Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

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*“On Ramps”* Act of the Apostles 8:26-40

When on mission anywhere in the world, or at any time in history, it is always helpful to have an “on ramp” into the community where we will be serving. And by “on ramp,” I am referring to “openings” and opportunities to befriend, and to come-alongside others for service together. And for this, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch boasts a variety of fantastic images.

First, there is Philip. This is not Philip the apostle. The Philip in this story is only mentioned a scant three times in the Bible. He is one of the seven chosen by the apostles to oversee the distribution of charity among the poor in the believers’ community in Jerusalem. He worked along-side Stephen and was probably a witness to Stephen’s persecution and his death by stoning.

This, however, did not dampen Philip’s enthusiasm nor alter his desire to serve. In fact, even though Stephen’s death inaugurated a wave of persecution against the fledgling church, which scattered the believers across Samaria and Judea, we are told that Philip took the sudden change in location to spread the good news about Christ.

Philip went down to the city of Samaria. There, he preached, he cast out unclean spirits, and he healed many people. In this way, Philip brought many more into the community of Christ followers. After which two of the apostles, Peter and John, joined Philip. The apostles laid hands on the new believers, and Philip bore witness as they received the Holy Spirit.

In today’s story, all of this has barely happened before, an “angel of the Lord” tells Philip to “get up,” and sends him out to meet the other main character in this story, the Ethiopian Eunuch—and what a sight this man must have been with his chariot and his book, and his wealth.

We are not explicitly told that he is rich. However, we can surmise that he is given that he oversees the queen of Ethiopia’s “entire treasury”—a position of great power. With such power and importance, he must also be wealthy.

Also, when we meet him, he is seated in his own chariot, and in procession of a copy of the Book of Isaiah. In those days, book ownership implied wealth and…education.

I chose this story to bring-up the end of this three-part sermon series because it has so many of the elements of discipleship and mission for us to remember and consider as we continue our own journey in mission to the community in Christ’s name.

What this story describes for us are the many ways in which the Holy Spirit will provide us with “on ramps” into the places and into the lives of people who want the love of God.

The Spirit also provides us with “on ramps” into the heart of our own courage and creativity for reaching out to others. It can help us find new ways to offer the love of Christ, new avenues of ministry and mission. It can and will inspire new ideas, new ways of being in relationship, new ways of serving. What is more, the Spirit provides us with guidance and stays with us giving us encouragement and hope.

And so, we are given the story of Philip, a man who has been working hard in the service of the new church of Jesus Christ. He is not an apostle—not one of the original twelve who walked with Jesus.

Philip was a believer who had accepted Christ through the word and ministry of others. He was a member of the new church who was plucked out of the crowd because he seemed to demonstrate the love and faithfulness needed to become God’s own “essential worker.”

Yes, that’s right: Philip was an essential worker—a phrase we have come to know quite well these last few years. Philip and Stephen (and five others) were the ones who were essential to the carrying forth of the daily hard work of the gospel—the business of dealing with hungry people, making sure their needs were met, and troubleshooting all the mishaps and complaints one encounters in distribution projects.

He was like one of the many people we relied on when everything was shut down, and everyone else was hunkering down at home. He was one of the people who was expected to put his own welfare on the line to service the rest of us…and he did it.

After Stephen’s death, you would have expected him to back away, to go home and keep himself safe. Indeed, in the 21st chapter of Acts, we find out that Philip has at least four unmarried daughters at home. After seeing the danger inherent in spreading the good news, few would have blamed him if he had gone home for good.

Instead, although he does leave Jerusalem, he takes every opportunity to proclaim Christ to all he meets. He befriends people and ministers to them, and many come to Christ and are baptized through his efforts.

When Peter and John hear about his success and come out to Samaria, Philip does not become resentful or territorial. Instead, he steps back and rejoices as the people he has baptized also receive the Spirit. He bears witness to the new life that has begun in them.

Perhaps it is because he has shown himself so open, and so lacking in ego that the “angel of the Lord” identifies him as right person to minister to the Ethiopian Eunuch.

