

Evangelism for Everyone
Acts 8:5-8, 12, 26-40

Philip certainly seems to have a knack for connecting with different kinds of people, doesn't he? In verses 5 through 8, he reaches across the line separating Jews from Samaritans, an ethnic and theological boundary a thousand years old at that time. But Philip was not put off by such barriers – he insisted on preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, and great joy came to Samaria as a result.

But at the end of the chapter – well, Philip's new acquaintance was as exotic as it could get for Ancient Jews. In the first place, this man was from Ethiopia, a word that writers in those days used to refer to the whole area drained by the Nile south of Egypt, much of which we now call Sudan. Back then, that was as far south as Mediterranean people ever went, so a man from the place they called Ethiopia was effectively from the end of the world.

Of course, the people who lived in that place were from a different ethnic group than the Jews were. And this particular Ethiopian was from a very exclusive socio-economic stratum of society, for he was an important official in the court of the Queen. In those days, the mother of the Ethiopian monarch tended to have a lot of power as well as influence, and since this man was in charge of her financial affairs, he was probably quite wealthy. At the very least, he could afford a carriage and, what is even more amazing, his own copy of the Book of Isaiah. In the days before the printing press, books had to be copied by hand, and so were very rare and expensive indeed.

Oh, and this Ethiopian's family was very different from Philip's as well. Philip was probably already married, and we know he would end up having four daughters, whom we meet in chapter 21 of the Book of Acts. But this man was a eunuch, someone who was unable to have children. In fact, such an inability was often a precondition of service in many of the palaces of the ancient near east.

Why is that? Well, because power in those days was most often transmitted through family lines, the only people that ancient monarchs thought they could trust with their diplomatic and financial affairs were those who were themselves unable to found dynasties. Simply put, eunuchs had the least to gain by betraying their masters.

So what does all this mean for us? Well, think about it. In the course of this one chapter, we see Philip preaching to black and white, to rich and poor, to the married and the single, to important people and to outcasts. All those distinctions that seem so important to us are thus shown to be irrelevant within the kingdom of God. In God's eyes, there are simply two kinds of people – those who love and trust Jesus, and those who don't. And God is gracious to send His messengers to all sorts of people, even to folks from the very ends of the earth to proclaim to them the Good News and to welcome them into the Kingdom.

But if God wants the Good News to be heard by all kinds of people from all over the world, that doesn't mean that God's messengers always use the same means to spread the Good News. After all, in Samaria, Philip preached to large crowds. In contrast, he had a one-on-one conversation with the Ethiopian eunuch. In Samaria, Philip cast out unclean spirits and healed the paralyzed and the lame. We see no such miracles in his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch.

And since there's not only one way to be an effective evangelist, that means you don't have to be a miracle worker, or even a public speaker. You can have a gospel conversation with anyone, anywhere: at work, or in an airport, or while sitting at your kitchen table. You don't have to gather a crowd – anyone can share the good news with a friend, or as Philip did with this Ethiopian eunuch, even with an inquisitive acquaintance.

And oftentimes it's precisely in more intimate settings, and especially within the context of an already-established friendship, that people really open up about their problems and their questions,

their doubts and their fears. Sometimes they'd rather talk to a personal friend than to an expert. Sometimes they'd rather talk with you than with an elder or a preacher. After all, God didn't send an apostle like Peter or John to talk to the Ethiopian. He sent Philip. And in the same way, God may be sending you to talk with one of your friends. God may present you with a special opportunity to share the gospel with someone, even perhaps this week.

But that's hard, isn't it? It just doesn't seem polite to talk about religion, any more than it does to talk about politics, because people might disagree. Or we may feel awkward talking about our feelings about Jesus. Or we may be ashamed of the coldness of our faith, or of some continuing sin in our lives and thus feel like we aren't worthy to share the gospel. No, most people would rather leave all the talk about Jesus to the preachers, instead just trying to live a good, moral Christian life, presenting a silent witness before the world.

But sometimes a silent example just won't do. Sometimes people have genuine questions about the things of the faith, just like this Ethiopian eunuch did. Real questions and real problems need real answers, and real answers often require words. Look at verse 35. It doesn't say that Philip set a good example for the Ethiopian. It says Philip opened his mouth and spoke to the Ethiopian.

But what are we supposed to say? After all, perhaps we've grown up in the Church and so we don't have a powerful testimony of a radical transformation in our lives, changing us from spectacular sinners into saints – you know, the sort of testimony you often hear at revival meetings. Well, just as we see so many times throughout the Book of Acts, it's not Philip's personal testimony that is discussed here. Look at verse 35 again. Philip didn't talk about his experiences or even his personal opinions. He preached Jesus. He told the Ethiopian about Jesus.

