
From the Cathedral Archives: Past Sermons For the Present

In this series, we republish articles and sermons relevant to our current times.

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Philip the Deacon

October 13, 2002

Acts chapter 8 tells the fascinating story for today: the story of St. Philip the Deacon, who found himself wandering one day, down the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. St. Philip was led by God to attach himself to a foreigner, an Ethiopian eunuch, who had been to Jerusalem to worship.

Now, talk of a eunuch in polite society, or in some discreet Christian Church is not very common these days. But eunuchs are mentioned in the Bible some fifty times. The general definition of a eunuch might be this: “males who do not have the ability to reproduce.” The reason for that inability might be genetic, and it might be due to accident. The perception accorded eunuchs in scripture is probably the same perception as that accorded homosexuality. Eunuchs were obviously regarded as different from most; and because they were different, certain roles were denied them.





They were considered blemished, and

so the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus dictated that they could not offer sacrifice, or even be admitted to the assembly of the Lord (Deut 23:1-3 and Lev 21:18-20). In fact, they were considered as foreigners. Any foreigner, too, was not allowed to join the chosen people of God.

But something happens in the development of Scripture, and in the development of God's people. The prophet Isaiah changes the attitude of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, when he makes the startling pronouncement at chapter 56, verse 3:

*Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,
The Lord will surely separate me from his people;
And do not let the eunuch say,
I am just a dry tree.*

*For thus says the Lord:
To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
... and the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord*

*These I will bring to my holy mountain,
And make them joyful in my house of prayer*

For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people.

*Thus says the Lord God,
who gathers the outcast of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered.*

This incredibly provocative passage begins to be fulfilled in the Book of Acts, when Paul and Peter discover that God has poured out the Spirit upon Gentiles, upon people who were not obviously regarded as the people of God.

And St. Philip, the deacon, fulfills the prophecy even more clearly. He attaches himself to someone who is both a foreigner and a eunuch, someone who does not fit the customary description of purity and correctness. And Philip baptizes this Ethiopian eunuch. Philip baptizes him and so makes him part of a new community, a new definition of God's people.

The witness of Philip is a critical one for us. If we are to follow in his footsteps, it will mean at least three things. First of all, we must be willing to move, to follow the Spirit into new territory, even into wilderness places to which we are unaccustomed. Part of my own fascination with Philip is that he is transported from place to place.

It is good that we are named for this kind of Philip, as the cathedral church of a city...on the move...driving cars and flying airplanes from place to place. The word Philip, in the Greek, translates literally as "lover of horses." (If you are a horse-lover, you are in the right church!) Philip is a horse-lover; and a horse was the noblest and fastest means of transportation of the day.

Yes, there is good reason for Atlanta, with its dependence upon the automobile, upon the airport, and as a crossroads of transportation, to have a cathedral named for Philip, who used transportation to its fullest extent, who traveled to baptize even the foreigner and the stranger. I believe it is a good thing, too, that this very cathedral has traveled. We were once further south, across the street from the state capital; but we kept on the move. We are meant to be a traveling church.

If we are to follow Philip, we must overcome any fear of travel, but—secondly—we must also overcome fear of the foreigner and of the stranger, the one who appears blemished, or much different from the norm. This fear seeps through much of American society these days, and it affects us here in Atlanta. North Atlanta fears South Atlanta. We tend to go to church, to go to schools, to go to clubs, with people who are the most similar to us. Indeed, that is easy. But it is not the mission of St. Philip the Deacon.

The mission of St. Philip would be to attach ourselves to the people who are different from us, who speak different languages than us, who are gay or lesbian or straight, but of different sexual orientation than us. The mission of St. Philip would be to serve as a deacon everyone with whom we come into contact.

Thirdly, St. Philip also baptized. We are becoming very good at this. We baptized twenty-two people this morning. I know that not everyone baptized here is immediately energized with the Christian witness; but I believe God honors those baptisms. In baptism, we open our community to a wider and wider constituency. We make people part of the glorious Body of Christ in this place. And we are changed by their presence. The early Christian Church was changed by the influence of different people being baptized, people like this Ethiopian eunuch, people like Timothy whose mother was Jewish, but his father was Greek—a foreigner.

