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## *It Was Only a Moment*

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**A sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton**  
**Feast of St. Philip-transferred**  
**Acts 8:26-40**

I am sure she has no idea of the impact she made on my life. I doubt she would even remember my name. I cannot tell you hers and I cannot even tell you the name of the church. But it was a moment, only a moment. But, a moment that formed me. A moment that told me who God was, and who I could be.

I remember it was vacation bible school. One morning they gathered all of together in the sanctuary. And the minister came in. She was a tall, stately, African-American woman with a kind face. And she had a voice. An unbelievably beautiful voice. She said she had come to teach us a song about God and how to get closer to him. It was called *Day by Day*, and it was from the musical *Godspell*. She sang it for us and then patiently taught us the verses.

After we learned the simple words she asked us to make a line--because we were going to have a parade. We were going to put our hands in the air and walk around this special worship place singing to God. And we did. I do not remember if we sang in tune. But I remember feeling happy. I remember the minister's face. And I remember feeling that this space, this special space where we came to worship God was somewhere I was welcome. Where I was loved.

It was a only a moment, and not one I would have ever listed as a turning point in my life. That is until several decades later when I sat in front of the Commission on Ministry. As I answered questions about a possible call to ministry, someone asked whether I had considered that there might be barriers to my ministry because of my gender? I was surprised by the question, but it was her face that came to mind. Her leading us around in procession. I heard *Day by Day*. So, I said, "No, I think I learned at an early age that God loved me. And that all of us were called to serve in God's church."

Today we celebrate the Feast of our patron, St. Philip the Deacon and Evangelist. It is a wonderful story in the book of Acts. We almost hear it as a tale of high adventure. It has chariots and action. Angels and whirlwinds that can take you from one place to another in a moment. 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 the Candace the Queen. Clearly he is 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 in need of ministry. In past years I have vacillated from thinking this is mostly a story about the eunuch to mostly a story about our patron. But this year, what struck me the most was that this story was about both of them. About the exchange and transformation that happens between them. While the eunuch is clearly filled with joy, we have to imagine that Philip too is changed in the process. His literally moved to another city, so it is hard to imagine that did not make some sort of impression.

We are here this morning to baptize new members into our community. As fellow members of the church we will affirm our own baptismal covenant. We will say that we seek to serve Christ in all people. If we really listen to the vows they can seem overwhelming. Will we have to be able to respond in the same way as Philip? Should we be cautioning these parents and godparents that they should look out for passing chariots or roadside puddles of water--at least until they feel a little more grounded in biblical interpretation?

But what if the invitation is really a quite a bit more simple. What if the invitation is to live our lives in ways that create the space for the encounters that will most transform us? Maybe the simplest of acts can help us to know our connection to one another. And we might not even know they are important at the time they are happening to us.

In the early 70s, Jacqueline Novogratz was given a sweater by her uncle. It was blue and had a scene of two Zebras at the foot of a mountain. She loved the sweater and wore it almost every day all the way through middle school. She even wore it into her first year of high school. Like many of us at that age, she had an embarrassing hallway encounter where someone teased her about what she was wearing. She was devastated and told her mother that she would never wear the sweater again. They went to goodwill and donated the sweater, without much of a second thought.

Jacqueline went on to the University of Virginia and did well. She was hired by Chase Manhattan bank and was on track for a promising career. But despite a lot of success, she was not completely happy. The more she was involved in international banking, the more she saw a divide between rich and poor. And the more she wondered whether she was called to a different kind of work. A business trip to Brazil, seals the deal for her. She meets a young man and decides she want to be actively engaged in giving those in poverty opportunities to better themselves.

She leaves Chase to work for a non-profit overseas. Hoping to be assigned to Brazil, she instead finds herself in Rwanda, Africa. It is not a smooth transition, her desire to be helpful meets with resistance from the women who live in country and are unsure why this young girl has been sent to "help" them. It is painful, but Jacqueline continues to be open and work towards a vision that honors her sense of interconnectedness. One afternoon she goes for a jog. As she is running she sees a young boy wearing a blue sweater. She stops in her tracks. She begins to try and speak to the boy and ask him if she can look on the tag? Her language skills leave much to be desired, so the boy looks at her with confusion. Eventually she convinces him to let her look at the tag in the back of the sweater. She finds her name in ink, and realizes that somehow the sweater she has donated eleven years ago has come back to her. Jacqueline goes on later in 2001 to found an organization called the Acumen Fund. Which helps to launch businesses in impoverished counties. She says, "rather than seeing the world divided among different civilizations or classes... our collective future rests on embracing a vision of a single world in which we are all connected. We all play a role in the change we need to create."

If we have a message from St. Philip today, I think it is an invitation to realize evermore deeply our interconnectedness. It may come in a dramatic way, or it might be revealed years later when we think of a simple moment in vacation bible school, or through an old sweater we thought we had given away. But God reminds us over and over again that we are sealed in the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever.

Amen

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