

**BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING:
“Blessed with a Faith to Share”**

Acts 8:26-40

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

World Communion Sunday – October 2, 2005

Note: Although World Communion Sunday marks a day when Christians all over the world reach out to each other in peace, I also want us to consider reaching out to our Jewish and Muslim neighbors this week. Tomorrow is Rosh Hashanah – the Jewish New Year. And Ramadan, the month of fasting for Muslims begins on Tuesday. As we hear this wonderful story about Philip – a Christian from Palestine – and the eunuch – a Jewish pilgrim from Ethiopia, who met on the road to Gaza, let’s open our eyes to the moving of the Spirit as we meet those who are different from us. God might even use us to introduce them to a new Word.

They were arresting and *even killing* Christians in Jerusalem.

It was the First Century, shortly after Jesus was crucified – the most dangerous time in human history to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Philip had been tapped on the shoulder by the original 12 *disciples* to be one of the original *deacons* of the church – one of the officers of this fledgling band of believers charged with offering care and comfort to widows.¹

But they were arresting and killing Christians in Jerusalem. They were already down to *six* deacons because one – Stephen – had already been stoned to death for saying out loud that he believed that Jesus was “the Righteous One” whom God sent.²

And so Philip left town. It was too dangerous to be seen helping widows in the name of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem; it was dangerous to be seen *at all* in Jerusalem if certain people found out you were a Christian. And so Philip left town, *headed south*³ toward Gaza, escaping certain persecution in Jerusalem.

We are familiar with the name “Gaza.” It’s been in the news often over the summer as the nation of Israel turned over that land to the Palestinians.

Philip was on his way to Gaza, when an angel – the Spirit of God – told him to approach a man sitting in a chariot along the road. There were many reasons *not* to approach this stranger. He was clearly a foreigner – in this case from Ethiopia, so his

¹ Acts 6:1-6.

² Acts 7:51-60.

³ The Greek word here is *meshmbrian* which literally means “midday.” But for a person in Palestine, it could also mean the position of the midday sun which would be “south.” Either Philip is told to go south on the desert road, or to go at midday on the desert road, but either way, he would run into the eunuch.

skin was a shade darker.⁴ The stranger was sitting in a chariot – clearly a person with some connections or else he’d be walking like Philip. And this stranger must have displayed the signs and dress of a eunuch – which means he would be near the bottom of the totem pole in terms of the Jewish lines of authority.⁵

It turns out that **the stranger was an official the court of the queen of Ethiopia**. Such court officials were often made eunuchs because it was believed that they would be less a threat to the royal family. Many of their jobs were quite intimate, and this was a common precaution. Some of the eunuchs were in charge of *dressing* the royal family or *guarding* the royal family.

In the case of *this* eunuch, he was in charge of the queen’s treasury. And he was an Ethiopian Jew who had come on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He was sitting in his chariot reading from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 53, verses 7-8. Most likely, he was reading out loud – which was common in those days – because Philip knew exactly what he was reading.

We are told that Philip ran up to him with a bold question: **Do you understand what you are reading?** No “Hi. My name is Philip.” No introductions at all. Philip heard and recognized the story of the suffering servant in Isaiah – and he asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

The Ethiopian Eunuch was just as direct: “How can I understand unless someone teaches me.” And this was all the invitation Philip needed to proceed to tell the stranger that *he* believed that the suffering servant in Isaiah was a prophesy about Jesus – a servant who refused to be served himself.

Notice that the eunuch also invited Philip to join him in the chariot, to sit beside him. They were equals. Philip wasn’t lording over the eunuch any sense that *he* was the wise one, the saved one, the more enlightened one. And notice that it was the eunuch who first brought up the idea of baptism. Philip hadn’t pushed it or even mentioned it.

And because the time was right – God’s time – this unnamed Ethiopian servant of the queen became the first known convert to Christianity who was not originally from Palestine.

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Ever since I returned from my sabbatical, I’ve been taking most Mondays as “monastery days” – doing the things one does at a monastery: reading, studying, writing, praying. I’ve yet to take a “monastery day” at an actual monastery. Since the weather’s been so good, I often go to a coffee shop with a terrace. That setting can be quite conducive to quiet study.

⁴ Ethiopian at this time meant “Nubian.”

