

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Third Sunday after Easter, April 17, 2016

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 279, 283, 342, 290, 507.

Lessons: Isaiah 53:1-12, Acts 10:34-48, Matthew 28:16-20.

Sermon Text: Acts 8:26-40.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Just before his ascension into heaven, Jesus told his disciples *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* Acts 1:8 (NIV) Today we see an event in which Philip the evangelist witnesses to a foreigner about Jesus Christ. Let’s look at

PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

- 1. Philip teaches the Word of God in its truth and purity to an African man.**
- 2. The Word of God works faith, which has had results to this day!**

There are two men named Philip in the New Testament. This Philip was one of the seven men chosen in Acts 6:5 by the Christian congregation to serve in the distribution of food to the Christians. But we see that even in that position of service God had more work for him to perform in service in the name of Jesus.

We read of an angel coming from heaven with a special assignment for Philip – one that would take him out of the city onto the Jerusalem-Gaza highway going toward the southwestern corner of Judea. Gaza is along the Mediterranean Sea toward Egypt, and has been in the news because of fighting between Jews and Palestinian Muslim descendants of Ishmael.

At times God gives us unexpected, sometimes unusual opportunities to witness. We may be apprehensive when we are put into unusual circumstances, but Jesus assures us that we don’t need to be afraid of what to say. Jesus told his disciples on one occasion: *“On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”* Matthew 10:18-20 (NIV)

You heard that Philip *“started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, ‘Go to that chariot and stay near it.’”*

Yet it was not Philip, the man walking into this desert area who needed a helping hand. It was the rich man in the chariot who needed help to find the road that leads from one’s own spiritual desert into God’s well-watered Paradise.

A eunuch was a man who had been chosen to serve in the presence of women who were often of the upper or ruling classes. This man had become very powerful in the court of Candace, queen of Ethiopia He had become the man in charge of all the treasury – comparable to what we could call the secretary of the treasury in the cabinet of the president of the United States.

Ethiopia was a Gentile nation in Africa. The first instructions of the angel said nothing about mission work or preaching to anyone. But Philip obeyed the angel, of course. Although God could have used an angel to actually do this work, we see that God wants to use us humans to reach other humans. Angels serve as God’s

messengers, but God uses humans for intensive instruction or the long-term soul-care that we Christians give to one another.

This man was not only a foreigner to Jews, he was also an African, and as such, would have been dark-skinned. As a result, it is unlikely that any Jew would have selected him as mission material unless by direct order from God, and that was the instruction Philip received. Yet this unusual case of reaching out to a non-Jew would soon become usual and typical for mission outreach, as Christians discovered that Jewish people were less receptive than Gentiles of different races and nationalities. The eunuch was not ignorant of the God of Abraham. He evidently was a convert to the Jewish worship of Jehovah and had made a special trip of many hundreds of miles to get to Jerusalem to worship as every devout Jew and those converted to Judaism, called proselytes, wanted to do.

We realize that he himself was wealthy because he had a copy of the book of the prophet Isaiah and was reading this marvelous Old Testament book of the Gospel of the Savior. God's Word was important to him even though he did not understand everything he read, and at this important moment he needed help in understanding a crucial truth which God was about to give him through Philip.

Up until now Philip did not know his assignment from God on the highway that day, so the angel told him his next move was to get going and catch up to that chariot on the road ahead. So Philip soon caught up with the chariot. Evidently the black man was reading the text of Isaiah out loud and Philip realized that the man was puzzled about what he was reading.

Philip came right out and asked him *"Do you understand what you are reading?"* Such a question is a great way to initiate discussion and learning. Especially when we want to share the good news of salvation this kind of approach can lead to someone hearing what we believe, and we know that *"faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."* Romans 10:17 (NIV)

Philip's instruction began at Isaiah 52, verses 7-8. *"He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken."* Isaiah 53:7-8 (NIV)

So who is the man reading about? Who is the person referred to as the lamb who had received no fair trial, no justice, and whose life was taken from him, and when was all this to take place? The eunuch and Philip were ready to talk about the man whom Isaiah is talking about: Jesus Christ.

