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## *People Go to Church Just to be Seen!*

**A sermon for Choral Eucharist on the Feast of St. Philip  
by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart find favor in your sight, oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

It had been a long day. I had been here from early in the morning till late in the evening. I was wearing my normal costume of holiness: black pants, black shirt, white collar. I finished what I had to do and I went to one of my favorite restaurants. They had one table left. It was over in the corner, but they let me have it. As it turns out, I decided to leave my collar in the car. Now, I love being a parish priest, but sometimes it's good to be anonymous. And as I sat at that table, I couldn't help but overhearing the conversation of the couple at the next table over. