

# “Barrier Free”

June 3, 2018  
Acts 8: 26-39

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I really love today's story from the scriptures — it has the Holy Spirit all over it! Frankly, it is a banner story that could be our story at this church. It's a story of how I see God's call on the church, and this church in particular.

The story takes place after Jesus' death and resurrection, and after the followers of Jesus have received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Philip, one of the apostles, senses a prompting from the Lord to go to a certain road south of Jerusalem. It's a wilderness road, so it's a little out in the boonies.

Now notice that Philip's nudge from the Spirit does not fill him in on the details of why he should go there or what's going to happen when he gets there; he's just told to go. And Philip goes. That's obedience! What would have happened had he just dismissed the thought that came into his head? Have you ever had a nudge from the Spirit? Have you ever thought of someone out-of-the-blue and thought 'I really should give that person a call?' Do you follow through?

Last week we talked about living a life that is filled with the Spirit. It means opening our eyes to those God sightings and opening our ears to those Holy Spirit promptings. In the story, Philip not only has the eyes to see and the ears to hear — he has a heart of obedience. There's no point in developing the gift of hearing God's voice if we're just going to ignore what we hear. God wants to deepen our faith and our trust in him. Sometimes we are let in on the big picture, but more often than not we see very little, or maybe nothing at all. Why would you obey a nudge you don't fully understand with your head? It's a question of trust. We believe that God is good. *God is good? All the time. All the time? God is good!* And God created you. He knows you and he loves you. There is nothing you could do to make God love you any more or any less than he loves you right now. Our response to God's love helps us to live in that love, and live in that relationship.

Because God is good, we go, and we trust.

Now just a little caveat here. I am talking about pretty small promptings. Never act on a prompting that is going to cause harm to you, or others. And, if the prompting seems big — like quitting a job or asking

someone to marry you, or spending a whack of money on something — don't do that quickly. You want to take any big decision slowly and carefully. You want to pray about it for a while; you want to ask wise, trusted Christians their opinion; you want to look and see if the prompting stays around and grows. In Philip's case, the prompting to go to that road off the beaten track doesn't have any major consequences if he heard wrong. If it was just indigestion from the chili dog he ate the night before, then no biggie! Sometimes a nudge is just our own thoughts and not a prompting from the Holy Spirit. But the only way you will know is to try it out in simple ways and see.

As Philip is hanging out and walking down that lonely road, a caravan comes along. Again, he is given a nudge by the Spirit to get closer. That's when Philip hears the passenger inside reading out loud from the Jewish scriptures, the prophet Isaiah. Philip calls out and asks the stranger "Hey, do you know what you're reading about?" The man inside says 'No, hop in and explain it to me!' So Philip does.

Who was this man in the chariot? We don't know his name, but we do know he was a high official in Queen Candace's court, and in charge of her finances. By virtue of the fact that he was traveling in a chariot and by his position, we know he was wealthy and a person of influence. Since he was reading the Scriptures and had been in Jerusalem to worship, we know he was an educated man and that he was devout — a man of faith. He may even have been Jewish. Dating back to the encounters between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, there were Jewish influences and teachings in Ethiopia that carried on down through the centuries. We also know he was hospitable and humble, as he welcomed Philip, a stranger, to join him for part of the ride, admitting that though he was educated, he didn't understand what he was reading.

But we also know that he is a Eunuch, a castrated male. It was not uncommon for males in close service to someone like a queen to be eunuchs. They were considered safer — less of a threat. This was somewhat common at that time. Jesus even speaks of eunuchs in Matthew 19:12. However there is also a sense of sexual deviancy. A literal reading of Deuteronomy 23:1 would have prevented him from worshiping in the temple, so it is interesting that that was the purpose of his visit. It is very possible, in fact quite likely that he would not have been fully accepted into the Jewish community of faith by virtue of his sexual identity and biology, regardless of whether his castration took place at birth or just before puberty. Though this particular individual was well placed in society, his was very likely a lonely, isolated and marginalized life.

