

Easter 5 B: Acts 6-8, John 15:1-8  
Church of the Redeemer, Bethesda, MD

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1) *Now what? Enough already! It's a road too many—and a road too far!*

That would be my reaction if I were Philip, and I heard an angel tell me:

*Get up and head south on the wilderness road.*

It's not like Philip has been just sitting around, taking it easy.

He's been trekking on one long road after another—twists and turns in each.

If I were Philip, I'd be totally exhausted, utterly disoriented, exceedingly grumpy.

He's been on a wild ride of a journey—both geographical and spiritual.

2) The mark points on this journey map are these:

- A Greek-speaking Jew, Philip becomes a Jesus-follower
- New Christian though he is, he is chosen and ordained as a faith community leader charged with seeing that Greek widows who've been going hungry get the food they need.
- His colleague leader Stephen is stoned by a mob—just for preaching Jesus.
- Along with other believers, Philip is run out of town by a wave of persecution.
- He lands in Samaria, where Jewish-Samaritan relations can get very tense.  
But he both preaches and heals there with striking success.  
He gets a ministry up and running, and it's gaining momentum.
- And now he gets an angel order to move out yet AGAIN—on a wilderness road, no less—where if you encounter anyone, it will probably be a bandit.  
This is madness—divinely directed madness—what method in this madness can there be?

3) What's on God's mind, apparently, is NOT a method, but a man.

In a word, an Ethiopian—a rich and powerful Ethiopian—a highly intelligent Ethiopian.

An Ethiopian spiritually hungry and eagerly attuned.

BUT an Ethiopian—who's an outsider in more ways than one—

ethnically, racially, sexually — on all counts an outsider—

as the saying goes: NOT ONE OF OUR KIND—NOT ANYONE FROM AROUND HERE.

Not allowed to worship in the temple when he goes to try—made to stand at its outer edges.

But this Ethiopian desperately wants a God connection,

so, at no small expense, he procures his own scroll of scripture to read on his way home.

So much going for him—this Ethiopian; and so many strikes against him.

And now the angel gives Philip another nudge:

*Get up close and personal, Philip—to a man who IS vulnerable, make YOURSELF vulnerable.*

*Unexpected and uninvited as you are, GO, join yourself to this man's chariot.*

In all these twists and turns, this journey of Philip has, in fact, had a single trajectory:  
Philip himself has been deeply connected—bound to the love of God—  
grafted as a branch into Jesus The TRUE VINE.

And Philip's vocation—evolving one step at a time—is to MAKE connections—  
first with widows who share his race and ethnicity, but not his gender  
then with Samaritans, who stand at the fringes of his race, ethnicity, and religion  
and finally with an Ethiopian who shares neither his race, his ethnicity, nor his sexual status—  
Philip's vocation is to make connections with all these folks  
who long for the God connection that Philip has.

Philip's vocation—first with folks closer, then with folks further—  
is to make his OWN connections with each of them;  
and then to foster their awareness of the connection GOD has with them.

The road Philip travels is—for him and for those whom he meets—a road of connection.

And in this journey, he discovers that in God's eyes, there is no such thing as a road too far.

4) This is the story line Luke traces in Volume 2 of his Gospel narrative, The Acts of the Apostles.

A further layer of meaning emerges when we step back from the story itself.

The account of Stephen, Philip, and five other named Greek-speaking colleagues  
is frequently titled: *The Calling and Ministry of the First Deacons*.

Luke himself doesn't name them as such, probably because, when he was writing,  
the term "deacon" was a term closely associated with Greek religion—  
a term used to describe the relationship of Hermes, the winged messenger god,  
to Zeus, the supreme god (remember your Greek mythology)?

Hermes was called Zeus's DEACON—his right-hand man, his authorized agent—his interpreter.  
(Our word "Hermeneutics," the study of INTERPRETATION, is derived from Hermes.)

Stephen, Philip, and the other five deacons, are brought on board in the early church  
to ensure that God's love in Christ is interpreted and understood in deed as well as in word.

Bread for the soul would have had little meaning for those Greek widows,  
if there had been no bread for their hungry stomachs.

But Stephen and Philip are not just waiters and busboys.

Scholars think they may well have also—around the dinner table—  
interpreted the words of the Jewish apostles for the ears of those Greek widows.

And that these deacons passed along to the apostles the questions and insights of the widows,  
to help the apostles become better, more effective preachers.

