

**First Baptist Church of Augusta**

**Acts 8:26-40**

***“Jogging With the Ethiopian”***

**May 10, 2009**

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According to the periodical, “Running Times,” the top two male runners and top two female runners in the world all come from Ethiopia. Through the years, I have run in a number of 10K’s and half marathons and one marathon. I am not bragging, but in all of them I have kept up with the Ethiopian runners. That is, until the race actually started, and then they disappeared as they raced ahead...*way ahead.*

This morning, on Mother’s Day, we have an odd story of one of the early followers of Jesus, whose name was Philip, and Philip is jogging with an Ethiopian - but more on that later.

First, what can we say about this Philip? Peter, we know about; James and John too, but Philip? Who is he?

We know that one of the original twelve apostles was named Philip. This Philip, however, was more than likely one of the seven selected by the apostles earlier in the book of Acts, to help with the distribution of food to the widows in need. We often look to those men as precursor of the office of deacon in our church today. Philip started out in the food pantry, so to speak. Philip mopped the floors and did all those other jobs that the apostles did not have time to do. The apostles were the preachers. Philip was just a worker, a servant in the literal sense. Philip, however, arises in Acts, as an up and coming evangelist. While the apostles are evangelizing among their own – their fellow Jews, the Hebrews – Philip is on the outskirts and proclaiming the good news among the outsiders.

Philip is told by a messenger of God, to get up and go south of Jerusalem. We don’t know why, but we do know Philip goes, and as he is going he meets up with a man from Ethiopia. Ancient Ethiopia is not the same as modern Ethiopia. Ancient Ethiopia is the same as the nation of Cush in the Old Testament and was located in the area of modern Sudan. The term Ethiopian, however, was used to refer to any dark-skinned individual. This detail is important, and I will bring this out in a moment.

The second thing we are told about this man is that he is a eunuch. He is, to be blunt, mutilated – by his own choice or by someone else, we do not know. There is no delicate way to put this, but we have this in the scripture, and so, we must take this information on its own terms, not ours. It was not uncommon for castrated men to serve in positions of government responsibility, including financial matters and the royal harem. He evidently was doing well for himself, given his responsibility as a court official in charge of the entire royal treasury. He is traveling in luxury – on a chariot – and reading his own personal copy of Isaiah, which, no ordinary citizen could ever hope to own. Yet, in the religious world, as a eunuch, he was, shall we say, a complicated gender, and for the most part, he just did not fit in anywhere.

In both cases, his minority status, due to where he is from, and the fact that he is a sexual minority, rendered him as an outsider. But as an outsider he longed for a place of inclusion.

Here is where the scene gets even more interesting. Philip is told to join this man, and so he runs alongside the chariot – that’s right, *runs*. The book of Acts, which is written by Luke, likes to use physical gestures as part of the story telling. Peter and Paul stare, for example. Paul speaks in a loud voice, in one story, and shakes his hand in another. For some reason Luke tells us that Philip runs, and as he is running, he has a conversation with the eunuch. “Yooohoo, what are you reading?” “Isaiah,” says the eunuch, “but I don’t understand it. Who understands Old Testament prophets anyway?” “Glad you asked,” Philip says, panting as he is running along, “I will be happy

to explain it to you.” “Get in the chariot with me,” replies the eunuch. “I thought you’d never ask,” responds a winded Philip.

And so, Philip does three things according to the Bible: 1) opened his mouth, 2) started with scripture, and 3) proclaimed the good news about Jesus. The eunuch is moved to impulsive, and perhaps, we might say imprudent action, when he sees water and wants to be baptized on the spot, to which Philip is willing to comply.

What is up with this strange little story that appears to be inserted in the book of Acts? In fact, we will not hear again about Philip until the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter, and that will be it. As for the eunuch, nothing more is told of him. This is a story of the radical inclusivity of the Good News of Jesus.

Philip has a heart and calling towards those who just don’t belong. Earlier in chapter eight, we read that he goes to proclaim to the Samaritans – they are the outcasts. In this story, he encounters an Ethiopian eunuch, who has two strikes against him. First, he is not Jewish. Secondly, he is a eunuch, which according to portions of the Old Testament, rendered him unfit to enter into the worship of God with others. He, too, was an outsider.

Yet, Philip does not allow these barriers to get in the way. Jogging alongside the chariot, he is invited in to explain the things of God to an outsider who wants in. When Philip asks the Ethiopian eunuch, does he understand, the man replies, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” (v.31)

Have you ever gone to a church that was different, you know, a completely different order of worship, a different structure, filled with people you do not know? How did you feel? Confused? Lost? Out of place? Imagine what it must be like for folks coming here as our guests for the first time. Overwhelming.

Of course, what I am talking about is not just merely church attendance. I am referring also to the larger family of God. Who are the Ethiopian eunuchs in our world today, who deep down want to know more about the things of God, want to be loved, want to be included, want to know that God has a place for them, but they have no one to show them?

Do you have someone in mind? A neighbor perhaps? Someone you see every day at the Y, or the country club, or the baseball field?

This is a Story of Listening and Participating.

There are unlikely apostles everywhere. This is a story calling on us to listen. *Listen. Listen* to the spirit calling you to move, to speak, to act, to initiate with someone who is outside, but wants in. *Listen* to the spirit that leads you to the unlikely of places, to be with the unlikely of people. Everyone needs someone to take us by the hand and join us in our journey to the holy, the things of God.

The Ethiopian Eunuch’s response speaks for many: “How can I unless someone guides me?” William Brosend makes the observation: “The Ethiopian did not ask for a teacher, he asked for a guide. There is a big difference. Teachers point and say, “Go there, do that.” Guides reach out and say, “This is the road I traveled. You might want to try it, but whatever road you choose, I’d like to walk it with you.” Philip got in the chariot with the Ethiopian.” (*The Christian Century*) It would be easier, I suppose, at least easier for us, to just leave a tract, or write a note, or send a sermon. But to get *in* the chariot with this outsider, this Ethiopian, this *eunuch*?

The church needs, I believe, fewer teachers and more guides to climb in the chariots, and not simply tell others about the love of God, but live it.

As we prepare in the next couple of weeks to vote on beginning construction, I need you to listen carefully again to this story and make the following commitments. I need you to be here with us in worship, to make this a priority. It is the most important thing we do all week long, and it is at the core of why we exist – to worship God. Back in 2004, we committed to three morning worship services and each one is unique, yet seeks the same thing: to have a holy encounter of our redeeming God.

Secondly, I need you to engage others, like Philip with the Ethiopian. Engage others to invite them into a life with Jesus. Don't just tell them, show them, join with them in their journey, and love them into the family of God.

You hear me speak so often about our church as a city on a hill, letting our light shine to greater Augusta and around the world. We do this as a teaching and learning congregation; we do this as a sharing and engaging congregation; and we do this by being and living as the presence of Christ. This is the kind of church we are inviting others to be a part of and be baptized in. As the Ethiopian said, however, how can they unless we show them?

Anna Carter Florence writes: "What a miracle. Two guys sitting in a chariot in the middle of a desert, reading the Word of God together. Two guys deciding that maybe the world was bigger than they'd imagined. Two guys realizing that nothing can separate us from the love of God."