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## *Where is the Spirit Taking You?*

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### **A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth Knowlton Acts 8:26-40**

I had only been ordained a few months, when my rector at St. Peter and St. Paul began joining with a small group of men each week to take a journey. They would travel the road from the suburbs of East Cobb, to the homeless shelter at Peachtree and Pine to offer a service of weekday Eucharist. While I was intrigued by this new ministry, I did not imagine it had much to do with me. I was curious how this group of men that had been praying together for a number of years, had somehow sensed a call to move beyond a morning prayer meeting, to a more active ministry off the beaten path. One week my rector was out of town on vacation, so he had asked me to cover the service. I agreed to drive down with the group, and was handed an outward sign of membership in their ministry, a heavy metal cross.

I was a little intimidated upon my arrival. I was the only woman in a sea of faces. It was hot and overcrowded and I really wondered how I had arrived in this place at this time. But the men immediately set about their business, and I followed their lead. We commenced the service and when I heard the scripture read, it seemed like a foreign book. "Blessed are the poor," had a completely different ring in a warehouse with no air conditioning and surrounded by a congregation that might easily question whether they were in fact blessed. But the singing was tremendous and more and more I felt myself to be in a holy place. When we asked if people needed particular prayers, hands shot up around the room and we deployed like a team of well coordinated warriors, each finding the person we were called to pray with.

After communion, a man approached me and noticed the cross I was wearing. He thanked me for the service and asked where he could find a cross like the one I was wearing. Naively, I turned to Jim, a man from our group, and asked where we had found them. (As if I was going to provide a shopping recommendation to the homeless man in front of me.) Jim, without missing a beat, removed his own cross and lovingly placed it around the neck of the person in front of us.

"An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip. He said, "Rise up and go southward along the desert road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza.' He got up and went."

Today we hear the story of our Patron Saint, Philip the Deacon and Evangelist. We hear of a man so guided by the Spirit that he seems to respond without hesitation and fly on the wings of God's desire. He is active and inspiring, worthy of an action adventure film. He hears the call and runs towards a moving chariot. He discovers an Ethiopian eunuch reading aloud from the prophet Isaiah. You can imagine him running alongside trying to have a conversation until he is invited into the vehicle. On the one hand the eunuch is a man of power, responsible for the treasury of Candace the Queen, clearly educated enough to be reading, and is a serious student of scripture. On the other hand, he is someone who is less than perfect, physically mutilated and not obviously worthy of Philip's company.

But none of this seems to impede Philip. When invited into the chariot, up he goes. He engages the man immediately in a deep discussion of scripture. And the Ethiopian eunuch seems to know that he needs a conversation partner in this journey. He asks for guidance, knowing that somehow there are deeper levels in this scripture than what might be obvious. He is reading the prophet with a hunger for understanding and transformation. Philip hears the hunger and meets the

Ethiopian where he is and begins to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

Up until this point, the story seems pretty clear if a bit fantastic. Philip is the servant of God with the knowledge to be shared and spread, the eunuch is someone desperately in need of ministry. It is a pretty typical way we think about outreach. We are blessed to have something that someone else needs. God call us to share out of gratitude. But the more I have prayed with this passage, the more I wonder whether it is as much a story about bringing the Ethiopian into the ranks of the baptized or whether it is about the ongoing transformation of Philip our patron.

We are here this morning to baptize new members into our community. They are too young to ask the question, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" So, maybe it is we that should be asking the questions. Of course these children have already followed the rules. Their parents and godparents have undergone preparation. They are joining an established community, not being carried down the road in chariots looking for stray prophets or roadside puddles of water. We have acknowledged they are not prepared to make adult confessions yet, so we have carefully arranged for adults to make vows on their behalf. And as a community we will also take vows to support these children and their families so they can grow in their knowledge and love of the Lord. So, I'm pretty comfortable that all is as it should be for these particular candidates. So, what if this story from Acts is more about us and less about the babies?

"Both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. But when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away. The eunuch saw him no more and continued on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself in Azotus. And traveling through all the towns until he came to Caesarea, he continued to proclaim the good news."

If we take this seriously, it is Philip who seems to be most moved, literally by the sacramental exchange. These families who will soon have candidates baptized will go on their way rejoicing this morning. But it is we who should find ourselves inexplicably in Azotus.

This is as it should be. We do not baptize new members into the community only for their own edification. This is why we have baptisms during our Sunday worship. We do it so that we can all continue to expand our vision of the kingdom of God and renew our commitment to Christ. We need to be challenged to realize there will be people included that we may not know or even desire to be part of the Body of Christ. This is not threatening news, but good news. Our own experience of the call of the Gospel is expanded the more we are unable to assume it resides neatly within our control and power.

This story is not solely about expanding membership to ensure that none are excluded. It is about creating communities that are transformative because they are not limited by human assumptions of who should be invited and who is being transformed. It is the transformation of individuals and the community that demonstrate the creative liveliness of the Spirit. It is the power that emanates from the community through its deep study of the scriptures and its sacramental life that creates the kind of energy we see in Philip. We may not be chasing down chariots and literally whisked away to remote locations, but we will find ourselves in unexpected places and we will be transformed by those we are called into relationship with.

A few years after I had left St. Peter and St. Paul and begun my ministry here at the Cathedral, I was celebrating at our first Easter service out on the street. Our Deacon, Ed Fuller, had the vision to imagine us carrying the sacrament beyond these walls to places that needed more than a little good news. We were in a parking lot, a folding table for an altar. Easter lilies had been lovingly carried from a parish in the suburbs and I had once again been invited to an unexpected place. We sprinkled holy water in the corners of the lot and gathered to hear scripture and celebrate the sacrament. At one moment in the service a woman burst into an impromptu gospel solo and we all found our eyes filled with tears.

After the service she approached and asked me where she could find a cross like the one around my neck. I smiled to myself, thought of Jim, and wordlessly lifted it from my neck to hers.

Amen

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