiopian eunuch shows us that the good news is for *all* people. A devotion in *These Days* takes the message of this story and applies it to us in the church today: “The real question for the church is not whether we are going to find more people like ourselves, but whether we actually care about the world for whom Christ died . . . Look around. What crossroad is your church standing at today? Who needs your ministry reaching out to them in some special way?”

We say we believe that God leads us through our lives. Maybe sometimes he leads us down what appears to be a deserted road, where we might least expect to find an opportunity for service or ministry. Wherever we find ourselves, let us hope and pray that we are in the right place at the right time.

Let us pray: Lord, open our eyes to see those who need your love, and give us courage to be faithful to them and to you. Lord, give us courage to take the new roads you are pointing out. Christ, help us go into all parts of our world, our neighborhoods, and share the gospel as you have commanded. Amen.

NOTES

¹William H. Willimon, *Acts* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 72.