After this baptism of the Ethiopian, St. Philip suddenly found himself at Azotus, a town very far to the north; and the Scripture says he made his way up the Mediterranean coast to Caesarea, where he apparently lived. Later in the Book of Acts, he has four daughters—he has a family—and he is proclaiming the good news.

Proclaiming the good news. That was the mission of St. Philip, and that is our primary task at this cathedral. The good news that Jesus Christ has come among us in love and grace. Jesus loves us, no matter what our ethnic origin or physical description.

In 1933, the Dean of this Cathedral, Raimundo De Ovies preached a sermon in which he claimed that the cathedral was a house of prayer for all people. He said that “from henceforth the keynote of the communicants of this House of God shall be ‘Service.’” “We shall not be respecters of persons,” he said. “One’s possessions, social standing, family affiliations, or any other worldly standard can find no particular value in this place.

Indeed, we are here to offer another particular value, the value of love. We are here to welcome the lonely and the stranger, the foreigner and the blemished, the rich and the poor, no matter what your wilderness has been. We are here to serve one another with good news: Jesus loves us, no matter where you are in your pilgrimage. This city, where so many are on the move, where so many are strangers, where so many are looking for love—this city—has a cathedral, a house of prayer for all people.

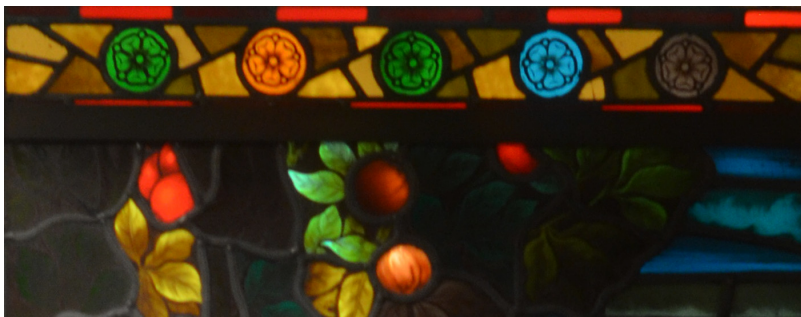
AMEN.

Get Up and Go: Saint Philip the Deacon and Christian Mission

October 14, 2007

Last Sunday, a group of Jewish high school students visited the Cathedral of St. Philip. They had made polite inquiries and arrangements beforehand, asking one of the clergy to meet with them afterwards; and it was clear they were with us to explore the presence of God in traditions other than theirs. I was glad they were with us, and I explicitly welcomed them during the parish announcements.

What I discovered during their visit was that our service changed. Our service was different because this group of Jewish students was with us. I do not mean, of course, that we said any different prayers or sang any different hymns, or consecrated bread and wine any differently.







No, the difference was within ourselves.

When I said my prayers that Sunday, I heard those prayers differently. When I used the name of Jesus (which I do often!), when I used images of the cross, when I sang about resurrection, I found myself reflecting—quickly as it might have been—upon how those notes met Jewish ears. As I spoke and prayed and sang, I did not regret a single word. I simply heard them differently. I might even have heard them more definitely and clearly. I certainly realized the power of the name of Jesus again.

That Sunday, I remembered that context changes the way we hear things. Context even changes our comprehension of things. When any two members of a family, for instance, are discussing a third member of that family, the discussion will be quite different if that third member is actually present. When our nation's leaders discuss other countries, it matters when we know the other countries are listening!

The Episcopal Church has been re-learning this principle during recent years. When Christians are discussing homosexuality, for instance, the tone and attitude of the conversation changes dramatically if gays and lesbians are actually part of the group! And the same goes for global community. The conversation among global western Christians changes dramatically when global southern Christians are present. It is probably the case that global western and global southern Christians are, for the most part, just learning how to have such graceful and truthful conversations together!

