

Listen to the Spirit —Rev. Denise Stone

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BIG FLATS NY, 6-23-19

Have you ever felt that there was something you were supposed to do? Not in the way that you think you might have forgotten to do something, but in the way that you have a thought or a feeling about something you should do.

It could be that when you heard we were having the rummage sale, you might have thought you should bake something or sign up to volunteer – or maybe to clean out your closet. Similarly, volunteering with something for last week's Father's Day Service and Picnic over at the park.

Or it could have been something more – maybe you heard about Big Brothers/ Big Sisters and you felt a nudge of some kind telling you to sign up. Or maybe as you have heard me encouraging us to invite friends and family to church, and you immediately thought of someone to invite.

All of these instances can be seen as possibly coming from the Spirit of God. All of these could be God trying to nudge you in the direction of a ministry in which God wants you involved.

Today's text is one biblical example of just that sort of thing.

There are two primary human characters in this story, Philip, one of the seven men chosen to care for the physical needs of congregants so that the Apostles could continue preaching and the Ethiopian Eunuch. We do not know his name just that he is in charge of the treasury of Queen Candace of Ethiopia and that he had come to Jerusalem to worship and was traveling home "by the road south from Jerusalem to Gaza."

A fact about the Ethiopian Eunuch, according to Professor Baker Colman is that the readers of Acts would have known that the Ethiopian official would not have been permitted to worship in the Temple. And they would have known that it was not just that he was not a Jew, or his race or nationality or status, but rather because of his sexual identity. You may recall that a eunuch typically refers to a person who has been castrated, and that it was often done on boys so young as to have affected hormonal development.ⁱ

Pay attention to this. This man of importance and stature in his own country had traveled to Jerusalem to worship and yet he would not have been allowed in the Temple for his worship. And yet, he went anyway.

That took courage and commitment. This is not a man for whom God was a stranger. And this is further reinforced by the text informing us that as he was traveling home he was reading from the Book of Isaiah. He had his own copy of this writings of this Prophet. Again, commitment.

Prior to our meeting the Eunuch, we are told in verse 26 that “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.)”ⁱⁱ Note that Philip is not told WHY he was to go – just that he was to go. And he went!

How many of us would do that? If we felt a nudge to go towards Pennsylvania down Route 328 but without a clear destination, would we do it? Maybe if it is a Sunday afternoon drive for fun, but not because we understood that the Spirit of God was telling us to do it.

Note however, that Philip heard the angel of the Lord and he obeyed. It is in verse 29 that the Spirit of God joins the action in this story, telling Philip to ““Go over to this chariot and join it.”³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah.” Again, Philip hears the nudging of God and responds.

The account of the actual encounter seems to be more of a summary of all that might have been said between the two men. Luke, the author of Acts, relates for us only the essential details. And that is okay – because those are the details we need to know.

Philip engages the Eunuch in a conversation about the meaning of Isaiah 53, the text of which probably reminded many of you of the narratives read in services around Christmas – of the Suffering Servant.

Philip uses what the man was reading to begin to tell him about Jesus Christ. Philip, at the Spirit's urging, met this man where he was and led him to know and believe in Jesus. The Eunuch's belief was so strong even at the very early stage that when they came upon some water, he asked Philip to baptize him. And so Philip did.

Baker Colman again suggested that “Philip doesn't seem to hesitate. The race, nationality, or sexual identity of the person did not seem to matter to him. Here was a human being who heard the good news about Jesus, was compelled to become part of the group, and requested baptism. Who was Philip to stand in the way?”ⁱⁱⁱ

And afterward the Spirit whisked Philip away to the area around the Mediterranean Sea. And the Eunuch continued his travels home having embarked on a new Journey of Faith.

This is an incredible story. It is an amazing story.

What does it have to do with us?

There are a number of take-a-ways from this encounter of Philip with the Ethiopian Eunuch.

First, we learn from the Ethiopian man, the importance of studying Scripture. Professor Mitzi J. Smith suggests that, “[t]he Ethiopian was a learned man able to ascertain the literal meaning of the scriptures. *Yet, he did not allow his attainments to blind him to his limitations. We should practice a faith that continually seeks understanding rather than an understanding that is seeking faithful followers.*”^{iv}

It is important for us to realize when we don’t understand something that we read in Scripture and to ask questions. It is also good to ask questions even if we think we understand what Scripture is saying.

A second thing we need to learn is that sharing the Good News of Jesus is everyone’s job. The Philip of

this story was not one the original 12 disciples. This Philip was one of the seven men chosen to serve the needs of people in the early church.

Philip's job was not that of a Pastor or Preacher, but of a server. And this person shared his faith with a complete stranger- someone of a different ethnicity and language and sexual identity from his own. And he did not hesitate.

Philip went to a wilderness road to speak to a man who was very much NOT like himself, putting himself at risk (wilderness roads were ripe for robbers and muggings). He went and he did what he had been called to do. Tell another about Jesus Christ.

First, we are reminded of the importance of studying Scripture. Second we that are reminded that sharing the Good News of Jesus is everyone's job.

And that brings me to the third thing I want you to take away from today's text. That is to listen to the Spirit. One of the earliest strongholds of Christianity was in northern Africa. It stands to reason that this Eunuch helped play a role in that.

What if Philip had not listened first to the Angel of God telling him to get up and go and then to the Spirit of

God telling him to go up to the chariot and share the news of Jesus?

Yes, God could have used other means to bring Christianity to this man and subsequently to North Africa, but God chose to use Philip in that time and that place.

We need to be aware of when the Spirit of God is speaking to us. The Spirit may speak in some of the ways I suggested at the beginning of this sermon – volunteering for tasks here at church or serving in a community agency like Big Brothers/ Big Sisters. Or it may be the feeling that you need to invite your neighbor to join you in church.

We need to pay attention to when the Spirit speaks to us.

Last Sunday, I asked for people in the worship service to write down goals or ministry ideas that they have for First Presbyterian Church of Big Flats. I'm not going to read the list of ideas to you this morning, but I do want you to know that of the 27 separate suggestions, 16 of them had to do with outreach to our community. That is over half of the suggestions. And they included reaching out to people who aren't "just like us," to reach out to people who are like the Ethiopian Eunuch.

It is clear to me that God is speaking to the people of this congregation. It seems that the Spirit of God is nudging us maybe even compelling us to reach outside these walls and to share the Good News of Jesus.

The leaders of this church will be praying over the all of the suggestions made, I would ask for you to pray as well – that the Spirit of God will show us where God wants us to join in the Work already begun by God and that you and I will listen to the direction from the Spirit and to be willing to go where the Spirit tells us to go.

That is the most important take away from today's text – to be willing to hear the Spirit of God telling you (and me) where to go to serve and then for you (and me) to respond without hesitation.

Let us pray.

ⁱ Baker, Coleman. "Commentary on Acts 8:26-40." *Acts 8:26-40 Commentary by Coleman Baker - Working Preacher - Preaching This Week (RCL)*, www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2445.

ⁱⁱ [New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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ⁱⁱⁱ Baker, Coleman. "Commentary on Acts 8:26-40." *Acts 8:26-40 Commentary by Coleman Baker - Working Preacher - Preaching This Week (RCL)*, www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2445.

^{iv} Smith, Mitzi J. "Commentary on Acts 8:26-40." *Acts 8:26-40 Commentary by Mitzi J. Smith - Working Preacher - Preaching This Week (RCL)*, www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1235.