

“We’re in this together”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA
5th Sunday of Easter – May 10, 2009 (Mother’s Day)
Acts 8:26-40, John 15:1-8

When I was a kid my family sometimes made audio tapes to send to my grandparents. Of course we didn’t have email in those days, and long distance phone calls were very expensive, so letter writing was our most frequent form of communication. But every once in awhile, we would create an audio letter so my grandparents could hear our voices. We still have one or two of those lying around. Listening to them is very embarrassing. I was about 4 or 5 on one of them, and my brother was two years younger. My mother was trying to get him to talk on the tape, encouraging him to demonstrate how he could count up to 10. In the background is big sister. “I can do it. I can do it. I know how. Let me... One, two, three...” Boy was I a show off. I was a little like that in school, too, at least until jr. high when I realized it was uncool. I was always raising my hand, “I know, I know!” I wanted to show everyone that I knew the right answer. In some ways I’ve grown out of that. But I still like to show that I know things, and I feel embarrassed when I don’t.

How different from the eunuch in our story from Acts. Here we have a court official who serves the Queen of the Ethiopians by overseeing her treasury. He is a rich man, an important man. Not only is he riding in a chariot, but he also owns a scroll of Isaiah that he is carrying with him on his travels and reading. It’s not like he could go down to the local Barnes and Noble and pick up a paperback copy of the scriptures. Although his sexual status as a eunuch would have caused him to be an outcast among the Jews, in his own context, he was probably a very powerful and wealthy man. Imagine what he thinks when he sees Philip chasing him down.

Philip hears him reading Isaiah and asks, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

How many of us, if we had been in that chariot, would have answered Philip the way the Ethiopian did? Wouldn't we have wanted to show off our knowledge? I can imagine young Lauren saying, “I know, I know.” Even if we didn't know, might we have been inclined to bluff, to pretend, to make something up in order to save face? Would we admit to someone running alongside our expensive vehicle that we didn't understand what we were reading? But the Holy Spirit is at work here, and instead of leaving Philip to eat his dust, the Ethiopian invites him into his chariot. “How can I understand, unless someone guides me?” he asks. What a marvelous question.

How can I understand unless someone guides me? We aren't intended to interpret the scriptures on our own. We aren't intended to walk on our spiritual journeys alone. We aren't intended to grow in our faith alone. We need guides, mentors, companions to interpret with us, walk with us, grow with us. We have to resist the voices of our culture that tell us to look out for number one. We have to resist thinking that we must do everything on our own. We have to allow ourselves to be as vulnerable as the Ethiopian saying, “How can I understand, unless someone guides me?” And then we have to allow someone else to guide us.

It's humbling to ask for help. But look what happened in this story. The Ethiopian asked for help, and Philip gave it to him, opening the scriptures for him and sharing with him the good news of Jesus. He instantly "got it," understood so well what Philip told him about Jesus that he wanted to be baptized immediately. "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Nothing was to prevent him. Philip baptized him on the spot, bringing him into the community of Christ. And he went on his way rejoicing!

Sometimes we're not in the role of the Ethiopian. Sometimes we're in the role of Philip, being blown about by the Spirit and being called to proclaim the Good News to someone new, someone different, someone who is not already on the inside. Frequently I think Episcopalians are more than willing to say, "I'm not sure I understand." We find it easy to identify with the Ethiopian. We think we don't know much about the Bible, even though our liturgy is almost entirely made up of passages taken from scripture. We struggle to proclaim the Gospel because we don't want to offend anyone or turn anyone off. And yet, our world needs to keep hearing the story of Jesus, his life and teachings, his death and resurrection. Philip is our model. God called him to go out on a wilderness road, to run after a chariot carrying a wealthy, foreign, ritually impure man and to preach to him the good news of Christ. If God called us to do the same, would we go?

Maybe some of us would. And maybe some of us would need a guide to show us how, a guide like Philip. On that wilderness road, Philip listened to the Spirit, and the Ethiopian listened to Philip. Where two were gathered together in that chariot, God was with them. That's what's so important about Christian community, so important about our time here together on Sunday mornings, so important about everything we do together. We can't be Christians in isolation.

Being here on Sunday morning is vital, not because we're supposed to "get something" out of it, but because this is where we encourage each other, pray for each other, guide each other. This is where we come to worship God, to give thanks and praise, to hear the word of God, to remember that we abide in Jesus, and to be a community walking together on the path of Christ. This is where some weeks we come for guidance and other weeks we come to be the guides. We need each other, just as the Ethiopian needed Philip.

The story ends by telling us that the Spirit snatched Philip away to another region where he continued to proclaim the good news to all the towns. We do not hear any more about the Ethiopian except that he went on his way rejoicing. But I would bet that he became another evangelist, like Philip, and that he also proclaimed the good news to those whom he met. Having experienced Christian community, having died and been raised again with Christ in baptism, he would have continued on his way, seeking out others in need of guidance.

When we come here together each Sunday morning, being nurtured in the Word and sacraments, deepening our relationship with Jesus and with each other, and growing in our faith, then we too are equipped to be sent out into the world. We have to be alert to those who are standing in chariots in our culture waiting for someone to come and share the good news. They can be found on our streets, in our neighborhoods, in our work places, in our schools. Frequently they may be found on a wilderness road, at the margins, just like the Ethiopian. Who out there is looking for God but doesn't know how to find God until someone guides them? We may not know all the answers, but we know enough to be companions on the way, to share our faith, and most of all to proclaim the good news of Jesus. We can, with God's help.