And sure enough: when the Spirit tells Philip to go over to the Ethiopian’s chariot, he does not hesitate but immediately goes up to him. It does not matter that the other man is rich and powerful. It does not matter to him that the other man is a eunuch. All Philip sees is a man who is seeking wisdom and truth—seeking after something his wealth and power has not been able to purchase for him.

Because Philip has been courageous and obedient to the spirit, he has been able to meet the physical needs of many people. On this particular occasion, he has also been able to meet the deepest spiritual needs of the Ethiopian. He teaches him, and when the Ethiopian asks for baptism, Philip brings him into the body of Christ. No hesitation. No objections, no hedging, Philip accepts him as a full member of the body.

As for the Ethiopian, in the life of the community, he was the ultimate outsider. He was not Jewish by birth. He was from a foreign land. Because he is a eunuch, it is unlikely that he would have been fully accepted, even as a convert to Judaism, into the life the community.

Yet his hunger for the truth and for the wisdom of God is so great that he persists. He has left his own country and has come all the way to Jerusalem to worship. He has even spent a considerable amount of money to obtain a copy of Holy Scripture—the Book of Isaiah.

His desire for an authentic faith also opens his heart and his ego to accepting the help of another. Think of it: how many of us would take kindly to a stranger who comes up to us out of the blue, the way Philip did. Philip not only comes up to the Ethiopian unannounced and unknown, but he also asks him a question most of us would consider rather rude: “Do you understand what you are reading?”

Instead of being insulted, the Ethiopian responds honestly and then he eagerly accepts Philip’s instruction. Moreover, what he learns excites him and makes him hopeful and bold enough so that when he spots a body of water, he immediately asks to be baptized.

Through this story, we are brought into the presence of two men whose humility is constant, and constantly leading them into more experiences of deeper faith and commitment. Their humility is another “on ramp” –for one, to a new relationship, for the other, to a new life.

We have Philip who remains undaunted by the tragedies and persecution he sees. He knows there are others who are seeking the same wisdom, truth, and love he has found in the body of Christ. This gives him hope and the courage to go on and find others to serve. Indeed, his hope and courage allow him to take advantage of every opportunity he is given.

And because he is willing and open, the Spirit does not fail to provide him with opportunities—even slightly outlandish opportunities, like a rich eunuch who is far from home—even unceremoniously whisking him from one place to another.

The Ethiopian is also an example of someone who does not hesitate when an “on ramp” to draw closer to God. What Philip tells him about Jesus gives him the boldness of one with a deep desire to know love—a love that draws him close and covers him with peace and a true sense of belonging; a love that sends him into the rest of his life rejoicing.

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian is *our* story—if we will let it be.

It is a story of mission— and the courage to do it even in the face of opposition.

It is a story of humility—even admitting we need help and allowing ourselves to accept help.

It is the story of service to a world that his hungry for the healing, hope, and the love of God.

The only question is: will we, too, be obedient to the Spirit when it shows us those who are hungry for the good news of Christ? Will we accept the assistance and the new relationships that the Spirit may lead us into having?

If we say “yes,” as we did four years ago during the *New Beginnings* program, we are saying “yes” to greeting and caring for new people, to entering into new relationships and new partnerships beyond our church.

We are saying “yes” to the Spirit who will take us into unfamiliar places and experiences—this can be uncomfortable, until we remember that we are promised that we will be given all the help and guidance we will need.

Most of all, we are saying “yes” to the love we have been given; “yes” to the Spirit of God that lives in us even in this moment; “yes” to the Risen Christ whose love raises us up so that we can have, and share, in the new life of the world through him.

Friends, our good news is that God and the Spirit are constantly providing us with “on ramps” into God’s ministry and mission to the world. And I believe that our decision to return to our roots as a missional church is one that will not only bless many more people, it will also send us off, like the Ethiopian, rejoicing.

So, let us give thanks to God for this life we have together with God, Christ, and the Spirit, and let us continue to seek, and together, find, God’s “on ramps” to compassion, healing, fellowship, and love among the beloved of God. Let it be so. Amen.