

***The Book of Acts is the second half of the Book of Luke, both written by the same author. Where Luke's gospel ends, Acts begins. And it is a chronicle of the movement of the Spirit through the followers of Jesus, a history of the early church. This is the first time since I've been at Southminster that I've preached from the Book of Acts. I'll confess to you, Acts is not the first book to which I'll turn when seeking comfort in scripture. I'm not sure why that is.***

***Perhaps I get a little skeptical when I read of the earnestness, and the success, of Jesus' followers in the Book of Acts. They turn the world upside down and create the church! They change people's lives and live boldly and successfully for Christ! They break down barriers and bring the gospel to people who had always been excluded by the powers. It's all Good News! Why don't I read it all the time?***

***Alas, I am far more comfortable among the knuckleheaded disciples of the gospel accounts than I am among the confident and self assured disciples in Acts.***

***This week, however, I was reading through this story of Phillip and the Ethiopian official, and I was thinking of our graduating seniors, and I saw the Book of Acts in a new way. Because 18 year olds have energy and ideas that the rest of us can only admire from afar. They see things that can be done. We tend to see 100 reasons why they cannot be done. The Book of Acts is a story of what the church looks like when it is led by teenagers, or at least led by people who act with the confidence of teenagers.***

***Because the Book of Acts is a story told before tradition and experience start limiting and defining what can be done.***

***I'm very much in favor of tradition. Don't hear me wrong. But when tradition becomes more important than the movement of the Spirit among the people, we should be aware. So, point one for you graduates, and for the rest of us, is this:***

***Don't ever worship tradition at the expense of the experience of the Spirit.***

***Let's dig into the story a little.***

***The angel of the Lord speaks to Phillip and sends him to the Gaza Road. Just as people don't take that road voluntarily today, so did they stay away from it then. A wilderness road. But Phillip doesn't let the directions slow him down. He doesn't say, "I'd rather head to Galilee." He doesn't say, "why? What am I supposed to do?" He just gets up and goes, with those rather vague directions. (Perhaps that is also a point***

***for kids—don't ask too many questions? Just do what your mama tells you to do!)***

***Also on the road is an Ethiopian, who is the treasurer of the Queen of Ethiopia. He is wealthy enough to be in a chariot. He is educated enough to be reading Greek. He is religious enough to be reading Isaiah. And he is humble enough to ask for help when it is offered. "For a modern parallel, imagine a diplomat in Washington DC inviting a street preacher inviting a street preacher to join him in his late model Lexus for a little Bible study."(Barbara Brown Taylor in Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2 (WJK, KY, 2008) p. 457).***

***He is also a eunuch, which would have kept him from worshipping in the Temple and kept him from being ordained to any of the offices of Judaism. Yet, he was returning from worshipping in Jerusalem, which means he was at odds with his tradition on some level. Unable to be a full participant in Judaism because of laws from Deuteronomy (23:1) that make clear no one who is sexually mutilated "shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord", he still worships in Jerusalem and still studies scripture.***

***So the second point for you graduates, and for the rest of us, is this: Don't ever let the powers of this world keep you from seeking your own relationship with, and your own answers from, God.***

***If the Powers of the world or the church tell you to stop reaching out toward God, and if you listen to them, then you lose.***

***The Spirit sends Phillip over to his chariot, but is still rather vague on instruction. Phillip hears him reading from Isaiah and asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?"***

***"How can I? Unless someone guides me".***

***So, point three is this:***

***Don't ever stop asking for help and guidance.***

***Even when you graduate from Boise State and are rich enough to own your own chariot and you work for the Queen of Ethiopia.***

***Because this Ethiopian official has uncovered a discrepancy in scripture. Deuteronomy keeps him from worshipping in the temple. Yet, the Book of Isaiah promises that ALL nations, all peoples will worship God together. Specifically, Isaiah says this about eunuchs: "to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me, and hold fast to my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters. I will give them***

***an everlasting name that shall not be cut off." (Isa. 56:4-5). The Ethiopian is reading a prophecy of hope, of freedom, of inclusion, but is unable to square it with what his tradition tells him.***

***How can I understand unless someone guides me?***

***Luckily, the Spirit has sent him Phillip. Because he doesn't just need someone who knows Scripture. He needs someone who knows the God of Scripture. He needs someone who recognizes that God's movement is ALWAYS toward greater inclusion. The family of God is an ever-expanding one.***

***Perhaps my corollary to point three is this: Don't ever stop asking for help and guidance, but seek out people who speak God's word with love.***

***We need to be listening to the people who have "felt the embrace of God, who can read the cold ink on the page in the warm light of God's Spirit." (Tom Long, *ibid.* p. 456).***

***And here is my argument for tradition this morning.***

***Phillip is able to speak to the Ethiopian of God's saving love in Jesus Christ precisely because Phillip is well versed in his tradition. He knows the Scriptures. How many times have we had discussions about faith at school or at work with people, people we are quite sure are wrong, but who start throwing Bible verses around left and right?***

***There are plenty of people who would have encountered the Ethiopian on the road and would have said, "I'm sorry. You are a eunuch. This prophecy from scripture doesn't apply to you. It says so, right here in Deuteronomy. I'd like to baptize you, but Scripture says no."***

***Many Presbyterians have abandoned Scripture. We hear people use it to hurt people and exclude people, and rather than read it and study it, we just put it on the shelf and forget about it.***

***So, point four is this:***

***If you want the Spirit to be able to use you to share God's love and grace with the world, you have to open your Bibles. You need to read and study them.***

***Had Phillip been a Presbyterian, my fear is that when the Ethiopian said, "about whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?", Phillip would have flipped through his brand new, never been opened Bible and said, "umm...I'm not sure? Maybe George Washington? Elvis?"***

***If we want to share the Good News of God's love that expands to include people who have been told that they are excluded, we have to***

***pick up our Bibles and read them. We need to take advantage of opportunities to study them together, so we can understand. This is where our connection to tradition, our grounding in tradition, will allow us to be led by the Spirit.***

***On the surface, this text is a story of two characters—Phillip and the Ethiopian official. But there is a very active third character in this story—The Holy Spirit. If not for the Holy Spirit, Phillip would never have been on the Wilderness Road to meet the Ethiopian man. So my final point is this:***

***Don't ever stop listening for the voice of the Spirit.***

***It is not usually a convenient voice. It doesn't always send us where we wish to go. And it isn't ours to predict and control. The Spirit sent Phillip down the wilderness road, but after the baptism of the Ethiopian, Phillip was taken away to Azotus, or Ashdod, which was an ancient city of the Phillistines. He hadn't planned on going there either, but proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he made it back home to Caesarea—50 miles or so up the coast.***

***So, if we're going to listen to the Holy Spirit, it will require us to let go of some control. She doesn't send us where we want to go. She doesn't send us to talk with the people with whom we would choose to talk on our own.***

***So, whether you are going off to college or are going back to work or to the golf course, live in faith that the voice of the Spirit will guide you into uncomfortable situations where you are uniquely qualified to make a difference in someone's life. Live into that future with boldness, with confidence, with humility, with love, and with ears open to receive the direction of the Spirit.***

***Amen.***