

“What’s Love Got to Do With It?”

Acts 8:26-40

5th Sunday of Eastertide

April 29, 2018

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Acts 8:26-40 (NRSV) Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

²⁶ Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south^[a] to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ 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 ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹ He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³² 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.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ 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?”^[b] ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip^[c] baptized him. ³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ 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.

Sometimes I think the feeling “out there” is that love is easy.

Folks talk about “having chemistry” and I’ll give that.

Scientists say there is something about chemistry in physical attraction.

We know, however, that love is more than that physical stuff.

We love our families (sometimes more than others) and our friends and those doesn’t have “physical attraction” involved!

You know, the more I think about it physical attraction doesn’t necessarily have *anything* to do with love.

Augustine, the theologian and philosopher who influenced early Christianity, wrote in his autobiography that his mother was influential on him. She was also driven to distraction by his ideas and writing, that he'd had a son out of wedlock, and that she was separated from him when he tromped off to North Africa to become a bishop. The love she had for her son, perhaps like Mary had for her son, was a *suffering love*.

Love, for us, gets all tangled up in birds singing and flowery-bliss and oogly-eyed happiness. Suffering? Nah. 'Cause, if we're in love AND suffering, something's wrong; something tragic has happened!

When we think about it, LOVE and LIKING are connected. We don't like things that offend us (people, issues, or things.) Loving is like-mindedness; not off-putting.

I like to hear from visitors who say "how loving your congregation is." (Who wouldn't enjoy hearing that?!) When someone is brave enough to cross our threshold and find a vacant seat (they wouldn't want to offend anyone's seat possession,) get through our way of "doing" worship, and then wander into Gamber Hall – well, I'm reasonably confident that on a good day, they'll have experienced and witnessed love in action! Love, in this instance, is an "easy acceptance" of the people we meet.

But, I know you'd agree with me that loving a "someone we meet" who needs a shower and a toothbrush, wants a toothbrush and some cash, (before we've even gotten to know them,) and then doesn't stick around...well, loving those "someones" is a more difficult, isn't it.

I stepped away from gospel readings today; both as a challenge to you AND TO ME. The reading that Sally just brought retells an encounter between Philip (a

follower of Jesus, a Jewish convert) and a non-Jewish (though I think he's eager) Ethiopian official of an Egyptian queen.

Let's get this more into context.

Chronologically, Jesus was crucified and resurrected...and, since we're at the eighth chapter of the Book of Acts of the Apostles, we can recall that Pentecost has already happened and the disciples of Jesus are leaving Jerusalem to proclaim HE IS RISEN.

Philip, commentaries (and more importantly words earlier in the book of Acts) tell us, was "a person of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom."

Philip's discipleship was to the people of Samaria. (Perhaps his experience there, among "foreigners" who don't worship "the right way" or in the "right place" has given him a heart for talking to strangers.)

'Cause these two guys, Philip and the Ethiopian, are as unlikely to get together over coffee as anyone! They're divided by race, religion, and social status. And yet: Philip is guided, by the Holy Spirit, to approach the Ethiopian on this deserted stretch of road.

The text that's in the text is from the writing of Isaiah and include "a sheep led to slaughter" which would have been identified, by the *new* Christians, as prophecy about the Jesus they knew.

It's not a surprise that the Ethiopian would benefit from some guidance about the Isaiah passage from Philip!

BUT: How *would you* explain the crucifixion?

That Jesus was "slaughtered" like an animal sacrifice....but that that sacrifice was the most precious offering of love.

Love!

How is Philip going to explain that!

I think that Philip gives us a wonderful example of an "elevator speech."

Do you remember those 30-second “commercials” about yourself that were recommended for job interviews as a way to quick, concise, AND THOROUGH introduction of yourself while riding an elevator with the human resource person.

We could use the same principle for explaining the WHY there is a Risen Christ!
But, WHAT’S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

To begin with, maybe Philip recalled his love for God.
That THAT love acknowledges that GOD loves HIM so much that all the mistakes and harsh words and times of less-than-loving *don’t stop God* from loving Philip!
Even with all the negative...there’s God’s love!

Philip ALSO knows, what John will write, that loving God and being loved **by** God really demands that we love others.

Couple of good points for that elevator speech, huh?

Because of his experience in Samaria, Philip knows that in order to get through the barriers of *differentness* he should, with compassion, explain what his baptism as a new Christian means.

He could share with the Ethiopian that his own baptism joined him, grafted him if you will, to Jesus the True Vine.

That’s today’s Gospel reading:

15 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes^[a] to make it bear more fruit. 4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

Philip could share the gist of those verses to encourage the Ethiopian; as we can encourage others to know Jesus more closely.

What’s love got to do with a vine and branches?

Think about it this way: Jesus' love...**THAT ALONE**...enables Philip to love a stranger, the Ethiopian, **ENOUGH** to share what **he's** come to know, what has enabled **him** to become a disciple.

That love **ALONE**...is what's enabled Philip to **DO** discipleship.

And that's going to bear fruit!

That Ethiopian practically demanded to be baptized in a roadside puddle!

HE was "grafted" **INTO** the vine; welcomed into God's family!

So now, not only was the Ethiopian a member of a Queen's household; by hearing Philip's elevator speech about **LOVE**, he had become a servant of the King of Kings!

YOU, as baptized members of the Family, the branches on the vine, have the same gifts and abilities as Philip.

Like Augustine's mother, sometimes the loving we do will be difficult and costly (and I don't mean just financially.)

Our inclination is to run from opportunities and relationships that hurt us.

We might even pull back from those occasions.

Love them? **THAT'S** not physical **ATTRACTION**.

Which is why (and we'll do this next Sunday) we hold our hands out to receive the bread and juice of Holy Communion.

We reach out to Christ who alone gives us what we need (fortitude, elevator speech scripts, empowerment) to get around or over or through *whatever* separates us from that **PERSON** who needs to be baptized or reaffirm their grafting to the Vine.

They may have habits or opinions or a lifestyle that is hard **to like**, **BUT BELIEVE IT OR NOT THAT'S WHAT LOVE HAS TO DO WITH IT!**

As Christians, as people living, by faith, as Easter people, we have the call to bear the fruit of love to encourage others to become disciples who will also bear fruit.

What's love got to do with it?

Well, I'll read (from the Message Translation) the other NT reading for today from John's epistle. This is practically the elevator speech we can all use:

There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love.

¹⁹ We, though, are going to love—love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love. He loved us first.

²⁰⁻²¹ If anyone boasts, “I love God,” and goes right on hating his brother or sister, [whoever that may be] thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If he won’t love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can’t see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You’ve got to love both.

How’s THAT for an elevator speech?

Praise God who loves us!

Amen!