FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

May 2, 2021

*“On Being Philip”*

As I was preparing this sermon, I had a bit of a time trying to think of how to present this wonderful old story. Most of us have heard it many times. We know that it is filled with all sorts of wonders—the way in which Philip moves from one location to another, the constant attendance of angels and Holy Spirit. However, I began to wonder if those aspects of the story obscured, at least a little bit, the true wonders God’s Spirit brings into the lives of these two men in the story, and in the generations after them.

I decided that we probably need to get a little closer to the characters in this story. We need to allow ourselves to see things from their eyes and experience. So, I have a little exercise for us: for a moment or two, let us say that we are going to mount a dramatic production of this story, and each of us has to pick out a character to portray. Would anyone of us like to play Philip?

Think about that for a moment. Think of what has happened in this story.

As stories in the Bible go, this one about Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch is fairly easy to get into. It even turns out quite nicely—the eunuch learns about Christ, he gets baptized, and he goes on his way happy and rejoicing.

Philip does not fare at all badly, either. He gets to help someone new into the faith, and is able to do a little high-speed travel thanks to a couple of angels and the Holy Spirit. So, if we had to choose to be a character, being Philip would not be a bad choice.

In fact, being Philip seems like a pretty easy choice. However, before we make-up our minds completely, perhaps we should review a bit more of Philip’s story and how it turns out.

To begin with, we should make a distinction between the two Philips. There is Philip the Apostle, and then there is the Philip in *this* story.

Depending on how prominent a part you want to have in our production, you may want to choose the part of the apostle, and that is fine. However, you should know that while *this* Philip does *not* get to be an *Apostle* he *does* receive quite a bit of attention, and a title of sorts.

Through his own adventures and achievements, *this* Philip, the one in our story this morning, comes to be known as Philip the Evangelist. So, he, too, receives special attention from the church. In fact, in several other Christian denominations, this Philip even has his own feast day on October 11.

So, can I convince you to take Philip the Evangelist’s part?

Well, ok, yes, you are right: being Philip does mean taking on some pretty rigorous responsibilities and attitudes about things. To begin with, you have to be willing to wait on others like a servant. This was Philip’s first job in the Christian movement. He, and six other Greek Jews, were chosen to make sure all the Greek widows and orphans in the community received their fair share of the provisions. Widows and orphans, of course, were among the least powerful in the community. Philip and the others would have been like waiters seeing to their needs at mealtimes and at food distributions.

Hopefully, none of us have so much pride that we would fail to accept the kind of charge Philip and the six others took on in the early church. Indeed, theirs was an important job. It was the first formal mission in the community that addressed justice and equity between the people. What is more, they took on this job from the apostles. Philip and the six others were chosen to be the first diaconate in the church. Their ministry allowed the apostles to devote more of their time studying Scripture, praying, and ministering in other ways.

So, the first trait we can identify in Philip is his humility, and his willingness to serve. In fact, he barely blinks an eye when he is suddenly told to get up and go. He immediately sets off for “the wilderness road” between Jerusalem and Gaza. It should also be noted that he and the six others were chosen because of their wisdom, and because the Spirit appeared to dwell deeply and fully within them.

What amazes me about Philip is that these gifts produce in him a kind of courage that is needed in every age—in his *and* in ours—the courage to be open to new people and new ways. Another way of saying this is that Philip was able to put aside whatever prejudice or hesitance he may have had about the other man who was an Ethiopian, a Gentile, *and* a eunuch. Any one of these things would have made most Israelites hesitant to engage him. Philip, on the other hand, immediately went out to meet him when prompted.

In fact, the way the Bible portrays their meeting, Philip actually has to run up and trot alongside the Ethiopian’s chariot in order to strike-up a conversation with him. Philip was willing to look a little ridiculous in order to reach-out to this man.

There were also more barriers about the Ethiopian that would have made others balk. For example, the man was obviously a foreigner, and a rich one, too. Being in charge of his queen’s treasury, the Ethiopian would have been powerful, rich, and educated. He would have been dressed in luxurious clothes and accompanied by an entourage. That he owned a chariot and a copy of the Book of Isaiah, and was able to read it further testified to his wealth, but also to his education, as few people in that time were literate.

While we do not know the specifics of Philip’s background (we do not even know if he was able to read and write), we can at least deduce that Philip was not on equal footing with the Ethiopian when it came to wealth and power. Yet none of this prevented him from going forth to meet him.

Think of what that would be like for you and me, in this day and age. For us, it would mean trying to make our way through the rich person’s gaggle of hangers-on and their security people. None of this phased Philip. He not only went up to the other man without hesitation, he also did not hesitate to tell him the story of Jesus Christ the moment the opportunity presented itself.

Philip knew that this Ethiopian Eunuch, as rich and powerful as he was, needed to hear the story of God’s love for all people. Moreover, Philip knew the Ethiopian needed to be taught more than words on a page. He needed to be brought into relationship with God through the ministry of Philip’s testimony and his willingness to befriend and baptize this stranger.

The Ethiopian needed for Philip to be open to God’s desire to do something new in the human community, and among the people who were being gathered around the story of God’s only begotten son, Jesus the Christ, and the Holy Spirit that was leading them all into new ways and among new people. He needed the wind of this new Spirit that was refreshing the human community, bringing people together and setting them on the course to new life and even life eternal through Jesus Christ.

So, being Philip is quite an undertaking, and make no mistake: you and I *are* being called to take on his character, his faithfulness, his ministry. We *are* being called to be like him which means we are being called to break down old barriers that keep people apart, even when we are strangers to one another; even when we are afraid of one another. We are being called to break down old barriers so that God’s healing Spirit might enter into all of our lives; and so that new life can begin.

But do not be afraid because we are also assured that each and every time we engage a new person we will be fully equipped, fully accompanied by God’s Spirit to minister, to serve, and to love in God’s name.

So, do not be hesitant or afraid to be like Philip. Instead, listen for the Spirit’s voice in your life; listen and look for the person or people who need your word of encouragement and welcome; and be assured that each and every time each of us endeavors to be like Philip, God’s blessing and joy is also going to be close at hand.