

"Follow the Verbs"

April 29, 2018

Scripture: Acts 8: 26-40

*<sup>26</sup> Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south<sup>[a]</sup> to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) <sup>27</sup> 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 <sup>28</sup> and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. <sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." <sup>30</sup> So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" <sup>31</sup> He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."*

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



Have words, either printed or spoken, ever made you feel excluded or not welcome? Have you ever thought about words or a “rule” and questioned why the words were spoken

or why the rule existed or wondered what even led to that thing ever being said or becoming a rule? Here are a few examples of rules that made people feel excluded or unwelcome. While some were very hurtful and downright wrong as we look back on them, at a time these were the accepted. In fact, some of these thoughts and ideas still exist today. Prejudice and bigotry and sexism and racism and so forth still exist in our society. Words and rules can still make people feel unaccepted, unworthy, and worse. Now, to turn it towards home, I ask: Do you think we, as a church, ever use words or have rules here that make people feel excluded or not welcome? I think we do. Along the same lines, does religion in general make it abundantly clear who can and who cannot be a part of or participate in certain things? Yes, this too is true. Sadly, the church – the very place that is supposed to be all about love and making everyone feel welcome – can put up barriers with the best of them. These barriers can be unspoken and unintended. Yet they exist. These barriers are very real for some people. At times the church can also be very intentional about who is welcome and who is not, about who is worthy of God’s love and our love and who is not. Today we look at belonging from different angle. Let us pray.




 Follow the Verbs

In today's passage from Acts 8 we meet two people – Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. This is Philip's third appearance in the book of Acts. In Acts 6, when the Greek widows were being treated poorly, Philip was one of the seven chosen to oversee the fair distribution of food. He was chosen because he was of good standing and was full of the Spirit and wisdom. Then, in the beginning of Acts 8, Philip is sent to Samaria to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. There he proclaimed the Word of God and healed and baptized many, leading many people to faith in Jesus. The second main character today is the Ethiopian eunuch. He was in Jerusalem to worship and is now returning home.

In the culture of today's story, the term 'Ethiopian' referred to anyone with dark skin that lived south of Egypt. The eunuch was serving in the court of the Queen from his homeland. The term 'eunuch' refers to males serving in the royal courts. These male servants would be castrated so that all sexual temptations were removed. Jewish Law forbade such people from worshipping in the temple, so this picture of an Ethiopian eunuch coming to Jerusalem to worship would have left all in the audience scratching their heads. It would be like us saying that grizzly bears have decided to all become vegans. So, this eunuch came to Jerusalem to worship God, but is excluded from the place of worship. He was told, basically, we don't accept your kind around here. Go back where you came from. It is as he is returning home that he meets Philip.





When I consider the eunuch at this point in the story, I am amazed. He was rejected and refused admittance at the temple. The religious authorities sent him packing. But look how we find him in today's passage. He is not storming off, all upset about how he was treated. He is found delving into the scriptures, still drawn to this loving and kind God. The eunuch is still seeking God, still trying to develop a relationship with Him. That is pretty amazing to me. When the church treats people like this today, they lose heart pretty quickly.

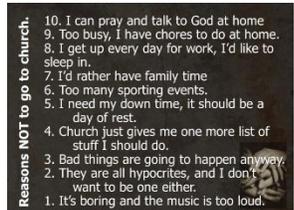
In our churches, I think we have generally moved along the acceptance continuum. One can argue the merits and the drawbacks to the increase in acceptance and tolerance that we see in most churches today. We are not going to argue this out today. But one does not have to think back too many years, for example, to remember a time when churches had an unwritten dress code. It was suit and tie for the men and dresses for the ladies. Just a few weeks ago, as we were waiting for the time to arrive to begin our Bible study, one person shared a vivid memory of the first time a woman wore slacks in this church. The event itself and the reactions it drew then were still as clear as day in this person's memory. The barrier or expectation of dressing a certain way is long gone from most churches, but I do believe other barriers or expectations still exist in many churches, ours included. In deciding if barriers do or do not actually exist, we must consider whether or not our church mirrors the socio-economic and cultural diversity of the community of Winner and the surrounding area. If there were no barriers, our churches would look just like our schools.




 Follow the Verbs

When we return to our Ethiopian eunuch, we find him still curious about God and willing to engage. I doubt, however, that he will be returning to the temple anytime soon. When we look at our society today, we find all sorts of people who are also curious about God and want to explore faith and their beliefs, but most feel outside of the traditional church and its rules, expectations, and structures. Like the eunuch, they do not feel like they can make their way through all the requirements or traditions that characterize a worshipping community. There are other reasons too. They do not feel like they fit in. They feel like they cannot meet all of the commitments. They feel like they do not know enough. There are lots of reasons people will list for not going to church. To illustrate, I would like to share a “Top Ten” list that I found online for why people do not go to church. Here is the list:

10. I can pray and talk to God at home.
9. Too busy, I have chores to do at home.
8. I get up every day for work, I'd like to sleep in.
7. I'd rather have family time.
6. Too many sporting events.
5. I need my down time, it should be a day of rest.
4. Church just gives me one more list of stuff I should do.
3. Bad things are going to happen anyway.
2. They are all hypocrites, and I don't want to be one either.
1. It's boring and the music is too loud.



Whether or not we agree with the things on this top ten list, we must at least acknowledge them as barriers that some people face. These are their beliefs, their excuses, their reality, their opinions. They are all real to the people who responded to the question: why not go to church? When one surveys young, nonchurchgoing Americans and asks what they think of Christians, they are more succinct with their answers. Here are the top three. They say the church is antigay, judgmental, and hypocritical. True or not, these are the barriers that we face.