From that interpretation work, it is only a short step for Stephen and Philip to interpret,  
not only by their actions, but also in their words—

to interpret the love connection God has made with us in the words and works of Jesus.

That interpretation—that deacon work—when it is rejected, gets Stephen stoned.

When it is welcomed, however, it gets Philip moved from connecting with Greek widows, to connecting with Samaritans, to connecting with an Ethiopian official.

And so—to round out this brief excursus—the work of the deacon in the church today, is not to be a junior priest, and not primarily to be an outreach project coordinator.

Rather, the deacon symbolizes, and leads us all in the privilege and responsibility Christians have to interpret the LOVE connection God has with us in Christ;

by speaking and practicing the love for one another that flows forth from and back to God.

As most of you probably know, Ann Dur-se, the deacon-to-be who is interning here, has a previous professional life as an ambassador.

When she's ordained a deacon, she'll be further designated to be a spiritual ambassador of the King of Love, the Prince of Peace—

and to oversee and orchestrate our efforts as members of the Divine Embassy staff.

5) Back, now, to the story Luke tells of Philip, the deacon.

When he joins the eunuch's chariot, Philip doesn't issue any directives or exhortations.

He just asks where the eunuch is at—which, in fact, is at a very tender place.

The eunuch is incapable, by his impotence, for one reason or another,

to foster the birth of any children in a time when any legacy without offspring was no legacy at all.

The eunuch is reading from the prophet Isaiah about Someone Else who has no generation, and yet whose name God honors in a legacy far better than sons and daughters.

In response to Philip's invitation, the eunuch asks a question about a text of Scripture but it's also a question etched in anguish on his own heart:

*Is there a place, is there a name, is there a connection for ME with a suffering servant whose life God yet saves?*

And Philip quietly says, *Yes there is—A connection for you, in Jesus, with a God like that.*

They talk it through, back and forth, as the chariot wheels rumble down the wilderness road.

And eventually that road doesn't seem like desert any more—

it seem brimming with the promise of verdant connections—vine and branches, bearing fruit.

*Can I be connected—can I be baptized,* the eunuch, this many-ways-outsider, wants to know.

And Philip—he's got no authority to make that call, he's not an apostle like Peter and John.

He's only a deacon—just an interpreter.

But when the eunuch interprets back for Philip

the implications of what Philip has interpreted for HIM—well, Philip just can't say NO.

What can Philip do but baptize this eunuch who is God's own child.

And I fancy that the Risen Lord looks down upon the scene, and says:

**YESS!—CONNECTION MADE—WELL DONE, BOTH OF YOU—KEEP THOSE CONNECTIONS COMING.**

And Luke is clear that this is just what they each do,  
as both of them head down the road—in different directions—to share the God connection.

- 6) It's a quick and easy move from there to say that we need more deacons, more interpreters, to foster more connections—but that move would be TOO quick and easy.

Because—as we all know all too well—words and deeds of interpretive connection-making can be employed to erect barricades as well as to bridge gaps.

Words and deeds that foster tribal connections—connections that can subvert the long, hard, step-by-step work of making community-welcoming connections.

I think of how easy it would have been for Philip, in response to the murder of Stephen, and the persecution that sent him fleeing to Samaria, to circle the wagons and hunker down:

*I'm not going to interpretively interact with those blankety-blank Samaritans!*

Or, having gotten over the Samaritan hurdle, like he did the Greek widow hurdle,

what if Philip had said: *Enough is enough! I won't go down that dangerous wilderness road!*

*Sure, I'll talk ABOUT Ethiopian eunuchs in the abstract,*

*but I won't join any chariots—won't sit down beside any real live Ethiopian!*

*And I'd never DREAM of striking up a Holy Spirit-ed Conversation WITH an Ethiopian!*

- 7) I, for one, am mighty glad that Philip didn't follow any such spontaneous self-defensive instinct.

I hope—and trust—that I and we can, step-by-step, reach out beyond our comfort zones;

both following and fashioning interpretive connecting roads like God has done for us in Christ.

Because if, Christ is risen, so are we; and that means,

in reaching out to those with whom we sense no immediately obvious point of connection, we may well be seriously and joyfully surprised.

We may find ourselves blessed by the very ones we SEEK to bless.

We may discover that when we interpret resurrection, in preaching and practice—even on roads that seem wilderness roads

there will BE no roads that are roads too far for making a God connection.

And so the question, for us at Redeemer:

is there, for us, like Philip, a connection that IS a REACH, but is WITHIN reach?

Let's consider it, shall we? What might that Deacon Philip point be?