Many of the more strident arguments occurring globally are occurring because some people did not realize that other people were “over-hearing” the conversation. Some people did not realize that other people were in the room. Of course, these other people weren't literally in the room. These other people were listening to the television coverage and following internet coverage on the World Wide Web.

Context changes things. Context changes both the way we say things and the way we hear things. And it should. Our context is our community, and community is where we have civil and graceful and truthful conversation. One of the challenges of our time is that Americans really do not know much about the people who are listening to our conversations. Those listeners might be Muslims or Jews. Those listeners might be Iraqi citizens, they might be Nigerian Anglicans, they might be Palestinians, they might be Chinese village farmers, they might be gays and lesbians (who are certainly, and thankfully, among us already). They are “the stranger,” who is closer to us than we think!

How can the Christian Church meet this challenge? This challenge of understanding other cultures? We cannot do it by watching television and looking up items on the internet.

The Christian answer is mission. We must be strong and courageous enough to leave our homes and comfortable culture and to travel out in mission to the world. That is where we learn. Last week, that group of Jewish high school students learned much more about the Episcopal Church by visiting one (and staying all the way through our worship service!). They didn't just Google the Episcopal Church or read the latest blog about us.

The Episcopal Church has taught me that Christians are being called to mission again. We are being called to go out into the world in the name of grace and service.

Today is the feast day of St. Philip the Deacon and Evangelist, and I am glad once again that our cathedral takes him as our patron saint. Consider Philip who had the courage to leave his comfortable home in Jerusalem and to travel along a wilderness road to the South. (I realize that it may not have been courage that prodded him; Jerusalem was in the midst of a persecution that may also have led him to leave!).

It is Philip the Deacon who dares to speak to a stranger, a stranger in terms of culture, race, and gender. The stranger is an Ethiopian eunuch. But he is reading the same sacred scriptures as Philip knows. Philip is led to teach and to baptize. The Ethiopian eunuch is changed by this encounter, and so is Philip! Philip is snatched away by the spirit and finds himself at

Azotus; Philip becomes a new man setting up a new home. The Christian Church itself was changed by Philip's encounter with the stranger.

Christian mission is not merely about changing other people. Christian mission is also about changing ourselves. Though missionaries throughout history have differed mightily in their tasks and character, they do seem to share one experience. Every missionary has a story of how he or she was changed by serving in another culture. He or she was changed by speaking Christian words in a foreign context.

Our Cathedral celebrates Philip today. And our Cathedral celebrates baptism today. What I have said today also applies to baptism. When we baptize new Christians into our church, and into our families, we ourselves are changed by their presence. You who are having children baptized today: remember, it is you who will be changed by their presence! And you, all of us, will be changed in the Spirit of God for the better!

As we celebrate baptism and Philip the Deacon today, I call upon us to re-engage mission. It is time to travel away from our "comfort zones," whatever they might be. Several groups in this church are already planning our next mission travels. There will be others.

"Get up and go," said the angel of the Lord to Philip. "Get up and go," says the angel to us today. Go to that lonely teenager playing video games that you do not understand. Go to the south! Go to south Atlanta; go to the southern hemisphere, to Ecuador and Brazil. Get up and go to England, to South Africa, to Tanzania, to China and India.

"Get up and go," and we will all be changed. We will be changed by that spirit of Jesus who said "remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

AMEN.

Philip the Deacon as Grace, Excellence, and Hospitality

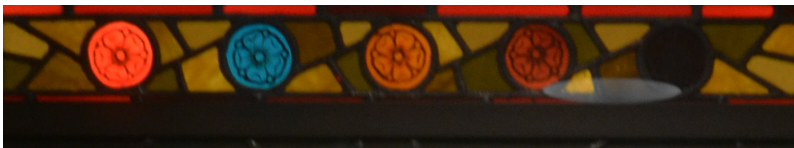
October 12, 2014

"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.

AMEN.