Things have certainly changed, but sometimes it seems not a lot. It is still difficult for people who identify differently than others, for people who are gay, lesbian, transgendered, even for those who live with a disability or are a visible minority, to feel they belong fully in the community and in the church. As you know, when it comes to the LGBTQ, the church continues to be a place where people are clearly told they don't belong. There are many churches in this country (and particularly in the US) who feel there is a "gay agenda": some kind of attack on the church by people who identify as LGBTQ. I think that is so sad and so strange.

As a follower of Jesus, I read the entire Bible through the lens of Jesus. Last week we talked about Nicodemus being in a religion of rules, and Jesus was opening his mind and heart to see the fullness of God and God's love. Jesus continually broke the rules to bring people who 'didn't belong' into the Kingdom and love of God. From speaking with women, healing on the Sabbath, to touching those who were 'unclean', Jesus continually colours outside the lines and invites us be born of the Spirit and to see the world and the people of God through fresh eyes — the eyes of love.

Philip is born of the Spirit as he speaks to the Ethiopian Eunuch and helps him to understand the passage in Isaiah through the lens of Jesus. Philip tells the man all about Jesus and the new life and hope he has now through that relationship. The Ethiopian's spirit comes alive as he hears about Jesus. As they pass a lake he exclaims: "Look — here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

It was probably a trick question, or at least a loaded question. He is asking: 'Are there barriers? There have been so many barriers for me all my life. Can I really be baptized?'

What has separated you from the love of God? Lots of things separate us from God's love. Often it's ourselves — but sometimes obstacles have been put up in our way. If the Church or someone professing to be a Christian has put a barrier up between you and the love of God, I want to say to you "I'm sorry. It should not be that way."

The job of the church and the followers of Jesus is to remove obstacles and barriers to God — not put them up! We need to be a barrier-free church. But if in the past you have felt hurt and rejected by the church or by a Christian, I say to you "I'm sorry," and I ask you to consider forgiving that church or individual, and to climb over that barrier. Better yet, move it off the road so no one else stumbles upon it.

When I was walking the Camino in Spain in 2008, I walked with another woman for a few days. We talked a lot and we walked in silence a

lot. We became quite close. At one point I began to suspect that she might be a lesbian, not because of anything she did or said but more because of the things she didn't say. We shared all sorts of things about our lives, our work, our families, and somehow the topic of boyfriend or husband never came up for her. At the end of the trip in Santiago, I knew I had to break the ice. I felt this burden inside: *I had to tell her that Jesus loves her.*

The Holy Spirit was nudging me in an urgent way. I was nervous about asking her, but part of the reason I went all the way to Spain was to face my fears and become a better servant for my Lord. So I took a deep breath and asked her if she was in a relationship. She said 'Yes', and then looked away. Body language speaks volumes. I then asked her if it was with a man or a woman, and, looking down, she said "a woman." I said "I need to tell you that Jesus loves you". She looked so surprised. All of a sudden, all the walls came down, and we talked and talked and talked, and she confessed that she never felt welcome by the church and that she always felt she didn't belong. She believed in God, but wasn't sure if he cared for her.

The next day, after we went to the 12:00pm mass where they honour the Pilgrims who have walked the Camino, she told me how moving and meaningful the service was for her, and she told me that she really felt loved. She said that there were lots of tears for her in the service. I don't know what has happened to her since we walked so many miles together...I've lost touch with her, but I know that the Holy Spirit nudged me to help remove one obstacle on the path that leads to Jesus. Thank God I listened to that nudge and obeyed. I pray that Stephanie still feels loved.

Barrier Free. That is our call as individuals, and it's our call as a church to respond to the nudges of the Spirit, and to share our story of the love of God so that others will feel loved and know deeply that they belong and are fully part of the family of God. Thanks be to God.