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## *A New Identity*

**A sermon by Canon Todd Smelser**  
**The Feast of St. Philip**

Perhaps like many of you, I have dabbled some with my genealogy. One branch of my family can now be traced back to the early 1700s in County Roscommon, Ireland. But other lines of my heritage remain elusive. For example, I know that Smelser is an Anglicized version of Schmelzer, but I don't have history beyond the mid-nineteenth century. So I took the plunge and sent a DNA swab into ancestry.com, to let them do their analysis of my roots. I think I was hoping for some exotic results, but they came back very predictable. I was basically Northern European, with a heavy dose of English, Irish, and Scottish ancestry. There was a touch of flair of 5 percent from the Iberian Peninsula, but all the rest was pretty predictable. There was the opportunity with this service to get connected with distant cousins who shared the same heritage, but that was more than I had bargained for. There seems to be other pursuits in my life which are more rewarding than tracking down fifth cousins who I might not have anything in common with, except our DNA.

As Christians, we are baptized and grafted into another family—God's family. Throughout the past two thousand years, followers of Jesus as the Way have gathered to pray and to worship a God who chose to reveal Godself in the form of a human being, Jesus of Nazareth. While many of his followers led ordinary yet faithful lives, there were others, the holy women and men of the Church, who have led extraordinary lives of witness and service. We can see some of their images in our stained glass windows and we remember them in our daily Eucharist in St. Mary's Chapel. We sometimes call them saints, for they often mirrored in their lives the love and compassion of Christ. Last Sunday, for example, we celebrated St. Francis of Assisi, who gave up personal wealth and status in order to serve the poor and lowly in his day. He also had a deep reverence for all of creation, and that's why we bless animals and pets on that day. The present Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis, also chose the name for Francis for his Papal name, since his ministry in South America, and now in the Vatican, has always identified with the poor and marginalized of the world.

Today, this Cathedral celebrates her patronal day, as we celebrate the ministry of Philip, Deacon and Evangelist. St. Philip appears several times in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. He was one of the seven chosen to care for the poor of the Christian community in Jerusalem. He preached and performed miracles in Samaria, and in today's reading, met and baptized an Ethiopian eunuch in Gaza, traditionally marking the start of the Ethiopian Church. Later, he lived in Caesarea Maritima with his four daughters who prophesied, where he was visited by the Apostle Paul.

The seven who cared for the needs of its widows and other poor were probably the church's first deacons, although Scripture doesn't indicate this. One of those was Stephen, who became the Church's first martyr. After his death, there was a general persecution in Jerusalem and many Christians fled to escape it. Philip fled to Samaria where he preached the Gospel to the Samaritans, a group who had split off from the Jewish people six centuries earlier, had intermarried with other peoples, and were considered outsiders by many Jews. They received his message with eagerness, and soon Peter and John came there to bless the new converts.

After this Philip was sent by God to walk along the road from Jerusalem southwest to Gaza. There he met a man who was an official of a royal court of the Queen of Ethiopia, returning home after worshipping in Jerusalem. The man was reading from the 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah—"he was wounded for our transgressions." Philip told him about Jesus, and persuaded him that the words were a prophecy of the saving work of Jesus. The man was baptized, and went on his way rejoicing, while

Philip went north to Caesarea, the major seaport of Israel.

Sometimes we go to great lengths to discover or re-discover our identity. My exchange with [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com) was interesting, but hardly life-changing. But this morning we baptize new members into the Church. We pray that this may be a life-changing event for all the baptismal families—an experience of God’s unconditional love. We hope that this service of holy initiation may have deep and extraordinary consequences for these young children.

To paraphrase the conversation of the two fathers in the musical *The Fantasticks*, when you plant a radish, a radish grows; but with children you don’t know the result until long after the seed is sown. As we all know, human life and relationships are unpredictable. The world can often seem impersonal and even scary. The Church, however, continues to provide all of us with a structure of hope and promise. Our rituals, our traditions, even our buildings can provide a needed context of security and earning. We know that these parents and godparents love their children. We the Church also want to remind us all of God’s love for them as well. But the foundation of love is not just affection and nurture—it is also about trust and faith.

This morning, we are asking you, the parents of these children, to share the love you have for them, with the love that God has for them. You have named your children, but this morning they will become part of a much larger family of followers of Jesus. They will be named in baptism and signed with oil, marking them as Christ’s own forever. You will make promises not only to be there for them, but to help them grown into the faith that will sustain them throughout life’s many changes and challenges. You can teach them about trust and faith, by being trustworthy and faithful yourselves.

What we are doing this morning is not magical but it is holy. Following Jesus’ direction in today’s Gospel reading we are to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And Jesus promises that he will be with us, to the end of the age.