
The Question of the Holy Spirit--Will You Join Me On the Journey?

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

Being raised in the Society of Friends, or as they are more commonly known the Quakers, it is safe to say that I did not grow up with much in the way of ritual or formality in worship. I did however experience close knit communities with a commitment to living a faith life that mattered. I remember being exposed to adults who took my questions seriously and thought it was important to ask the hard questions. There were not a lot of easy answers, but there were people in the meeting who were doing the hard work of living a life a faith. It was my primary experience of adults outside of my family who appeared to want to spend time with me and engage in everything from teaching me to swim at camp one summer to touring a local mosque as part of a Sunday school outing.

When we left Maryland and moved to Michigan, our Quaker community suddenly got a lot smaller. Coupled with an adolescent restlessness and a boredom with silent worship, I ventured out in another direction. I found myself two blocks down the road from my house, at the First Presbyterian Church. I came through the door of the music department, starting with the bell choir and eventually sitting in the stalls of the choir. Here again I met adults who cared about me, my life of faith, and thought I had an important part to play in our community.

When tenth grade rolled around, my friends all joined the confirmation class. I asked for permission to join as well, and my parents were willing to let me sit in. I enjoyed the conversations, the engagement with the bible, and felt a part of a community that took God seriously. I had never been baptized, so as the class began to draw to a close I asked my parents if I could be baptized and confirmed with my class. They startled me by saying, "no."

In retrospect, I appreciate my parent's belief that this was a very important decision in my life. And, it was one they did not want me to make lightly. They were worried that this was more of a social decision, than one about faith. So, they asked me to wait for a year. I was predictably annoyed and compliant.

While they were rightly concerned about peer pressure in my teenage life, in this case, there was something deeper going on for me. I had an experience in the community that made me want to commit to it in a deeper way. Through my years with the Quakers and now the Presbyterians I felt myself drawn to commit in a formal way to God. Whether I would have called it an experience of hearing the good news is unclear. But I had acknowledged a deep longing within myself. Sitting in a darkened sanctuary during an all night lock in I had a sense of the presence of God that I could not shake.

While, I would not have called it the Holy Spirit, I knew that something important had happened. If Philip the Deacon had been around and I had been of age, I would have asked the same question as the Ethiopian eunuch. "What is there to prevent me from being baptized?" Luckily for my pastor, I did not put him on the spot, but dutifully waited a year and then presented myself decently and in order at Sunday worship.

My parents were there in support, as they have continued to be each step of this rather unexpected Christian journey of mine. And while I don't remember the lessons of the day, or the sermon, I remember the feel of water trickling down the nape of my neck and I can still describe the lace blouse I was wearing. I was home in a new way. The Spirit had called and I had answered.

Today we celebrate our patronal feast, and so we have again heard the story of Philip the Deacon and the Ethiopian eunuch. It is a strange story in some ways. Full of moving chariots, baptisms outside of recommended preparation guidelines, and a Spirit that might cause angels to talk to us or a whirlwind to pick us up at the end of the service and land us suddenly in a new place. While we are surrounded by eagerness and joy, there is something a bit otherworldly in the tale. It has adventure, but if we really thought this is what we were signing up for in the life of faith, I wonder whether we would all be sitting here quite so calmly.

If we had read a bit before this passage in the Books of Acts we might be even more uncomfortable. For, we would have also seen Philip at work healing those who were possessed by demons, converting magicians and getting everyone so riled up in his ministry that the Apostles from Jerusalem thought they had better check up on Philip and make sure that these baptisms he was performing were legitimate. Upon seeing his good work, the disciples decide to lay hands on those who have been baptized and we are told they then received the Holy Spirit.

So, I have to wonder, who exactly is in charge here? The disciples? Philip? Those in need of healing? An outsider in the form of the Ethiopian eunuch?

The only explanation that makes sense is that the Holy Spirit is in charge, but that adds an element of wildness and unpredictability to the scene that we may not be terribly comfortable with. We like our rituals and our sacraments to be a bit more orderly.

Why can't Luke figure out what comes first, the Spirit or the Sacrament? At times in the New Testament the Spirits show up and the water is just the final sealing of the promise. Other times, the baptism has taken place, but further hand laying seems to be required. How are we to know how to go about engaging this life of faith?

Well despite his adventurous approach to answering the Spirit's call, St. Philip has some fairly practical steps to offer us. Ones that translate beyond chasing chariots and casting out demons.

The first is his willingness to go places beyond his comfort zone. After persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem, Philip left his home and went to a city of Samaria. A place where he may not have anticipated going when he first heard the call of Jesus. He met with those who were there and engaged them faithfully. He did not decide ahead of time who might be willing to hear the good news and ended up in the company of those who might have been beyond his imagination. As surprising as the conversion of Saul seemed to the early church, the magician Simon was a powerful person in the city. He would hardly have seemed a likely target for conversion.

Philip continued to remain open and was open to the next stage of his journey when he was told to go south. It is then he meets the Ethiopian. Everything about this encounter shows Philip's willingness to remain open. He encounters someone from the outside, but is willing to engage in a real conversation. He tells what he knows of the good news, but we sense he does not see himself as having all the answers. If he did, he could never have heard the eunuch's request for baptism and responded the way he did. And did you notice what happened during the baptism? They both went down in the water together. The Ethiopian may have requested the baptism, but they were both transformed in the process. Each time we baptize new Christians, the Body of Christ is expanded and we are all transformed.

We gather today to welcome these children into that story. It is a story of community and a story about committing together to remain open to the movements of the Spirit. We make vows today along with the parents and the godparents, without any real knowledge of what the next steps will bring. We are on the road together though and we sense deeply the mystery of doing this together. That somehow we will have a different life of faith for ourselves and our children if we engage in the enterprise together. As parents this can be difficult because it means we have to acknowledge that we are not fully in control. But the richness of allowing our children to come to know other adults who love and care for them for no

other reason than a common faith cannot be underestimated. Whether it is a casual conversation over pizza at a youth event, or the patience of someone teaching a child to swim, or how to sing. These are simple steps on the road to faith. And while it is unpredictable where we might end up, it is clear there will be great cause for rejoicing along the way. So, the Holy Spirit is asking us a question this morning. "Will you join me on the journey?"

Amen

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