

Hillcrest Congregational UCC
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May 10, 2009
Sermon Title: Do You Understand?
Acts 8:26-40, John 15:1-8

Today let us go on a treasure hunt. Lets' look for the jewels in the text from the Acts of the Apostles line by line.

Acts 8:26 "Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road.)" Ah, it seems as though whenever we find angels, or God commanding the people to go, it is always a wilderness road. It feels like that for me too- it never seems to be the road to a tropical island vacation you know?

"So Peter got up and went." Not many people in the Bible refuse the instructions of an angel of God. Peter would have known the story of what happened to Jonah when he rebelled and ran the other direction from Ninevah; first he was thrown overboard, then swallowed by a whale, and finally, spit up right there on the shores of Ninevah.

"Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury." This man is a very important, powerful, and wealthy man, yet notice we do not get to know his name... All we do know is that he is a eunuch and an Ethiopian, a foreigner. It is what he represents that is important.

"He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah." This eunuch is so important, not only does he not walk, he does not even drive. He has a chauffeur! So at his leisure he is reading the prophet Isaiah. Yet, even though he made the long journey from Ethiopia to Jerusalem, he would not be welcome in the temple- he would not be admitted to the inner court to worship God. Only the righteous could approach the place where God resided.

The temple was set up with the inner holy of holies- where God resided. Then there was an area for the ark of the covenant. Outside of this were several layers of courtyard. Only the High Priest could enter the holy of Holies, and only on one day of the year. The courtyard around it admitted only priests.

The next courtyard was for Jewish men who were righteous and physically whole. The Eunuch would not have been allowed there. The next courtyard was for women and foreigners. Perhaps he would have been allowed there because he was a foreigner. But the outer area was for those who were ritually unclean. That would most likely have been him because being a eunuch meant he was physically whole and therefore not clean.

Entering each layer of courtyard required ritual cleansing, offerings and sacrifices. But like the women, there were some things that could not be "cleansed." The women could not be made to be men, the eunuch could not be made physically whole. These were conditions that

according to the tradition kept one constantly and permanently outside the presence of, and limited any possible relationship with, God.

Verse 29 “Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’ 30So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?”” The Spirit makes us bold. You don’t usually just walk up to an important person and start a conversation. You don’t just join a chariot!

31 “He replied, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.” The Eunuch is hungry for knowledge, for companionship, for spiritual healing and sustenance. Being refused entry to the inner courtyard of the temple means he could not listen to the teachers, no matter how many times he made the journey to Jerusalem to worship, he could never get the intellectual and spiritual food he craved.

Verse 32 “Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: ‘Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. 33In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.’ 34The eunuch asked Philip, ‘About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’ 35Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.”

Philip has a perfect set up. The Spirit has worked within the eunuch and Peter does not have to evangelize. He does not have to stand on the street corner with a sign and a bull horn yelling- Jesus died for you, believe in Jesus. Instead, Philip sees that the Spirit has led him to this moment when the eunuch is open to hear the good news. All Philip has to do is tell the eunuch the story about Jesus and all he learned from him.

Verse 36 “As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’ 38He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.” The eunuch responds so positively to the good news that he asks to be baptized immediately. He asks to be forgiven, and washed clean, knowing that this will not change his physical or social condition, but that the good news of Jesus is that God wants just as he is. God wants a relationship with him!

39 “When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.” Apparently the conversion of the eunuch were so astounding, that the disappearance of Philip did not bother him at all.

Now scholars differ, but it is unlikely that Philip was transported away. Perhaps the language used is just to emphasize how amazing the encounter with Philip was-he did not need any additional tutoring, he did not delay Philip in spreading the good news, the Ethiopian just went on his way rejoicing, a transformed man.

40 “But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.” Philip’s life had also been so transformed by the ministry of Jesus, that he could not stop proclaiming the good news. Philip lived in Cesarea. From there to Jerusalem, to Gaza, to Azotus, and finally back to Cesarea would have been a round trip of more than 140 miles on foot!

Jesus called Philip because he recognized him as a branch that would bear much fruit. Jesus used imagery that the people in his audiences could relate to. In our passage today from the Gospel According to John, it is a vineyard. Jesus teaches us that God is the vinegrower and he is the true vine. He exhorts us to abide in him so that we can bear fruit.

He also talks about pruning branches and burning branches. For us this may appear a little threatening. But this is not hell fire and damnation sermon. This is simply a matter of fact that some of you who grow roses may understand.

A good vinegrower takes shears to branches and cuts them back, prunes them so they will grow in healthy way. The good vinegrower also clears out branches that are barren so that those with blossoms can have the light and space to grow, so that they are well connected and draw nourishment from the vine.

We have the instruction on how to stay connected to our vine. It is through love. The author of the first letter of John wrote, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God... God is love... Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another; if we love one another, God lives in us God abides in us, and we abide in God.

All well and good. But then he goes on with the challenging part: Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen; those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

The Ethiopian man sought understanding. His conversion and baptism were only the beginning. Understanding is not only of the mind but of the whole being; the mind, the heart, the soul and the body. If we understand we will be like Jesus, like Jesus and God we will love, and we will live that love, actively. If we are branches connected to the vine, we are parts that are connected to the whole. But to be connected we must love.

This week I invite you to look around and find those who are seeking understanding, those who are not able to come here to worship for what ever reason; those who perhaps feel unwelcome or that they have been prevented in some way from seeking a relationship with God. I invite you to listen for the voice of the angel of the Lord to tell you to get up and go, and the Spirit to tell you to go and join them.

God will open their hearts and you will not need to evangelize. All you will need to do is to love them. And then when they are ready, tell them tell the story about Jesus and all you have learned from him. And then, invite them to come and join us. Do you understand? If we do it right, we don't even need words. Amen.