But what if we haven't been to seminary? What if we don't teach Sunday School? How will we know if we are saying the right things? Well, perhaps it's not expedient for a professional preacher to admit it, but most of the questions that most people have about Jesus don't require a seminary degree to answer. Most of the things that most people need to hear about Jesus you probably already know. And all that you need to know about Jesus is contained in one book, the Bible.

For where did Philip begin his own explanation about the life and ministry of Jesus? He didn't start with the mind-blowing doctrine of the incarnation or the Holy Trinity. He didn't even start by telling about Jesus' miracles of healing or His teachings that seemed so radical to the religious leaders of that day. No, Philip started with the passage the Ethiopian eunuch was reading, the passage we read responsively from the book of Isaiah, a passage which is perhaps the best explanation that can be found in either the Old or the New Testaments of why Jesus came to live among us and die for us.

For what did Isaiah predict that Jesus would do? That He would suffer many great sorrows, not least because His people would turn away from Him and reject Him. Isaiah said that even though His people didn't want Him to, Jesus would nevertheless take our transgressions, our iniquities, our sins upon Himself. He would be chastised, beaten with a whip that would leave stripes, bloody marks on His body, suffering the punishment we deserve. He would even die for us – His life would be taken from the earth.

In all of this, Jesus would be like a sheep led to the slaughter, silent in the face of His sufferings. Even though He was treated so unfairly, even though He would be crucified just for telling the truth about Himself, He did not respond to the taunts and the threats of His enemies. Instead, He made intercession for the transgressors, praying for the sinners who nailed Him to the cross, praying for people like you and me whose sin required Him to die.

But it was precisely by taking our punishment, by dying in our place, that Jesus would make us spiritually clean so that we might enter the presence of God. Isaiah said that His chastisement made us whole. Isaiah said that by His stripes we are healed. It's all right there in Isaiah chapter 53, all written down almost 700 years before Jesus was even born.

But if the Old Testament is critical to a correct understanding of the Person and Work of Jesus, those same Scriptures can't correctly be understood apart from Jesus. That's why the eunuch was puzzled as he left Jerusalem, the place where all the religious leaders presided over the Temple. You see, because those leaders denied that Jesus was the Messiah, they couldn't really explain passages like Isaiah 53. They couldn't do what Philip could do and what you and I can do – to show not only how the Scriptures point to Jesus, but how Jesus makes sense out of all of the Scriptures.

Just look, after all, at the profession of faith that the eunuch makes in verse 37: "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." It's such a brief statement, and yet so laden with meaning. In one short sentence, the eunuch is declaring his faith that Jesus of Nazareth, a real man who really lived and really died, is also the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One God had promised would save His people from their sins. At the same time, the eunuch declares the divinity of Jesus by saying that Jesus is the Son of God. And the eunuch even implies a belief in the resurrection of Jesus. For if he simply believed that Jesus had died, he would have said, "I believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God." Instead, he says that Jesus is the Son of God, that He is thus still living after His death, still reigning in power and glory.

Do you know that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God? Do you know the things the Apostles' Creed says about Him? Then you know enough to tell others about Him. And if you need to know more, you have your elders and your Sunday School teachers and your pastor to help you out. Best of all, we all have the same basic resource Philip had: we have the Scriptures, the written Word of God to tell us everything we need to know about the living Word of God.

So, I suppose the more important question is this: do we want to tell the story? Do we want to reach out across some of those barriers that separate us from different kinds of people? Are we willing to step outside of our conversational comfort zones? Are we ready to accept the opportunities the Lord will place in our path? Are we willing to submit ourselves to the will of Christ, whose earnest desire is that the gospel be preached to all the nations, so that all would come to repentance?

Philip was willing, wasn't he? After all, when the angel of the Lord directs Philip to go toward Gaza, he doesn't complain about having to walk out into the desert. He doesn't even ask why. He just goes. He does what God tells him to do. And when the Spirit tells Philip to go talk to that very strange man in the chariot, Philip doesn't object. He doesn't point out all the demographic or linguistic or economic or historical reasons why the man won't listen to him. He doesn't pull back out of fear or distrust. He just goes and does what God tells him to do. And as a result, an eternal soul was saved, and this man from Ethiopia carried the Good News of Jesus Christ all the way to what Philip probably thought was the end of the world.

So, what about you? Will you take up the Great Commission? Will you call others to believe in Jesus Christ the Son of God, the Lamb of God Who died to save sinners like you and me, and Who rose again to give us new, abundant life? Will you tell the story of Jesus and His love?