⁵ See Deuteronomy 23:1. Any eunuch would not be allowed in “the assembly of the LORD” but this eunuch had come, nevertheless, to Jerusalem to worship God.

Several weeks ago, I was sitting with my Bible and my coffee and my solitude, on the terrace of a favorite “monastery place” when I was joined on the terrace by a young man who took his seat several tables over. We were of different generations and different races, and I would soon find out that we were different in other ways too.

Seeing my open Bible on the table, he asked, “Are you doing a Bible study?” “Yes,” I said, and I looked back down to my book not really in the mood to talk.

But he was persistent. A few moments later, he said, “Are you reading it for a class?” “A sermon,” I said. More silence.

And then I noticed that he was staring in my direction, and I wondered if this wasn’t one of those “Spirit-of-God-on-the-road-to-Gaza” moments. “So, where do you go to church?” I asked him. “I don’t go to church,” he said. “But my mother is in seminary.”

“That’s great!” I said. And then, after a pause – perhaps for effect, he said, “Actually, I’m Muslim. I was raised Baptist, but converted to Islam about ten years ago, and that’s why my mother’s in seminary – to refute my beliefs when we get together for holidays.”

About this time, a couple of other patrons came out to the terrace with their lattes and frappachinos. And when they saw the open Bible and heard words like “seminary” and “Baptist” they went back inside. If you want to clear a Starbucks, just talk about religion across a couple of tables on an open terrace.

The young Muslim man proceeded to tell me that he had been married to a Jewish woman, but he was now divorced because *he* had been more serious about his spiritual life than she had been. She was content to celebrate the Jewish holidays but he wanted their spiritual practices to be an every-day thing.

“So it wasn’t a problem for you that she was Jewish?” I asked him. “No,” he said, “It is permissible to marry someone of another faith if it’s one of the faiths of Abraham’s God.”

There are verses in the Quran that speak of tolerance toward “people of the book”⁶ and this young man interpreted tolerance to mean that you could even marry someone of another faith, just as long as the person was Muslim, Jewish, or Christian – “one of the faiths of Abraham’s God.”

⁶Qur’an 29:46 *And do not dispute with the followers of the Book except by what is best except those of them who acts unjustly, and way: We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you, and our God and your God is One, and to Him do we submit.* (There are also other verses that suggest a less tolerant relationship.) “People of the book” include non-Muslims who believe in the God of Abraham and who rely on holy scripture like the Torah (Jews) and the Old and New Testaments (Christians).

We continued to talk for about an hour until it was time for me to go. I stood up and finally came closer to his table and told him that it had been nice talking with him. And then he said, “May I ask you for some help before you go?” “Sure.”

“I was wondering . . . would you mind praying with me?” he asked. “What would you like us to pray about?” I said. “Please pray that God would send me a faithful wife who loves God.”

And so, on the terrace of a Starbucks in Roslyn, I prayed out loud with a Muslim man looking for love. It wasn’t exactly the road to Gaza, but it might have been a start. **Who knows what seeds we plant when we try to share our faith with someone who is searching?**

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We live in a world in which *we are so careful about being tolerant*, we are *so cautious about not offending someone* that we miss moments when angels could be leading us to share life-changing news with someone who is searching. ***It’s as if we are ashamed of what we believe.***

Barbara Bradley Haggerty, the religion reporter for National Public Radio, told a story to the Faith on Tap group a couple of weeks ago, about a report she prepared before the last presidential election about the spiritual lives of the two candidates. There was a lot of material about George Bush’s faith. He had talked about it openly on several occasions and there were many recordings of him talking about what his faith meant to him.

Ms. Haggerty had a more difficult time tracking down similar recordings of John Kerry talking about his faith, until someone handed her a transcript of Kerry speaking at a National Prayer Breakfast in the late 90s. A written transcript is obviously not very effective for radio, though. She needed a tape of his voice speaking the words. And after some digging, she learned that a senator in Kerry’s own party had taped the address and still had a copy.

But when she approached this person and asked for a copy of the tape for her report, he refused to give it to her. The concern was that ***if secular people heard the candidate talking so candidly about his faith, they might reject him.*** Maybe they would consider him some sort of fanatic. Maybe they would call him a hypocrite.

