

Acts 8:26-40 ~ John 15:1-8
What Does Love Call us to do?
 5th Sunday of Easter ~ Healing Service ~April 29, 2018
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Introduction to Scripture Reading:

Before we hear the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, I want to give you a little backstory to provide some context: The Philip in our story is Philip the Evangelist, (not Philip the Apostle, one of Jesus original 12) but Philip the Evangelist—the 2nd of the 7 men chosen in Acts 6 to assist the twelve apostles. This Philip is actually quite new on the job and new to the faith. When our story begins, Philip’s friend Stephen, the first named of the seven—had just been stoned to death for proclaiming Christ, and with this stoning, a severe persecution against anyone in the church in Jerusalem had begun. So here is Philip, the fledgling evangelist, having recently fled Jerusalem, heading southwest on a wilderness road toward Gaza.

The other man in our text, the Ethiopian Eunuch, is bumping along in his chariot in the same direction as Philip, but he was on his way home from a spiritual pilgrimage he has just made all the way from Ethiopia to Jerusalem. That’s a long way to go in a chariot to worship in a city where he knew he would be excluded by law from entering the Temple. Yet even still, this eunuch had made this extreme pilgrimage, and at this point is heading south in his chariot, on his long way south, back to Ethiopia.

Philip catches sight of him, and at the Spirit’s calling, speeds up to join him. Much to his surprise, as he gets closer Philip overhears the Eunuch reading out loud to himself from the prophet, Isaiah.

Sermon

“I was hoping you could baptize Andrew on the beach this summer.” My sister-in-law Kristi and her husband Woody had just adopted their baby boy from an orphanage in Bolivia. No one knew his actual birthday, he seemed to be about 10 months old when they were given the green light to go to Bolivia and bring him to their home in Santa Cruz, CA. Adopting this precious baby boy was a dream come true for them, and baptizing him into her Presbyterian roots, was an important next step. However they didn’t belong to a church nor had they since Kristi’s childhood. And at that point, when Kristi asked me to baptize her baby, I was a relatively new pastor, equipped with *my Book of Common Worship* and *Book of Order* to guide me. And I had a problem.

I read the relevant passages frontwards and backwards. I could not find a way to perform my nephew’s baptism “by the book.” Her request did not fit within the bounds of our theological understanding of baptism. What church would I be baptizing him into? What Ruling Elder could sign his baptismal certificate to make it official? I will never forget how heavy and conflicted I felt, as I did my best to explain what prevented me from baptizing Andrew. Kristi was gracious and understanding

of my decision, but I have struggled with it ever since. And through it I have learned this much: I was asking the wrong question. And I came up with the wrong answer.

Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized? (Acts 8:36b). That was the right question. This Ethiopian eunuch was filled with the Spirit and with questions just underneath his wealth, education, and authority as a high court official serving Queen Candace of Ethiopia. This one that bubbled to the surface after hearing Philip share the Good News of Christ Jesus, carries the message for us today: *Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?*

Philip could have come up with many reasons that might have prevented him from baptizing the eunuch: his status as foreigner from Africa; his compromised gender status because of his sexually mutilated body; or the possibility that he didn't fully understand the story of Christ's death and resurrection and what baptism into Christ really meant. Or Philip might have had practical concerns about performing an impromptu immersion baptism all by himself in that random body of water.

But one of the things I love about this story is how clearly the Spirit drives it forward, leading both men out there on the "wilderness road" where they were all at once traveling together, side-by-side, doing things they'd never quite done before. Philip recently struck down and humiliated by his friend Stephen's stoning, and the severe persecution against the church and all who believed in Christ. The eunuch, compromised by his mutilated body which would forever marginalize him, no matter how wealthy he became or how high he rose in the ranks of the court. The Spirit led the eunuch to ask the right question, and the Spirit led Philip to do the right thing.

It wasn't about the eunuch's worthiness, or about Philip's authority or ability. No. The question, standing under the shadow of the cross and in the light of the empty tomb is this: "What does love call us to do?"ⁱ The divine love of Christ who suffered for all people, this Divine Love runs under the surface, disregarding, disarming all the boundaries and differences we construct. I am the Vine and You (*all of yawl*) are the branches. That voice, the Spirit of Divine Love said to Philip, "Get wet!" And so they did. And in that baptism, both were healed.