Starting at the text the Ethiopian did not understand, Philip talked about Jesus of Nazareth. Scripture plainly says that Philip *"told him the good news about Jesus."* The eunuch, too, from Scripture, concluded Jesus was plainly the long-awaited Messiah.

We don't know all that Philip told this man, but we can safely assume that Philip would have been proclaiming both Law and Gospel to this man. However, as one who knew about the Jewish religion, the Ethiopian surely would have known the Law of God, the commandments, and realized that he had not kept them well enough to earn salvation. For we – anyone and everyone – must admit that in order to earn your way into heaven, you must obey God's Law perfectly. That is clear from these words from Deuteronomy: *"You must be blameless before the LORD your God."* Deuteronomy 18:13 (NIV)

Surely from the Ethiopian's request in the New International Version which is translated *"Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized"* we must realize that he was penitent. He wanted the water of life – of eternal life – which is found only in Jesus Christ.

During the process of this Bible class with Philip, the eunuch's heart became convinced that Jehovah had given Jesus to be the Messiah-Savior, and thus Jesus was his personal Savior. He had also become ready to commit himself into Jesus' hands by Holy Baptism. The question, *"What hinders me from being baptized?"* (New King James Version) may indicate a concern that perhaps his African heritage or the dark color of his skin could be an obstacle to his being accepted into the Christian fellowship. It would not, of course.

If you read only from the New International Version, the following verse, verse 37, is not printed in the text, but only as a footnote *"Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' The official answered, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'" There is no good reason to exclude this verse. It is consistent*

with common practice that such a confession would be made by the convert about to be baptized. In the baptism of children, such a confession is made in the words of the Apostolic Creed by others – sponsors or parents or the congregation. This lesson is also used as a text to show that we instruct adults before Baptism.

This text plainly shows that before the baptism of adults in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, they are instructed in the truths of Scripture. And, of course, at confirmation, Christians repeat the same confession of faith, and promise to continue diligently hearing and learning of the Word of God and in the diligent use of the Lord's Supper.

In this lesson from Scripture, we are reminded that Jesus Christ died for all men, regardless of skin color or race or ethnic background.

It is our calling, as Christ plainly says in Matthew 28: ***"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*** Matthew 28:18-20 (NIV)

But some may not think they are worthy to be followers of Jesus. Yet we must remember that Paul, Saint Paul himself, human author of many of the books of the New Testament, confessed his sinfulness in these words: ***"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst."*** 1 Timothy 1:15 (NIV)

Today you also see the humble, repentant attitude of the Ethiopian. We must also be reminded that there is no salvation for impenitent sinners. When John the Baptist told impenitent self-righteous people who came out to him ***"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance"*** Matthew 3:8 (NIV) it is plain that every believer will want to bring forth fruits showing repentance.

We must realize that some may not think the Gospel applies to them, because of ethnic differences or skin color or country of origin. But remember that Jesus died for all. And faith is necessary to appropriate that salvation for oneself. We, after all, are not Jewish and were at one time outside of God's chosen people. But by the grace of God, Peter tells us ***"you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."*** 1 Peter 2:9-10 (NIV) Our God is a God who tells us to repent of our sins so that we may personally benefit from his salvation.

As a man of authority, this African would have – and did share the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

As Philip was spirited away to do other work, the Ethiopian headed home, ready to share with people back home. Although he did not have the support of a Christian congregation when he arrived home, history has shown that the Gospel spread through Ethiopia and has had fruits to this day.

We know that many souls in that heathen foreign land were led to the Savior by his service to Jesus. Well into the twentieth century Ethiopia was considered a Christian nation. The emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 until 1974, Haile Selassie, was a Christian belonging to what we would consider the Eastern Orthodox Church. He had a title which suggests the results of this Ethiopian of the first century telling others about Jesus Christ. The emperor was called "Lion of the Tribe of Judah, His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, King of Kings of Ethiopia, Elect of God." In 2007, 62% of Ethiopians were considered Christian, and we can trace that back to this one Ethiopian whom God called to faith in Jesus Christ through Philip the Evangelist.

May we remember that everyone – all races, all skin colors, all nationalities are included in the "all nations" we are to reach out to with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Amen.