Maybe this is a political problem and maybe it’s not, but that’s not our concern here. Our concern is that this was ***a spiritual problem.*** And it’s also ***our*** problem.

How open are we to talking about our faith candidly and out loud? If we take seriously Jesus’ call to “make disciples of all nations” then how can we ***not*** share our faith?

I'm not talking about preaching on the sidewalk or insinuating our faith to those who don't want to hear about it. I'm not talking about self-righteous proselytizing. I'm talking about *being open to the moving of the Spirit*.

When we are drawn to someone who is searching, certainly when someone *asks us about our faith*, are we prepared to talk about it? Are we ready to sit beside someone who is looking for answers – if we are so invited?

If we have been blessed with faith – even *an imperfect faith*, even a *new faith* – then it's not enough to pray, "Thank you God for this spiritual anchor you've given to me." God doesn't bless us so that we just sit there being blessed. **God blesses us so that we might be a blessing to someone else.**

And if you are sitting there thinking, "I just don't feel like I know enough to talk about Christianity with people. What if they ask me something I don't know anything about?" -- then there are at least two points to ponder: 1) maybe this is a cue that you need to open up your Bibles and, in fact, do some studying, and 2) know that God will use you where you are. God doesn't need pretenders who act as if *we* are not hypocrites (*we are*), as if *we* have cornered the market on all-things-spiritual (*we haven't*).

We are more effective Proclaimers of the Good News if we are *real*, if we talk about our own doubts and our own failings. We are more effective *if we sit side-by-side with those who ask us questions*, not acting *as if we are the wise ones*, the saved ones, the more enlightened ones.

It is extremely important to look at our fellow human beings with respect and appreciation. And world communion comes *when we teach our children* to respect and appreciate people who are different from ourselves, *even those* different in their Christian traditions, *even those who are clearly not Christian*.

Diana Butler Bass, who is a research fellow at the Virginia Theological Seminary, tells a wonderful story about being out at the mall with her four-year-old daughter when a veiled Muslim woman came walking toward them. It frightened young Emma.

"Mommy, what's that?" she asked. And Bass realized that she had a teaching moment. "That lady is a Muslim from a far-away place. And she dresses like that – and covers her head with a veil – because she loves God. That is how her people show that they love God."

Emma pondered these words and then she asked her mother, "Mommy, do you love God?"

"Yes, honey. I do. You and I are Christians. Christian ladies show love for God by going to church, eating the bread and wine, serving the poor, and giving to those in need. We don't wear veils, but we do love God."

After this, as four year olds tend to do, she announced in a loud voice every time she saw a veiled woman, “Look Mommy, she loves God. Look, *she* loves God too.” Once when they were getting out of their car in their own driveway, Emma spotted a neighbor from Pakistan wearing her veil. “Look Mommy, she loves God!”

When the neighbor looked surprised, Dr. Bass explained what she had taught her daughter about Muslim women loving God. And suddenly the neighbor threw her arms around Bass’ neck and tearfully said, “I wish that all Americans would teach their children so. The world would be better. The world would be better.”⁷

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The Spirit of God moved Philip to approach the Ethiopian Eunuch in order that the world would be better. I believe that it is God’s will that ***all the world*** proclaim Jesus as Savior. But this involves our willingness to participate in this mission. And it involves God’s timing and God’s prompting. It involves planting seeds of love and acceptance, even to those who are different from us. No one has ever been drawn to Jesus because of hatefulness.

If we are blessed with faith in Jesus Christ, then know that ***it’s not enough*** for us to be content to sit back and merely thank God for this ability to believe. **We are called to bless others because we have been blessed.**

And maybe it will happen in a coffee shop or in a mall or standing at the bus stop or in an elevator. And someone will notice the cross around our neck or the church bulletin in our hand or the Bible on our desk or the Christian music on our radio and say, “Can you explain something to me?”

This is the moment when we whisper a quick prayer to God: “Lord give me the right words . . .”

Let us pray:

Lord, what is to prevent us from sharing our faith? Let it not be our own fear and embarrassment. Let it not be our unwillingness. Give us such faith that our words and our actions reveal a changed spirit, so that others might notice that we live by a different creed and for a different purpose so that the world might be better, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

⁷ Bass, Diana Butler, *Broken We Kneel*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 2004, pages 35-36.