
Philip the Deacon as Grace, Excellence, and Hospitality

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
Observing the Feast of St. Philip the Deacon

The eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea. Acts 8:36b-40

As of last week, I have been here at the Cathedral of St. Philip for sixteen years; and over those years, I have been thrilled to preach on the person of Philip the Deacon.

This cathedral in Atlanta, Georgia, honors Philip as our patron saint, not least because Philip is a deacon. The world tends to think of cathedrals as grand and imposing structures, worthy of awe and prestige. And from the outside, this church, here on a grand site looking down Peachtree Road, looks imposing. We look imposing to the ordinary driver in Atlanta. We look grand and prestigious.

But, with your help, I have strived for one thing over these past years. We at the Cathedral of St. Philip have worked against the notion of being grand and imposing. It is not the way of Jesus Christ to impose, or to be imposing.

Much of the rest of the world, and even much of the church, want our institutions to be imposing. We want to be part of a system that always gets it right. We want to be part of a system to whom we can appeal our grievances and slights, and who will impose their right way upon the world.

Cathedrals have certainly fit that description in the past. And, surely, churches have certainly been institutions that we want to rely on.

But cathedrals and churches have also succumbed to damaging perceptions, too, from age to age. Whenever we have tried to be imperialistic, we have failed the gospel. Every age has its empires. And the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation has been consistent on the subject of empires. Whatever the empire of the age is, the Bible is against it. The Bible is like *Star Wars* in that regard—or, I should say, the *Star Wars* movie takes that theme directly from the Bible. The empire is evil! The Bible is against empire.

In the time of Moses, the empire was Pharaoh and Egypt. The Bible was against pharaoh. Then it was the empire of Assyria, in the eighth century BC, who conquered the Northern Israel Kingdom. The Bible was against Assyria. Then it was Babylon, who demolished the temple of Jerusalem in 587 BC. The Bible was against the empire of Babylon. Then, in first century, AD, the empire was certainly Rome. The Bible, and first century Christians in general, were against the Roman Empire.

Empires generally get their way by imposing, and by being imposing. Empires are imperious, deciding their way without

the consensus of the people, and generally without respect for the common good.

Sadly, in times of tension, even good and healthy structures, like the church, are tempted to imperiousness. Sometimes they have good reason to act imperiously. But such action can be dangerous. It might be said that the last ten or fifteen years of anxiety in the Episcopal Church have tempted us to act too imperiously.

But that's an issue for another sermon. Certainly cathedrals have been perceived as structures or systems that can act imperiously. Indeed, some people desire for cathedrals to act imperiously, with all-or-nothing absolutism.

But that is decidedly not the mission of the Cathedral of St. Philip. Even when people project grandeur and imposition upon us, when they want us to be grand and imposing, that is not our way.

Today, we celebrate the character of our patron saint, Philip, as a deacon, called to serve. We are a cathedral named for a deacon. Named not for an emperor, not for a king, not for a president, not for a CEO. Named for a deacon. Deacons are servants. Today we are reminded that we are called to be a servant.

The apostles of Jesus, apparently, did succumb to false perceptions of greatness. Apparently, a dispute arose among them one day as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles (those in the world), those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant." (Luke 22:24 and Mark 10:42-43).

I wish that gospel selection was the assigned gospel for today, the Feast of St. Philip. The greatest among you is the one who serves, not the one who is the emperor.

When I talk about our ministry here at the Cathedral of St. Philip, I talk about service with three words, three words that I use a lot. Those words are grace, excellence, and hospitality. Every time I speak to a confirmation class, every time I try to tell people what the purpose or mission or vision of the Cathedral is, those words emerge: Grace, Excellence, and Hospitality.

They are not mere words, of course. They are values. If someone wants me to put them into a mission statement, I usually say, "The mission of the Cathedral is to serve the gospel of Jesus Christ with grace, excellence, and hospitality."

The values we respect at the Cathedral are the ones of Philip the Deacon. He had the hospitality to join his questioner, the Ethiopian eunuch; he got up into the chariot with him. Philip had the excellence to explain clearly the gospel. Philip had the grace to baptize the eunuch right then and there, just as the Ethiopian eunuch requested.

Of course, the values of grace and excellence and hospitality can mean different things to people, and that is fine. But, for me, the meanings are these: Grace is simply the elegant love of God; it is the love of God expressed in as simple and beautiful and economical a way as possible. Excellence is the desire to do things well, according to whatever the standard of the event or project is. Hospitality is respect; hospitality is welcoming everyone, including everyone, dignifying everyone, especially the stranger, especially the Ethiopian eunuch. Hospitality is serving others more than oneself.

On this Sunday, the Cathedral of St. Philip honors the feast of St. Philip the Deacon. With him, we baptize new Christians into the name of greatness, but not greatness as the world perceives it, not greatness as empire and imperialism—but greatness as service. We baptize people into service, the service of grace and excellence and hospitality.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip