

Choose to Conquer the World - 6 May 2018 (6 Easter, Year B)

By Josette Keelor

Last week, we read of the prophet Philip, who meets a traveling Ethiopian eunuch. The traveler is reading Isaiah, and when Philip asks him if he understands what he's reading, the traveler says, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" So, Philip journeys with him and helps him understand the scripture. The Ethiopian asks to be baptized, and Philip complies.

It's a short reading that might be interpreted as how we disciples are called to help others better understand their relationship with God through Jesus. But I've left out an important part of this story—the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit directs Philip onto the road where he ends up meeting the traveler. The Spirit then directs Philip to go talk with the man and learn of his need. And at the end, after Philip helps the man, the Spirit directs Philip on to his next task.

Actually, the Spirit does more than give simple directions. One second Philip is there with the traveler, the next second he's gone.

"The Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away," the reading tells us. "The eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea."

I found all this very interesting, which is why I bring it up today, even though this Sunday we've moved on to three new readings. Last week's readings carried a theme of obedience to God that continues in this week's readings, and I think the story of Philip and the traveler is an interesting example of that idea.

Whatever Philip was up to in the beginning before the Spirit came to him wasn't as important as the role he was about to play in the life of the eunuch. Philip not only helped him understand what he was reading, but then also baptized him. None of this could have happened if Philip had disobeyed the Spirit and decided whatever he was doing was more important than helping a lonely traveler find Jesus.

But I think the ending is even more significant. Just imagine Philip after baptizing this man and returning to the road with him. Surely Philip wants nothing more at this moment than to keep talking with his new friend of their shared interests and maybe even their differences. But the Spirit has other ideas, and for whatever reason the Spirit is done asking. Sorry, Philip, you're outta here. No time to get comfortable, you're needed someplace else.

And that's what I imagine the Spirit wants from us as well. Sometimes we hear these commands and have the opportunity to decide whether or not we'll accept; and other times, change is thrust upon us. It's at times like these when we truly have the chance to live our faith. Are we like Philip, proclaiming the Good News, regardless of how our lives might have been turned upside down? Or do we curse the Spirit for stealing us away from things we would rather be doing?

Think of a time in your life when you achieved what you wanted—or you helped someone else achieve success: You got the house you wanted or the job you wanted. You moved to a new place or started a new business. Naturally, you'd want to settle down there, right? I mean, you just achieved everything you ever wanted! Now, it's party time, relaxation time. Happily-ever-after time.

But guess what? The Spirit has other ideas. And though in God we trust that all our dreams can come true, “happily ever after” isn’t usually an instant and lasting reward—at least, not during our time on Earth.

Our stories are meant to go on, and like Philip, we shouldn’t expect much time to celebrate and kick back with our feet up. When one journey ends, another begins, and I think this reading tells us that we should expect the Holy Spirit to shake things up in our lives whenever we start to get too cozy and forget that we’re here for a reason—to obey God’s commands, to include others in our lives, and to love.

Which brings me to today’s readings.

In the first one, Peter tells us that it’s not OK to exclude others from the chance of knowing God just because they’re “not like us.”

In the second reading, John tells us that to know God is to love Him, and to love God is to love all that He’s made.

And the third reading continues that theme of obedience and love: That God not only requires us to love one another through inclusion and through recognition that we are all children of God, but also by being willing to give up our lives for our friends—as Jesus did for us.

Any one of these takeaways would be enough for one Sunday—but this Sunday we’re absolutely inundated with messages of lifechanging potential.

“You did not choose me, but I chose you,” Jesus tells us.

Interesting statement, right? And it can have various meanings. It could mean that while we asked God to solve our problems in a particular way, He sent us Jesus as an answer that we didn’t expect. It could also mean that although we might not want to follow Jesus, that’s really just too bad for us. Because Jesus, like the Holy Spirit, has different plans for us.

Now, I’m not saying we don’t have free will. We all have the privilege of deciding whether we’re going to believe in God, and even if we do believe, whether we’re going to follow Him. But it’s a well-known idea that those who choose not to believe in or follow God are fighting a losing battle.

There’s a saying that whenever people make plans, God laughs. It’s not that God doesn’t care about our plans, it’s that He simply might have other ideas for us. While we want to continue along our journey just enjoying where we are, He says, “Nope, I need you over there, stat. Somebody there needs your help.”

I think Jesus is telling us that those of us who call ourselves believers would be wiser to accept our orders than to resist.

Today’s second reading continues:

“And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last,” Jesus says, “so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

When I first read this, I thought it’s kind of sad to think that Jesus needs to command us to love one another. That we can’t just love each other without requiring a promise of reward. But there’s another way of interpreting this line too.

“I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

Maybe what He’s saying is that through His commands we are able to love one another. That through Jesus, we are made better. It’s like He has the key to unlock our hearts—hearts that would deny baptism water to those we see as unworthy. Hearts that would keep us from altering our route to help a lost traveler find salvation.

Through Jesus we are able to love, and John explains that one for us too:

“Whatever is born of God conquers the world. ... [and] Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”

So, yes, celebrate your success. But before you get too comfortable, consider what God might have for you next so you can be ready with an answer when the order comes.

Whatever happens, we always have a choice to accept the situation or not. It’s the choice to be of the world or to conquer the world.