

Being Available

Fifth Sunday of Easter
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, May 10, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Acts 8:26-40; I John 4:7-12; John 15:1-8

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

(On this day, Lauren Blake Savidge received the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.)

It seems to me the apostle Philip in our first lesson today possessed the “ministry of availability.” That’s a phrase I read in a book recently: The “ministry of availability.” See, sometimes there are just those moments where you and I are Spirit-led into an opportunity to minister to someone else. It wasn’t something we necessarily planned. We didn’t wake up that morning knowing we would be serving in such a manner. It wasn’t even something we necessarily felt prepared for, but the opportunity presented itself anyway. And there **we** were, available to minister.

A dear friend of mine who lives in this community told me of an opportunity she found herself in last December. While entering a store at Capital City Mall, she passed a Salvation Army bell-ringer. My friend proceeded through Macy’s, but about halfway down an aisle, something—or Someone—just nagged at her. Something—or Someone—made it clear to her she ought to go back. She decided to listen to the nagging, reversed course and returned to the storefront where the bell-ringer sat. (She admits, however, she grumbled while doing so.) She struck up a conversation with the bell-ringer, who turned out to be talkative. Quite talkative. My friend quickly realized this would not be a short conversation. Remember—this was not on her carefully planned schedule of things to do for the day. Yet she remained in conversation with the bell-ringer.

The upshot of the entire event is this: When my friend began their conversation, the woman was singing to herself and had her nose stuck in a piece of sheet music. My friend asked her about the sheet music, whether perhaps she was practicing Christmas music as a choir member somewhere. Here’s what my friend discovered... First of all, she discovered the bell ringer had to hold the sheet music that close because she was visually impaired. Second, she discovered the bell-ringer loved music, was absolutely passionate about it. In fact, the bell-ringer had taken piano lessons for a time, but when she retired it became financially unfeasible for her. And so it was that my friend decided to contact the bell-ringer’s original piano teacher, and paid that piano teacher to provide the bell-ringer with some more lessons. And providing a few more piano lessons was a way of providing great joy. It was an offering that was life-giving to this nearly-blind bell-ringer who loved music. That’s what I would call the “ministry of availability.”

When I read our first lesson today from the book of Acts, I immediately recalled my friend’s story. I asked her permission to tell it to you today. My friend believes the nagging was a prompting of the Spirit. She was wise and faithful enough to listen and respond. This was exactly what happened with Philip, wasn’t it? It was the Spirit that in a sense “nagged” him, right? The Spirit urged him to go south on a wilderness road. I don’t know what Philip

originally intended to do that day. Maybe Philip had planned to go north. Or north by northwest. Or maybe Philip was just going to hang out where he was for a day or two. But the Spirit told him to go south. The Spirit was making Philip available for ministry.

Did he come upon a blind bell-ringer? In a way, yes. An Ethiopian eunuch, to be precise. A Jew, but an emasculated Jew who would not be accepted in the temple. Eunuchs were not **full** outcasts in that society. Often they were employed to serve in royal households, and received higher education for those tasks. But they were nonetheless excluded from worshiping assemblies. Philip encountered this Ethiopian eunuch who just happened to be reading scripture aloud from the prophet Isaiah—obviously the man was interested in the word of God—but he didn't understand it. When asked, the eunuch said, *How can I, unless someone guides me?* He had questions about what he was reading. Well, of course he had questions! If he was being excluded from worshiping assemblies, small wonder he would have questions about the scripture. No one was taking the time to answer him. No one was taking the opportunity to minister to him.

Boy, if ever there was a picture-perfect Kodak moment for telling the good news about Jesus Christ, for sharing faith, for offering a life-giving love, this was it! This was a prime opportunity, and Philip did not walk away from it. He got into the chariot with the Ethiopian eunuch and together they read from Isaiah. Then Philip began to teach the man what those words meant for him—how he understood those words were good news, those words were spoken as prophecy about Jesus Christ who gave himself like a lamb for sacrifice, so that we might receive God's forgiveness of our sins and have new life with God in all its abundance.

And do you see the result here of Philip being available? After their talking together, after Philip's sharing of his own faith, the Ethiopian eunuch asks an additional question: *Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?*

Nothing was preventing that. Absolutely nothing. I guess you could say the Spirit of the Lord was "nagging" the eunuch. Creating faith in him. Creating a desire and urgency in him to have a life connected to God where he was no longer on the outside looking in, but fully embraced as God's very child and Christ's own brother.

The water was available. Philip was available. So in the midst of all this availability, ministry occurred, and the Ethiopian eunuch was baptized in Jesus' name.

It was just a moment, a single moment of opportunity. Then, as our scripture tells us, the Ethiopian eunuch went *on his way rejoicing*, and Philip—why Philip was "nagged" by the Holy Spirit to go somewhere else to proclaim Jesus, to share the story. They never saw each other again. Yet a life was changed forever.

Debbie and Jim, realize this day that you will be given many opportunities in the years to come to be available to your daughter Lauren. Not just in the daily care and feeding and providing that parents do. But with the promises you made today to raise her in a life connected with Jesus Christ, you are promising to be available to her in a very specific ministry. I have it on the best authority from a few parents here (and my own personal experience) that some of the greatest

moments for discussion with their child take place in the car on the way to a soccer match or the shopping mall. (Everyone's captive in the car on the highway.) Then there's that moment when you're both finally home—from work and from school. Who knows what kinds of questions you will be asked, or what kinds of comments Lauren will make? Yet you will suddenly realize **that moment** is an opportunity both to listen to Lauren and her concerns and questions, as well as share God's love and your faith with her. Oh, the Spirit may indeed have to "nag" you on these days. You may grumble a bit as you turn the oven to "Warm" or put the TV on mute and instead sit down and talk. You may have other things on your mind; a list of tasks to do. But the Spirit is making you available for ministry to your daughter.

If you don't know the answer to her questions, feel free to ask me. Many's the time I've had someone come up and say, "Pastor---Zach had a question we were hoping you could answer ..." "Ethan wanted to ask you about ..." "Katie was wondering, and I was too ..." After all, we're in this faith community together. We are all branches connected to the same vine that is Jesus Christ. That connects us with one another. We should be available to one another—whether it's helping to understand scripture or offering prayer or meeting some physical or emotional or spiritual need. We should also be available to the people with whom we share this world, who for one reason or another have found themselves on the outside looking in, yearning for God's love. We—the Church, the branches of the vine—should possess a "ministry of availability" in the name of Jesus.

The problem always comes in that we think we already have our list of things-to-do fairly well intact, and those plans are unmalleable. We give all kinds of reasons to be **unavailable**. We plan to go north, by golly, and not even the prompting of the Holy Spirit itself seems enough to make us want to change direction. But the words of preacher Barbara Brown Taylor as she studied this story of Philip are compelling and convincing: *If we were to surrender control of our own travel plans for even an hour, where might the Spirit send us? How many of our accidental encounters with other people are really divine appointments?*

Now, my friend could have just dropped a dollar in the Salvation Army bucket and walked away. Instead, she became available to a blind bell-ringer. **Update:** My friend tells me the money she paid the piano teacher for the additional lessons is just about used up. But the piano teacher said he's busy making other arrangements so that he can continue giving lessons to the bell-ringer. And my friend has already been informed she will be invited to the first piano recital.

Lessons like the one about Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch are a wake-up call, reminding us of the sheer power and purpose of God to change things. To change us. To change the world. Because you never know when you'll be walking down the aisle at Macy's and something—or Someone—will "nag" you to turn around. **AMEN.**