

5-2-21
Easter 5
Communion
Acts 8:26-40

We All Need a Philip

I've told you before about my ninety-nine-year-old girlfriend. I first fell in love with Beverly St. John thirty or more years ago when we first worked together on some project in the Church. Deanna knew all about it and wasn't threatened by that relationship at all. She came to love her as I did. I was not the only one who loved Beverly. Everyone I ever knew who knew her loved her. She and her husband, Bill, had a long and happy marriage before Bill died way back in the '90's. She lived as a widow until her own death in 2017. I used to joke and say that Beverly was the only woman in the world that I'd ever leave Deanna for. She would always tell me not to make any plans I couldn't change because she had already been married to the best man in the world, so she wouldn't have me. Beverly served in several leadership roles in the Church and modeled what servant leadership is supposed to look like for all of us. She showed us all what Jesus looks like. Beverly has been dead for several years now, but the parts of her that she left with all of us still enhance life for all of us who knew her.

Everybody needs a Beverly in their lives. I fully expect that one day when an updated edition of the Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms gets printed, that when you turn to the page where the definition of grace appears, there will be a picture of Beverly. She was the absolute embodiment of grace. I have been in meetings with her about things that could easily have been controversial, but not with her in charge. She had a way of drawing out the best from everyone who worked with her. She taught Sunday School in her church in Nashville for many years, but she continued to teach by her example long after her classroom teaching was over. Beverly called me twice when her

church was searching for a pastor. She even sent a search committee to my church once, but the timing was never right for me to leave where I was to go and work alongside her. I always regretted that. Both my friends who eventually took that job benefitted much from working with her. I always said that Beverly one of those rare people who made you want to go out and behave yourself when you were with her. She would never openly criticize or judge even someone with whom she disagreed. There was something about her that just made you want to be a better person.

Many of you know that I served in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church for many years. That denomination is in partnership with ours in many ways, but they also have a sister denomination that is still racially distinct from them. Those two denominations do many things in partnership, but they are still organizationally separate. There have been more attempts to unify those groups than I can remember, and Beverly and I were involved in several of the more recent ones. If they get to have the meeting of General Assembly they hope to have this summer, that union might happen. I'll be in another meeting that week, but a part of my heart will be there, remembering the tireless work Beverly did for many years to make that happen. A good friend of mine in the Black Church says that, as happy as he will be to see unification happen, he will regret that neither Beverly nor I will be there to stand on the platform and celebrate with him.

Everybody needs a Beverly in their lives. I hope you have one. Someone who interprets matters of faith and life for you and helps you understand what it means to be a child of God, not just what it requires of you, but what benefits you derive from it, and how you can help others to know them, too.

I know a lot more about Beverly than I know about the Apostle Philip. We know that he was one of the original disciples of Jesus, but he's not nearly as big a factor in that story as Peter or John, from whom we hear much more. Philip is the one who asked Jesus how in the world they were going to feed all those people the day that those loaves and fish turned out to be

enough. He was also at the Last Supper with the other disciples and asked Jesus to show them the Father, only to have Jesus tell him that he had seen all he needed to see of God in Jesus himself. But the important thing to remember about Philip is not so much what he did while he was with Jesus, but how he was involved in the work that went on after Jesus had risen from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God. The Book of Acts tells us many of the stories about that work, the stories of the founding of Churches and the sharing of faith that laid the foundation for the reason we gather here today and every Sunday morning to worship and to give thanks for God's call in our lives.

That journey is different for all of us, but all of us need a Philip in our lives at one time or another, someone to help us understand the things that call us to faith and the ways we decide to respond.

The man Philip encountered in today's story had all kinds of reasons to need someone to help him understand what he was experiencing. We've talked many times before about what it would have been to be an outsider among the Jews. Not a pleasant experience. Worship in the Temple was a much different experience than the one we have when we come here or anywhere else to worship. Most of us have been to worship with friends or family when we knew there were limits on our participation. In some places we know we're welcome at the Table. Other places we know we're not. Some places we understand what's going on. Other places, we know we're outsiders. Temple worship was even more demarcated than that. There were places where women could go. Places where Gentiles could go, and places where no one but the High Priest could go. Everyone could worship in some way, but not everyone could fully participate in everything. The guy in our story today was an Ethiopian, so he would have looked different than most everyone else there. He also did not have the physical ability to procreate, and the Hebrew Law laid out particular things about people like him and their participation in worship. He worked for the Queen of the Ethiopians. He was basically the Secretary of

the Treasury for her administration. But even in his high position, there were limits on his participation in Temple worship.

We might wonder why someone would go to worship if he couldn't participate fully. That's one of the mysteries of faith—there is something about God that draws us and calls us to seek it out even when there are obstacles in our way. This man may have come to Jerusalem on some official business, to bring money from his boss to the Temple. Whatever brought him there, he heard enough to want to know more. The fact that he could read and that he had access to a scroll indicates that he was a man of substantial means and authority.

