

“Teaching and Learning”

April 26, 2015

4th Sunday of Easter – Pathway to Discipleship

She called me on the phone at the parsonage one afternoon. Out of the blue, the phone rang. I answered, and the woman on the other end asked me about being baptized. I was surprised and asked her if she had a church. She told me that she was trying to find spiritual outlets online and connect with people. We agreed to meet at the office. She came in soon after, and I learned of her story.

She was clean after many years of drug addiction. She had been in jail. She had been sexually assaulted. She struggled with mental illness and family problems. In her own words, she was a miracle. God had worked in her life, and she was thankful. She wanted to be baptized.

Now I'll tell you, this kind of thing doesn't happen every day. Pastors get a lot of questions. A lot of people ask for prayer. But it's not every day that someone calls on the phone asking about baptism. And I'll admit. I wasn't hesitant at first - hesitant because her story didn't fit with what I was used to, because it was new and different, because sometimes it's just hard to believe. She challenged me to think about grace in a new way - in a deeper way - and to see how amazing God's grace really is!

It's not every day that you encounter someone who's seeking to acknowledge God's work in their lives so powerfully and boldly. I have a feeling that might be what Philip felt like when the Holy Spirit led him to this man from Ethiopia. Gospel writer Luke, who scholars believe wrote the Book of Acts, too, is sure to tell us the details. Luke says this all happens on a desert road. Luke is sure to tell us about this Ethiopian - a eunuch - a castrated male servant who could have been ostracized - on the outside. But we know he was in Jerusalem. We know he's got some wealth - he's got his own chariot. We know he's got some social status as the person in charge of the treasury for the queen. The man is wealthy, educated, devout, humble, and hospitable. He's a seeker whose heart is open to God's grace.

We know something about Philip, too. In Acts 6, Philip is one of seven men appointed to care for those who are in need as the early Christian community grows. Later on in Acts 21, we hear Philip called “the evangelist.” The other thing about Philip is that he's attentive to the Holy Spirit. He responds. He goes, and he acts. He engages. He guides.

Barbara Brown Taylor offers a great parallel as we consider this encounter: “Imagine a diplomat in Washington, DC, inviting a street preacher to join him in his Lexus for a little Bible study.” It really is an amazing moment!

The Ethiopian asks questions. And Philip answers. Their encounter challenges us to look at ourselves. How are we engaged in Scripture? How are we always seeking to learn and

grow? Are we willing to reach out to others for help? Can we share the questions we have about God and faith?

Yes, the Ethiopian is a seeker, and Philip is a faithful guide - one is a learner, and one is a teacher. But that relationship offers both of them an opportunity to strengthen their faith and to understand God more deeply.

First, the Ethiopian asks, "How can I understand unless someone guides me?" Now it's interesting because this man has high status. He probably has wealth. But he's seeking help. He can read the words, but he needs to understand them for himself. And he needs someone who has experienced the God Isaiah talks about to help him. So, Philip guides him.

What he's reading - the prophet Isaiah - carries hope and promise for him. He realizes that Isaiah's words are about Jesus - One who understands his humiliation and his humanity. Isaiah's words are about God who reaches those who are on the margins and gathers them in.

His second question is: "who is Isaiah talking about?" Maybe he's wondering if it's possible that Isaiah's word really is for him. We know that this man has some interest, some inkling, some connection because he's just been to Jerusalem to the temple. But it's still true that he could have been on the outside - not fully included in worship because of who he was.

For him to see Jesus through Isaiah's word offers him hope. Jesus humbled himself and went even to death for the sake of the whole world - for the sake of every person - no matter their sexual identity or social status. Whatever this man has experienced, he hears a promise of God's love for him, and it's good news.

It's so good that he doesn't hesitate. "Is there anything preventing me from being baptized?" Maybe he had thought about it before. Maybe he was told he couldn't be baptized. Philip pays attention to the Holy Spirit, and the Ethiopian is baptized. This man who might have lived his life believing that he couldn't be a part of God's family experienced grace in a powerful way. He went away rejoicing, and tradition holds that the Christian church in Ethiopia traces its roots to this moment - to this one who went back to his country and shared good news about God.

Luke reminds us that the Gospel of Jesus Christ - the Good News of the Risen Lord - the power of resurrection - is about new possibilities for everyone! No one is outside of God's grace. No one is outside of God's love. No one is outside of the embrace of the Gospel!

This encounter reminds us of how important it is for us to engage in teaching and learning in the church - of engaging with one another about our faith in Jesus Christ. Yes, Philip was faithful and involved in caring for others, but I wonder how this moment affected him just as much as it did the Ethiopian? It's important that we recognize Philip and the Ethiopian, but we also have to lift up the Holy Spirit as a main actor here.

God offers us opportunities to share the Gospel and to encourage others on their walk with Christ. Our presence in worship and in community allows God to work through us and to

speak to us. We rely on the Holy Spirit for help at every step. And the other part of it is that we're changed and transformed in the process!

Teaching and learning bring transformation. Teaching and learning work together to make disciples - to bring people into relationship with Jesus Christ - and to nurture the faith of people who have a relationship already! If we want to make disciples for Jesus Christ, we have to be disciples for Jesus Christ first. We have to be intentional about studying Scripture, asking questions, and being honest about our faith journey - the ups and the downs.

It's not enough to make sure that someone has a Bible of their own. It's not enough for us to have a Bible somewhere in our home. This encounter reminds us that we need others with us for guidance, wisdom, and conviction. We need to be with others so that we can see God working through them and remember that God works through us, too. We need to keep on learning and growing together to deepen our relationship with God and to grow as disciples.

One of our VCI prescriptions is about creating a Pathway to Discipleship for every member of the congregation – and for all those who aren't here yet. You have a blue brochure that offers some details – that offers a starting point to think about where you are. Our VCI Pathway Team knows that this will be an ongoing process for our congregation to lift up Christian education and mission. If you have ideas, please share them.

So do you wonder what happened with the woman who called? Well, I can tell you that it was a joy to touch her head with the waters of baptism - to celebrate God's grace in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – and to tell her to live in God's grace all the days of her life.

But beyond that moment of grace, something else happened. One Sunday, she came downstairs to find me when folks were mingling in the fellowship hall. She wasn't used to being in that bigger crowd. She told me she felt like people might think she was out of place because of the tattoos that covered her arms. I said something stupid like, "Well, Jesus doesn't care. I'm sure he had tattoos, too." Her response came immediately, "Well, he did have scars."

You could have knocked me over when she said that. All of the theological training in the world couldn't prepare me for that moment and the profound truth that she spoke. That was her witness to the deep, deep love of Jesus Christ. She believed that the scars Jesus carried were for her. She wasn't going through the motions. She understood it. She believed it deep down in her soul. She trusted it. And that day, God blessed me and reminded me of the power of grace. I was the pastor who baptized her, but she taught me about grace.

God reminded that the Good News of Jesus Christ - the Risen Lord - the One whose love death can never stop - the One whose light cannot be put out - is One who embraces all - who

welcomes all in love and mercy. And every time I think of her, God reminds me of how much I learn from others on this journey.

We've been embraced by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and we're called to share it - to be teachers and learners every day.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.