

Acts 8:24–60; John 15:1–8

Grace to you, and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come.

I don't know if you've been paying attention or not, but there has been a running theme throughout our first lessons for this Easter season. The various readings from the book of Acts have all emphasized the community of faith. Starting a couple weeks ago with the common ownership of everything that the believers had, which was then followed by Peter's witness to the congregation after the healing of the crippled man. The week after that was Peter's confession of faith to the religious officials. All of it seems to make sense to have the story today about Philip and this official from Ethiopia. These are all stories of faith within a community setting.

To take a closer look there are some things that we need to remember with our story. First of all, the temple is in Jerusalem, which is in the country of Israel, which is in the Middle East at the far eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. Ethiopia is on the African continent, south and slightly east of Egypt. In modern-day Africa it is actually down around Sudan and Kenya if you can imagine the map of Africa in your mind. Without pulling up Google Earth, let's just say it's several hundred, if not even a thousand miles away from where Jerusalem is.

Now, this fellow, whose name we never learn, is probably not Jewish by birth. He's more likely either a convert, or in the process of becoming a convert. He would be called, probably, a "God-fearer." It's not uncommon. In chapter 10 in the book of Acts, we get the story about Cornelius who is a Roman army officer and who was a "God-fearer" as well.

There is a bit of a problem with this fellow in that he's from the queen's court and therefore is also a eunuch. And putting aside whatever jokes might be running through your mind about what a eunuch is, and for those of you who don't know what a eunuch is I'll describe it this way using Benjamin Franklin's description. A eunuch is to an adult male what a steer is to a bull; someone who has lost their social standing.

This eunuch has gone to Jerusalem, hundreds of miles away, to worship at the temple, which is something that he as a eunuch is not really allowed to. Back in the book of Deuteronomy there is a whole section that says a male has to have all of his parts in order to go and worship. He could only stay outside of the temple proper. It would be like coming to worship here at Trinity and only being allowed to stand in the narthex while worship was going on. He could stay in what was called the Court of the Gentiles, which is what one would pass through in order to get to the Court of Women, which you have to pass through into the main sanctuary. It was a really big structure with progressively smaller and smaller areas which one must pass through.

Our fellow here in our story, even though he has traveled all the way from Ethiopia, isn't allowed to go into the temple itself to worship. So, instead, he is traveling back home. He is

traveling doing a rather unusual thing; he's reading. Specifically, he's reading scripture. He's reading scripture aloud, specifically a passage from the prophet Isaiah.

The fact that he's a court official, it's not so unusual that he can read. We already know that he is a "God-fearer." He's reading scripture – since that is something that we Lutherans seem to suffer a lack of scripture reading, it might seem a little to strange to us – but what makes it weird is that he's reading scripture from his own copy. To put that into context, most of us probably own a Bible, many of us probably own several different versions of the Bible, but in the first century you really didn't own your own copy of scripture. It was so expensive because it had to be copied by hand. The temple had some, the synagogues had one, but individuals, not so much. So, he's a government official who can read, who is apparently wealthy, who has come to Jerusalem to worship and now, on his way home, he has an encounter with one of the original twelve, the disciple named Philip.

Now Philip has been mentioned several times in the gospels, mainly in John's gospel, Philip is the one in the first chapter of John, where Philip sees Jesus and calls Andrew and gets Andrew to be a follower of Jesus. We can read the first chapter of John to get that little bit of a story. Philip is a fairly decent guy. He's not like Peter. Peter, who is always trying to get the right answer. He's not a stalwart kind of a fellow like Thomas, who earlier in John's gospel is willing to go and fight and die for Jesus. He's not John the beloved disciple. But Philip's a good, stand-up kind of a guy.

An angel directs Philip to head south of Jerusalem, to go out on the wilderness road. We don't know exactly what the wilderness road is. It could mean that it's not well-traveled, or it could mean that there's not a lot of commerce built up along it. Whatever, that point is not important. What is important is that while he's out there along the wilderness road, he sees the chariot traveling by and the angel directs to go up to it. So, Philip goes running up to it – I can only imagine driving in downtown Philadelphia and you come to a stoplight and some homeless person comes running up to your car. I can imagine that must be similar to what the official was thinking as he is riding along in his chariot and some guy comes running up to his chariot and starts talking to him. "Do you understand what you're reading?" Philip says. "How can I?" says this official. "How can I unless someone walks along with me as I read it?" That's one of the ways that word in Greek – that as we heard read to us – how can I unless someone guides me, unless someone instructs me, unless someone walks along beside me. Here's the essence of what I think the official is trying to say to Philip. "How can I live my life as a believer if I walk alone?"

Over and over throughout scripture we see that a faith-filled life is done so in community. Not always in a community as we read about it a couple weeks ago, where everyone shared everything that they had. We know that life in community does not always work out as we also heard – for those of you who remember my message, the story of Ananias and Sapphira because they tried to lie to God about how much they were giving and paid for it with their lives. But still, life in community. The crippled guy at the gate, two weeks ago our lesson. His healing was known to be authentic because he was known to the community who came there to the temple. They knew that he had been there for years. They had seen his feet and ankles. They knew that he was honestly a crippled person. Peter and John, as they preached and witnessed to

the congregation and community there at the temple, preached within the context of a community.

Even Jesus, when he was in the midst of his own ministry, he lived with and was in community with the twelve that he had chosen. Yes, he would go off and pray by himself, but he always came back to his community. Even after his death and ascension, that small group of believers continued to live in community with one another.

Now when I say community I don't necessarily mean that they all moved to a big old warehouse and shared floor space with one another with no privacy. I don't even mean that they bought up a whole row of town houses and lived next to each other, although maybe they did. We don't know. When I say that they lived in community, by that I mean that they gathered together regularly. They ate together frequently, maybe daily. They worshiped together often. They held one another accountable to the facets of their faith. They lived in community, much as I imagine that we here at Trinity strive to live.

I am often amazed, however, at the number of folk who I run into who feel that they are just fine living their Christian witness all by themselves. I don't mean to say that you can't do that, but I do mean to say that faith is best lived out when it is with other believers.

We suffer from the fact that we live in this North American culture of "I can do it myself, thank you very much. I don't need anybody to help me." This independence attitude which, on a national level, does appear to have served us rather well, but in terms of our faith however, not so much.

Not too long ago I saw some statistics and in my messy office I can't find them exactly, so I apologize that I can't quote them accurately. But, the percentage of Americans who claim a belief in God is overwhelming; well over 80%. Yet, only about half of those folks who claim that belief attend any kind of worship on a regular and frequent basis. I wonder if those same folks would claim to be a golfer if they never went out onto a golf course. You can't really claim to be a bicyclist if you never go out and ride a bike. I think it's difficult to call myself a Christian if I don't regularly gather together with other believers.

Philip was called by God to go and direct a stranger in how to walk with God. Regardless of how briefly they were together, they walked that road of faith. As a matter of fact, there is a thriving Christian community in Ethiopia today. Tradition claims that it is because of this Ethiopian eunuch and his encounter with Philip that the Ethiopian Christian church is there and vibrant and alive.

All of us, by our baptism, are called to live a faith-filled life. We are called to be a witness of Christ's death and resurrection. We are called to be a witness of Christ's grace and love. We are called to this life of faith, and we are strengthened by a community of faith, to gather together, to worship in community, to live in fellowship with Christ and one another. May we be like Philip and that official as we go forth sharing our faith, living together in the community of Christ. Amen.

Copyright © 2009, John H. Brock. All rights reserved.