

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 5th Sunday of Easter, April 29, 2018.

This might sound strange, but when I first looked at today's lesson (**Acts 8:26-40**), in which Philip runs up to the carriage of a government official and asks if the official needs help in understanding a passage from Isaiah, I thought about Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard in Baltimore.

Like many of you, we travel the MLK a lot, including our visits to Gibson Island. For us, MLK is our route of choice to get to the series of highways which takes us to the Gate House.

During the MLK portion of this trip, drivers are approached at nearly every intersection by people looking for help. These folks use signs and gestures instead of words to get one's attention. Some drivers respond with small acts of kindness. Most, including me, respond with a "no thanks" gesture, a wave-off, if you will.

The cardboard messages vary considerably, from a simple "Help, please" to a more creative but sad "This is not a good day." I must confess that none of the signs or gestures has moved me to respond on the spot with any kind of help. Donations to community service organizations, yes, but no cash to those at the intersections.

The question today's lesson raised for me is how would I respond if one of the cardboard signs said "Do you understand the Book of the Prophet Isaiah?" Would I say, as the official does in the lesson, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And would I go further, and ask the person to join me in the vehicle, so that a dialogue could begin?

This is what happens in our lesson. "Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he, Philip, proclaimed to the official the good news about Jesus." Farther down the road, the vehicle stops so that Philip can baptize the official.

Quite a chain of events. Quite a teaching opportunity for Philip. Quite a learning opportunity for the official. And quite a reversal of roles. Here, the person on the street is the provider, and the person in the vehicle is the one in need.

Well, this got me thinking about how you and I offer the Good News of Jesus to those who express an interest in that News, and about how you and I receive the Good News when someone else offers. Are we more comfortable offering or receiving? Perhaps we're not comfortable with either role.

If we had to choose a role, we probably would choose offering rather than responding. We would rather teach than be taught. We would rather challenge than be challenged. We would rather be in charge of the offense than the defense.

Why is this? Why are we – and maybe I’m speaking just for myself – uneasy about being approached by a stranger at an intersection who might want to help us understand the Good News? Maybe it’s just a matter of being uncomfortable about any kind of role reversal.

We assume that we are being asked for help rather than being asked if we need help. The request feels like an imposition rather than a serious attempt to support us with Good News. The result is that we end up not helping and not being helped. In the case of Sunday mornings, I prefer to be right here. It seems safer. This environment, this space, these friends, these traditions are comfortable. We’re not worried about what will happen here. We exchange the Peace of the Lord in confidence and joy.

Which takes us back to Philip. He didn’t have a cardboard sign. He had a message from God. Remember the first verse in our lesson: “An angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ So he got up and went.” Did Philip have a choice? After all, it is God speaking to him. And, even after Philip obeys and goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, God raises the ante: “Go over to this chariot and join it.” And Philip does, and the dialogue with the official begins.

Are any of those asking for help on a Sunday morning doing so because they feel called by God to engage people who need help? I assume not, but that’s the easy way out, isn’t it? In our lesson, the official, following the baptism, goes on his way “rejoicing.” And Philip goes on his way, proclaiming the Good News “to all the towns.” A happy ending, or, better, a happy beginning. Verse 25 of this morning’s psalm (**Psalm 22:25**) seems to apply: “The poor shall eat and be satisfied, and those who seek the Lord shall praise him ‘May your heart live for ever!’”

This very positive theme is at the heart of our second reading today (**I John 4:7-21**). This lesson from the First Epistle of John is filled with the power of the Good News: “God loved us so much, that we also ought to love one another.” This describes how Philip and the official were feeling long after their chance encounter. Or, was it chance? Maybe it was meant to be. Maybe the Spirit knew something when the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.”

And, more to the point for you and me, individually and as a community, what is the Spirit saying to us? Or, in the words of our Collect today: “Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life.”

This is why we gather. We don’t know Jesus perfectly, but, through community worship and private prayer and corporate study and public service, we seek to know him more fully, so that we might follow him with more conviction, more creativity and more thanksgiving.

What is the Spirit saying to me as I travel the MLK? I’m in a vehicle. I’m not homeless or hungry or broke. On some Sundays, I might even be thinking about the Prophet Isaiah in preparation for a sermon at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea. At the next signal, a person who appears homeless and hungry and broke approaches me with a cardboard sign that asks the question: “Do you need any help understanding the Isaiah passage on which you’re about to preach?”

I hope that I would respond with something more charitable than a “no thanks” gesture. After all, I do need help in understanding. We all need some kind of help. And maybe that need is what binds us with those at the MLK intersections. And maybe that need is what God addressed in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And maybe this Good News is meant for all. And maybe we, having received this News, are expected to share it, even when such sharing is uncomfortable.

How to do that? That’s a question for both those asking for help and those with the resources to provide help. I wonder what would happen if the cardboard signs read, in the spirit of Philip, “How can I help you?” Perhaps the response would be something different than a wave-off, which is my customary response.

Today’s lesson from John’s gospel (**John 15:1-8**) reminds us that some kind of exchange needs to happen. “Abide in me as I abide in you.” Yes, this describes the relationship between Creator and creature. But doesn’t it also describe a healthy relationship between neighbors? We all need help in some way, and we all can help in some way. Where is that match, that connection, as individuals, as a community, as a nation? Is there a chariot that we should be joining or a stranger to whom we should be more open?

Food for thought - and prayer – and maybe more. Amen.