
I Love To Tell The Story

A sermon by Canon Lauren Holder
The Feast of St. Philip – Year B

This is my first time preaching on these readings for the Feast of St. Philip the deacon and evangelist—because not all churches celebrate this feast. Though of course, they should. And in my research of how this feast day came about, I discovered an entry on the highly reliable and scholarly site of Wikipedia that while the Catholic and Episcopal churches recognize Philip as a saint, the Anglican church does not. And that the Episcopal Church only added Philip to the list of saints because he is the patron saint of the Cathedral of St. Philip in the Diocese of Atlanta. While I could find no sources to corroborate this statement, still I say to all the Episcopal churches of the world who may be celebrating the Feast of St. Philip today: You're welcome.

In fact, this finding made me wonder if our beloved Dean Candler—a renowned and enthusiastic liturgist throughout the Episcopal Church—if perhaps he had composed our Collect of the Day. I learned he did not compose the collect, but he did help write the first (and best) line: “Holy God, no one is excluded from your love, and your truth transforms the minds of all who seek you.”

It strikes me that perhaps we could have read our Epistle and Gospel readings in reverse order. Matthew's Gospel ends with these words from Jesus to the disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them... and teaching them... And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Poignant parting words.

And the book of Acts, or as my best friends calls it, “The Acts and Shenanigans of the Apostles,” we hear about how the disciples lived out Jesus' commandment to “GO” in the first days, weeks, and years of the early Church. We learn that Philip was travelling on a wilderness road. Two things we know about Philip—he was a deacon and an evangelist. He felt called to serve the most marginalized, and he preached where ever he went—to anyone and everyone. Case in point: the Ethiopian.

This man had traveled all the way from Ethiopia to Jerusalem—a Holy pilgrimage—and was reading the Holy Scriptures from the prophet Isaiah. This was someone in search of a deeper relationship with God. And yet, as a Eunuch, he would always be outside the Jewish community, never able to fully convert to Judaism. As he's reading, Philip comes up and asks if he understands the passage. The Ethiopian responds, “how can I?” And Philip plops down beside him to talk about Jesus.

At this part of the story, I'm whisked back to my days in the Baptist Church, and thus I've been singing the hymn, “I love to tell the story...” in my head all week.

*I love to tell the story
'twill be my theme in glory
to tell the old, old story
of Jesus and his love.*

Philip loved to tell the story of Jesus' love. To anyone. He told the story to the Ethiopian. Before that he told the story in Samaria, converting a bunch of outsider Samaritans before that. The man loved Jesus' story! Loved to tell it! He took Jesus' commandment to go and make disciples of all the nations quite literally, where others might like to just make disciples of

their like-minded friends.

You know the feeling of when you have really good news, and you just can't keep it to yourself? It's such good news that it practically falls out of your mouth before you know what you're saying? I imagine that's how Philip talked about Jesus.

Two things strike me about Philip sharing Jesus. The first is about belonging. I've long been interested in the concept of belonging. When I was in college I wrote a paper on the effects of belonging on the economy of indigenous communities I visited along the Amazon River. When I was a Youth Minister, I wanted to write a dissertation on the theology of belonging, thinking specifically about summer camps. If you've ever attended camp, you know there are certain traditions that feel exclusive on the first day, but because they are so accessible, by the second day you too are taking part in the traditions and you know you are part of something greater.

Philip tells the story of Jesus, and the Ethiopian is so inspired that he asked to be baptized on the spot. It is an act of belonging. He becomes part of something greater. In a moment we will baptize two children, and they, too, will become part of something greater. We will all renew our baptismal covenants as a reminder that we belong together, and we belong to something greater.

And the beautiful thing about sharing Jesus? It's often in sharing Jesus that we find Jesus. In sharing love that we find love. So, I imagine that even as Philip was sharing the story of Jesus with the Ethiopian, Philip was finding Jesus in that moment. Jesus told the disciples, "I am with you always, to the end of the age," and Philip found that truth in proclaiming the good news.

So, my prayer for us this week is that we would share Jesus. That we would tell the story of Jesus and love to tell the story. That we would find Jesus in the sharing of Jesus, and that we would find that we belong to one another and we belong to something greater. Because no one is excluded from the love of God.

Amen.