Much of the worship in the Temple revolved around expectation of the One who would come one day to redeem the world, the Messiah. That must have been what this man had heard about on his trip to the Temple, because on his way home, he was reading from the Prophet Isaiah about the Suffering Servant, the One who would stand silently before those who accused him, the One whose life would be taken from him unjustly. Of course, when we hear those words, we automatically think of Jesus. But this man didn't know what we do, so he was puzzled and confused by what he read. Who was the Prophet talking about, he wanted to know? And what did all this mean? The limitations of the Temple had prevented him from asking the questions his experience had stirred in him. So he tried to read and understand for himself on his way home.

Now I know that a regular part of your Sunday afternoon now that there are no NFL games to watch is to go home and pour over the Scripture we read together in worship on Sunday morning. Now that we have a Facebook feed, I'm sure you all watch the service again and maybe again on Tuesday to be sure you understand all the things we talked about in worship. It could happen! Even if those things don't happen every week, I hope that something we say and do here stays with you and gives you things to think about between the times we gather here. I have a friend who pastors a church in East Tennessee who is a braver man than I am. I don't know if it happens now, but in pre-Covid

days, a part of that church's Sunday evening schedule was an opportunity to meet with the preacher and talk about the sermon from that morning, hopefully to ask questions and gain clarity about what the Word from the Lord had been that day. Each week, people came, and that conversation was helpful to many. And he still works there.

The guy in that chariot on the way home from the Temple that day could have benefitted from such an opportunity. So God sent Philip to him. Philip climbed right up into that chariot with him and heard him reading from Isaiah. He asked him, "Do you understand what you're reading?"

The response from the man is one we have all made at some point along our journey: how can I unless someone help me understand? That's a big part of why we offer Sunday School groups for adults as well as for children and young people—to give us a place to ask questions, to give us people to help us understand the call and presence of God in our lives. That's why we offer groups like our Thursday morning Bible study group. That group is spending the next several weeks trying to figure out what God wants us to learn from this confusing, virus-filled last year we have endured together and apart. Where else in our culture can we ask questions like those? You've heard me say a million times that God is alive and active, saying and doing things in the world, but how are we going to figure out what those things are if someone doesn't help us?

With that kind of opening, Philip started with the story the man knew and told him about Jesus and how he had come to be that One of whom the Prophet had spoken all those years before. Just what that man was longing to hear. Just what the Temple had been unable and unwilling to help him hear. Everyone needs a Philip to help us hear God's call in our lives, to help us figure out what God wants from us and how we can find peace when we offer it.

Everyone needs a Philip.

Some of us have one, or more than one. Beverly was one of mine, but there have been many others. Dean Morrow, Paul

Brown, Ron Cole-Turner, other teachers, colleagues in ministry, faithful people in congregations I've served—people who helped me figure out what God was calling us to do together. I'm still learning, and there are still Philips in my life helping me do that. And I'm thankful,

But there are people all around us who need us to be the Philips they need. People who need to know it's OK to ask us how all this stuff we say we believe informs our lives and gets us through them, especially through the hard parts.

Everybody needs a Philip. I know it's a scary thought and that it's not the job any of us want but you just might be the Philip someone needs. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Gracious God, we join with all creation in giving you thanks and praise today. We give thanks for this privilege of coming to you knowing that you will hear and respond. We give you thanks that your creative work continues even among us. You continue to show your love for us and to call us to help others know it, too. Help us to be the people others need us to be, so that all the world will know both your power and your mercy, and that they might see those and all your gifts in us.

Help us to move beyond our fear. Now that we can begin to think about safely gathering again, enliven your Church with your Spirit so that we may recommit ourselves to sharing your love here and everywhere. Remind us of our mission partners and the work we support through them. Remind us of our own mission to proclaim Good News from this corner, where faithful people have shared your love for more than a hundred forty years.

Uphold all who live in danger, those who are in peril even today. We pray for people in places where the virus continues to rage and for people here who still need to be vaccinated. Some won't and some don't know how. Help us who have benefitted from science to help others benefit, too. You have promised to be our refuge and strength. Help us to be the same for one another.

We pray today for all who need comfort. Bring comfort to the Ramp family and to all who mourn. Uphold all who are sick and those who care for them. Be with those who are waiting for healing and for words of hope. Remember all those we have mentioned today, especially Will, as he waits for the next steps in his healing.

Let peacemakers control governments and decision-making here and everywhere, people who are committed to your way of peace and hope. Give wisdom to all who lead and hope to all who follow.

Trusting in your mercy, O God, we entrust to you all these for whom we pray and those whose needs you know and those we don't and don't need to because you do. We pray in faith, believing that you love us and want us to be whole, and we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and with the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.