

When I was in the Diocese of Nova Scotia I had the honor of presiding at the wedding of Mark and Tracey. Tracey had been a faithful member of the congregation from her childhood. About a year after their wedding I marveled at the opportunity to baptize their daughter. A few months after her baptism I got an email from Mark (from his work account) asking if he could talk with me. That began a very long discussion. See Mark was the first person I had encountered in a church setting who had never been exposed to church and really knew nothing about faith, church, or spirituality. He could not remember anyone in his extended family ever having anything to do with church. But at his daughters baptism he had a sense he needed to know more. And thus began his faith journey. Almost a year after his initial contact (and weekly conversations and a course on Anglicanism) he asked if he could be baptized as a sign of the faith he had developed.

As I look back on that experience, what stands out for me is how God was at work. God worked through his wife who shared the story of her faith journey. God worked through the timing –with the birth and baptism of his daughter. The timing was right, the Holy Spirit was at work, the people who needed to speak said what needed to be said, a welcome was offered, and a connection was made.

That reminds me of today's reading from the book of Acts.

In this passage, God shows us how to really open up our lives to something exciting. God shows us the life of the serenity, creativity, and adventure that God wants all of us to have. It's really quite simple, and it's available to each one of us.

This is the lesson that God teaches us through the life of a man named Philip.

We meet Philip as a man "filled with the Spirit" in Acts 6. The Apostles chose him along with six other men to serve as the first deacons. These were men who oversaw the distribution of money to the widows there so that the Apostles could focus on the Word of God and prayer.

One of those deacons, Stephen, was martyred. He was put to death under the leadership of a religious leader named Saul. We know him as the eventual Apostle Paul.

One result of the martyrdom of Stephen was that the church in Jerusalem scattered. His death marked the beginning of a time of persecution, and the

majority of the early followers of Jesus fled the city for their lives. But they didn't do what we might expect – they didn't keep quiet about their faith. No: Acts tells us that those who had been scattered moved on, preaching the good news along the way. Please note: these weren't professional preachers. They were ordinary Jesus-followers, moving to new towns and villages, setting up their businesses, and gossiping the gospel wherever they went.

Philip, as a deacon, was one of those who had been scattered.

We find him preaching to people in Samaria about Jesus. Later in that passage, God told Philip through an angel to move on. "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza" (Acts 8:26).

Along the way, Philip found a court official from Ethiopia in a chariot. In the Ancient World the word "Ethiopia" often meant someone who was black and not middle eastern brown. In our reading today, it is believed that the individual is also ethnically Ethiopian because of his position in the Royal Household.

The person Philip reached out to was a Eunuch, (and we're not told his name) a court official in the court of the Queen of Ethiopia, The Candace. The word eunuch referred to a male who was either castrated or sterile. Such men were chosen for employment in the women's quarters of the royal household. And Jewish law excluded eunuchs from "the assembly of the Lord." (Just read Leviticus or Deuteronomy). He was most likely a Jewish proselyte (or convert). He was reading the book of the prophet Isaiah as he returned home from Jerusalem. There were actually many people like him in the world at that time who sought out the God of Israel.

In the book of Isaiah, God had given particular encouragement to eunuchs that they would experience acceptance in God's house. In Isaiah 56:4–5, God says, "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever" (Isaiah 56:4–5).

It is this same passage and many like it in Isaiah 56 that also gives encouragement to Gentiles.

When Philip heard that the Ethiopian Eunuch was reading from the scroll of Isaiah, he asked him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” Which becomes a teaching moment.

Philip explains the scripture to him, including how Jesus’ death and resurrection are a fulfillment of the prophecy as foretold in Isaiah. The eunuch believes, and when they reach a place where there is some water, he puts his new faith to the test. “What is to keep me from being baptized?” The Jewish law had allowed him to study and discuss, but not to be a full member of the assembly. But this was no longer the time regulated by Jewish law. Philip baptized the eunuch, and God’s love for everyone was no longer a phrase of empty words, but a living experience.

And then Philip went one way and the Ethiopian Eunuch went happily on his way.

This is one of the most wonderful stories in the book of Acts, and it’s full of meaning for us today. What can we learn from it?

First, what’s God up to? The baptism of this eunuch comes a few verses after the baptism of the Samaritans who became Jesus-followers. A couple of chapters later, we have the first baptism of a Roman, Cornelius – we’ll think about him next week. The message of Jesus is spreading; it started with the Jewish people, but it didn’t stop there. It went on to those heretics in Samaria – and then to a spiritually hungry eunuch from Ethiopia – and then to the enemy, the hated Romans, Centurion Cornelius and his household. And within a few chapters Paul and Barnabas are taking the Christian message far beyond the borders, out among the Gentiles. And everywhere the message goes, it finds a ready hearing in the hearts of people hungry for spiritual reality.

That’s what God’s up to. We make a boundary and say, ‘This far the gospel can go, and no further’, but God delights in going beyond. People who’ve been marginalized and humiliated and excluded – sometimes by the very churches they’ve come to in their search for spiritual life – God is reaching out to those people. We’d like to keep God in the nice, safe circle of long-time followers, but God is always reaching out beyond the boundaries to the outcasts and the humiliated and the vulnerable, and the marginalized and the sinners.

And some of them are willing to go to great lengths to learn about him. The three wise men came looking for the newborn king; they’d made a long journey from

the east and may have been on the road for as long as two years. Even if you didn't have to leave home, would you put two years of your life into a demanding spiritual journey? The eunuch had come all the way from Ethiopia; You'd be surprised to discover how spiritually hungry some people are, even in today's world. God is at work in people's lives. What we need to do is learn to get out of the way or choose to walk closely with God, so that when God gives us little nudges, we'll be able to pick them up. God knows the ones whose hearts are ready for a significant conversation.

Philip used the opportunity which led to inroads into North Africa and into government circles in Ethiopia. Where are the inroads into our society today? Where is the Holy Spirit prompting us to go in our communities and are we prepared to follow those promptings?

With our Acts story today, we see the good news of Jesus moving further into the world. The image of Christ as a vine and the disciples as its branches becomes a living reality.

There is a rather simple formula here: be open to God and open to people. Be open each day to what God wants to do in your life, and be open to the people around you. The Spirit will show the way and lead you to an exciting and adventurous life like you never knew before. We just have to choose to do so. Amen.