Luke doesn't spell out *what* good news about Jesus Philip actually said. But we can guess, can't we? Somehow, Philip shared the mind boggling truth that these words from Isaiah, "Like a sheep he was led to slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer... in his humiliation justice was denied him," was a prophetic description of Jesus who suffered and died for all of us, including the Ethiopian eunuch. Jesus, like the Eunuch, had also been humiliated. Jesus was cut off and killed by a perversion of justice. But that was not the end of the story. Jesus was raised from the dead so that every one regardless of their skin color, gender identification or sexuality, their station in life--or any other surface difference we come up with. Jesus was raised from the dead so that everyone can be healed, all can

be forgiven, and be freed from the bondage of sin and death. Thanks to Jesus, for the eunuch, the old biblical law in Deuteronomy that barred him from full participation in the covenant community was officially null and void.

Really? This had to be too good to be true. Surely there was some catch. There had to be something, there always was.. But there wasn't! The Good News of Love that bursts boundaries, Love that prunes the ways of death and exclusion, judgment and superiority, was for him. Christ was risen and so was he. They both got wet, they shared by water in Christ's saving death.

This conversation and conversion moment changed forever the Ethiopian's understanding of himself, and Philip's understanding of his new calling and purpose. Both men were healed. That's what Love does. Love calls us to question. Love calls us to listen and respond. Love calls us to listen to the words under the words. Love calls us to see each other, and all of humanity at the foot of the cross, equally loved and equally called to love one another by Christ. But to do that—we all need pruning. Yes: Our Vine-grower, Farmer, God does prune us. As Jesus told his disciples, his last words to them before he was arrested. "I am the Real Vine and my Father is the Farmer *Every branch* that is grape-bearing he prunes back so it will bear even more."

Ouch! No one likes to be pruned. No church body likes to be pruned. It hurts, it stings; it rocks us back on our heels—and brings us to our knees. The Greek root of the word, "kathairei" means *both* to prune and to cleanse. That's something to think about: Especially in our context of baptism, of turning, of repenting. Cleansing and healing in God's realm requires pruning. Like it or not, without pruning, we cannot grow into mature disciples, doing our part, getting wet in our work for justice and peace.

What does Love call us to do? Perhaps you came into worship this morning troubled by a situation or decision, a hurt, a humiliation or a frustration—at work, at school, at home, with a family member or a friend. Take this question home with you and pray with it "What does Love call me to do?" Like Philip and the Eunuch, let the Spirit lead you forward down your wilderness road. Our text from John 15 offers an another way to ask the question, perhaps you need to also ask "What does Love call me to let go of? What does Love call me *not* to do anymore? What is the pruning or the cleansing that will help me to bear more fruit in this situation?"

What does Love call us to do as a church? How are we being called to "get wet" here and now at FPC? Did you know that our church has recently become the primary source for wheelchairs, shower chairs, and other medical equipment that in our community? We lend this equipment out to anyone who needs it. I believe that Love has led us into this ministry that directly and concretely helps folks who are ill and recovering from surgeries and accidents. We have some amazing stories, even just this week with equipment coming in and going out somehow exactly where and when it was needed. This is one example of a ministry that Love calls us to do. And

there are many others we are doing and doing well. As a church seeking to be the Body of Christ here in Marshfield, I hear God calling us to lead with this question in the days ahead: What is Love calling us to do more of? What is Love calling us to let go of? What is Love calling us to begin doing?

When I decided not to baptize my nephew Andrew, I asked the wrong question and I came up with the wrong decision, several years ago. Since then, the Spirit has done some pruning and cleansing in me and in my approach to ministry. Just a couple of weeks ago, on April 12 in Philadelphia, two men entered a Starbucks and left in handcuffs because they sat at a table and waited for their third party to arrive, while being Black. I see multiple individuals, entities, as well as the systemic sin of racism, endemic to our country causing the wrong questions and wrong decisions to be made that day. I already see some pruning and cleansing happening in response, and I pray this experience will call us all to do what we can to prune and cleanse the blight of racism in our hearts, our community, and our country wherever we can.

As we face whatever comes in the days ahead, let us remember to ask the right question, “What does Love call us to do?” And let’s not hesitate to get wet.

ⁱ The idea for focusing my sermon on this question came from Jill Duffield’s article in the *Presbyterian Outlook*, April 27, 2018, “Looking into the Lectionary,” <http://pres-outlook.org/author/jduffield/>