- 1) Antigay
- 2) Judgmental
- 3) Hypocritical

When one considers the barriers, the reasons, the excuses, the experiences, the opinions, and so on... there are sometimes many hurdles we must overcome to help people explore their faith and to develop a relationship with Jesus Christ. When we think about the people we know, we all know folks who are curious about God and genuinely want to explore faith and their beliefs. In light of all of this, in our passage today we get a great example of healthy, respectful, and effective faith sharing and the change that can result. All we have to do is just follow the verbs.

#### Follow the Verbs

- GO

The first verb is *go*. Philip did not go to the temple to try and find a believer to convert to faith. Philip did not *go* to church, he went *outside* of the church to find people who did not know Christ. We too need to seek nonbelievers outside of the walls of the church. We need to go to where they are to eventually be able to share the good news of Jesus Christ with them.



The second verb is *join*. Philip notices the eunuch reading in his chariot and senses the lead of the Holy Spirit to engage this man. The Spirit tells him to go over and join in with the man. Like Philip, we cannot expect people to join us in our practices and traditions unless we are willing to first take the time to join in the lives and experiences of others. Here is where we begin to form relationships that will eventually help people feel like they belong and like they are loved.

Warning: this can be challenging and it can take a long time.

The third verb involves communicating. The key words here are *listen* and *ask*. Philip heard the eunuch reading from the book of Isaiah. After Philip goes to the Ethiopian and after he joins the man, then he listens to what is happening and then he asks a question. This is a great pattern for us to follow as well. Too often when we decide to share our faith, we think we have to have a plan all figured out and that we have to know exactly what we are going to say. But the truth is that we are already sharing our faith by the ways we are living our lives. God will do the real work of transformation if we let Him lead. We just have to go and join and listen and ask good questions. God will lead if we are willing to follow. In the language of our series, we simply start with belonging and then we move towards belief as the Spirit leads.



Sometimes the Spirit leads in amazing ways. To illustrate how even the most hardened heart can yield to the power of love, listen to this story:



*There was a family with one little daughter. Mother and daughter were very faithful in church and Sunday School attendance. The father wasn't interested and he made it plain it was okay for his wife and daughter to go to church, but it was not for him. He worked in a steel mill. He was a huge hulk of a man who had been a football player at Ohio University.*

*The daughter, Susie, became ill and was taken for diagnosis to the family doctor. It was determined that she had leukemia and, as it was in an advanced stage, it was too late to save her. The family was to take her home and to care for her as comfortably as possible until she died.*

*Each night on coming home from work, Susie's bedroom was her father's first stop. He would visit and spend some time with her. Daily her condition worsened and she lost weight, her cheeks were more and more sunken, and her color looked very bad.*

*One night in particular, Susie had obviously been doing some serious thinking, and she asked her father, "Daddy, I know I will die soon and go to be with Jesus. My Sunday School teacher told me that. But, Daddy, when I get to heaven I will be given a crown to wear. And my crown will have no stars because I have not led anybody to know Jesus. So, Daddy, will you give your life to Jesus so I can have a star in my crown?" The father, through the tears, nodded his head and right there prayed a sinner's prayer of commitment. It made Susie's eyes light up with joy! She called for her mother and told her what Daddy had just done.*

*A few days later she passed away. On the next Sunday morning came Susie's daddy with her mother walking together into church. Time was taken for a "testimony" in the service and the father stood and said, "May I say a few words?" The preacher assured him, "Yes, go ahead."*

*The man went on, "I was resistant to the Gospel and had rejected pastors and evangelists who had tried to lead me. I could reject anyone but my little daughter." He paused to wipe the tears away and went on, "Because she asked me and because she loved me, I gave my life to Jesus. She reached me when no one else could." Then, just before he sat down he looked upward and finished with this, "And now Susie is in heaven, wearing the crown promised to her and a single star is in her crown – that's me!"*

We will certainly encounter many people who have barriers that keep them from coming to Jesus. It is not our job nor will any of us ever be able to argue anyone into faith in Christ. All we can do is share the good news and share our story of faith. The first is what Philip did. Verse 35 tells us, *"Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus"*. It was the piece of understanding that the eunuch needed to claim a faith of his own. As they come to water, they stop and Philip baptizes the man. The eunuch accepts Christ and is baptized as a sign of belief. Philip trusted as the Spirit led and allowed God to work in the man's heart. As soon as Philip's job was done, God whisks him off on another assignment.





Follow the Verbs

We may find people who are seekers, like the eunuch, and they just need to connect a few dots to feel the call of Jesus upon their lives. But, more often than not, we find people who are curious but are also reluctant or cautious or a bit broken. In most cases, we are more like seed planters than deal closers. We simply follow the verbs: go where they are, join with them in their lives, listen to their stories and hear their needs, and then ask the questions that will lead to a discussion about what faith and Jesus have done in our lives. As we share personally from the heart, the Spirit will lead and God will transform lives. May we all trust in the power of God to bear witness to our faith, always seeking to bring others to Christ and to help them grow deep in their faith. Amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve**

- 1) As you consider your faith journey, what are the key ways that God blessed you that brought growth and maturity?
- 2) Who do you know that is 'curious' about God and about developing their beliefs in Christ? Pray for the Holy Spirit to work in their lives.
- 3) We all have a faith story. As a means of serving the kingdom, what would be your two-minute 'elevator speech' about how you came to faith?