



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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MAY 3, 2015
THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Good Questions Psalm 22:25-31; Acts 8:26-38

Over the past couple of weeks, Deborah and I have been printing pictures from our last sabbatical in preparation to place them in a scrapbook of the trip. The process is somewhat slow because each picture holds a story and each story is a part of our family's history. Every time we look at a picture, that story replays itself.

Reading over today's lesson from the book of The Acts of the Apostles, I realized how similar that early Christian text is to a scrapbook. It recalls stories of the Early Church, tracks the journeys of Paul and other missionaries, and offers a good look at how the first Christians settled into their new expression of faith. Some of these stories flow like a slide show, one picture melting into another. For instance, we watch Peter and John bring healing to a lame man and then defend their faith before the Roman authorities or we witness the dramatic conversion, blinding, and new sight of Paul. Other stories are single snapshots, a momentary glimpse at a single event in Christian history. The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is one such "photograph." Listen:

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied

him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.”

The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and 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 8:26-40

This event is an amazing story on many levels. It begins with an angel telling Philip to go immediately to a particular intersection of two major roads and concludes with Philip suddenly vanishing from one spot and reappearing in another, somewhat like Samantha’s relatives on *Bewitched* or the various characters in a Harry Potter story who manage to instantaneously transport themselves from one place to another.

As fascinating as they are, these mysterious aspects of the story are merely the frame and matting which surround this picture. They capture our attention and draw us in for a closer look, but we must be careful lest they distract us from seeing the picture itself. It is an image of Philip sharing the Gospel with the Ethiopian eunuch, to be certain. But look more closely. Pay attention to the details. Do you see what holds this picture together and makes it truly interesting? It is the questions that are asked. The questions, like a smile, a gesture, or an object almost overlooked, tell us more about what is happening in this snapshot of a day in the life of an early believer.

Philip, looking for a reason to engage this foreign man in conversation (for surely he is the reason Philip was sent to this spot), asks a logical question: “Do you understand what you are reading?” The man, who is surprisingly honest, answers with another question: “How can I, unless someone guides me?” I probably would have feigned understanding and suggested that I was getting along all right muddling through the scroll of

Isaiah. I think most of us would do so. The eunuch was hungry for truth and did not want to miss an opportunity to find out what Isaiah meant. Philip began explaining the prophecy but the man interrupted him and asked whom the prophet was describing. Philip told him about Jesus, why he had come to live on earth, what he had done, the manner in which he died, and how he came back to life. More than enthralled with the story, the Ethiopian was transformed. When he realized they were passing a body of water, he asked the ultimate question, "What would prevent me from being baptized?" In other words, he was professing his faith in Christ on the spot and wanted to bear witness to it through baptism.

We see, then, in this eighth chapter of Acts, a picture of discipleship. We see what followers of Christ do. Earlier this spring, ten of our young people did as the Ethiopian did. They studied scripture, they asked questions about what it means, and they learned what being a Christian is all about. When those experiences converge into faith, we celebrate with baptism, as we have done today. Baptism is our witness to the world that Jesus Christ is the answer to the deepest questions of life. The Lord's table, or communion, is our witness that Christ answered those questions for our sake.

Christian faith begins with good questions. There are plenty of answers in the Bible, but they become relevant to us only when applied to the right questions. That is the genius of the game show Jeopardy!®. The "answers" that are given make sense only when the contestants ask the appropriate questions.

You will remember the occasion when a lawyer asked Jesus, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25) Jesus asked him what he had learned from the law because he knew the man was asking the wrong question. He was concerned with his eternal fate alone and not with his faith. The man answered that we are to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength and love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus told him to live that law, but the man asked another question, "Who is my neighbor?" Now he was getting closer to the truth. Jesus told the story we know as "The Good Samaritan" and asked the man which of the people in the story was the neighbor to the injured man. The man answered, "The one who showed mercy." "Then live with mercy," Jesus advised him.

It is important for us to ask the right questions in order to understand scripture and to live faithfully. Had the lawyer asked, "How can I best live out my faith?", Jesus would have answered, "Live with mercy toward all people." Imagine how different our world would be if we all treated one another with

mercy! Discrimination, oppression, violence, and abuse would be nonexistent. As people of faith, we have to ask the right questions.

What did Jesus mean when he said . . . ? Why did Jesus tell this story or make that statement? Why did the Gospel writers include this story and not something else? What could God possibly be telling me as I read this story? Who wrote the Bible? Why did they write these things? What do Old Testament texts have to say about my twenty-first century faith? Why do the biblical characters seem so familiar? Why did Jesus come back to life? What difference does his resurrection make for my life? How can I live faithfully in this world?

The questions—the good questions—we ask make all the difference in the answers we are given. Good questions distinguish real students from those who are only occupying space. The disciples of Jesus Christ—you and me—are expected to ask questions since that is the only way we are going to get good answers. If the Ethiopian had not asked good questions, he never would have been told the truth about Jesus. If Philip had not asked the first question, he would not have had the opportunity to share Christ with the man. A good question asked from an open heart will lead us to the truth and, as Jesus said, “The truth will make you free” (John 8:32). Freedom in Christ is the longing of faithful hearts. Seek the truth by asking good questions and discover a vibrant faith. Amen.

May 3, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

On this day when we gather before the waters of baptism and around the table of life, we celebrate, O God. We celebrate the faith of this new believer and we celebrate our own faith. We rejoice that you love us enough to come and live among us and to die and live again so that we might live. We celebrate that our faith, sometimes tested and bruised, is strong and resilient because it is centered in your unfailing grace.

Thank you, O God, for the many ways you reveal yourself to us. Some of us see your hand in the brilliant colors of springtime flowers while others glimpse your face in the faces of other people who love them or who long to be loved by them. Others of us hear the whisper of your voice in the dark of night or in the midst of the raging storms of life. However we experience you, O God, we are grateful that you are more to us than stories in a book or rote prayers spoken for centuries. You live within us and walk with us, and we are grateful.

Our concerns today are more abundant than the words we have to offer in prayer. You know our personal needs for health and well-being. You share our concerns for this community and the world at large. We grieve over violence and unnecessary harm caused to one person by another. We weep over the tragedies we cannot prevent but which bring deep pain and need. We live with the throbbing sorrow that comes when someone we love suffers or dies. We stand speechless in the face of needs around us. But we know, O God, that you see what we see and feel what we feel. Bring the power of your grace to bear upon our world and meet our needs we pray. And guide us as we unclasp our hands from spoken prayer to engage them in meeting the prayers we have just offered.

May your mercy wash over us today and cleanse us once again. May your love for us welcome us to your table where we may be fed. May your desire for us burn within us so that we will not rest until your will is done here and throughout the world for which you lived and died and live forever. Amen.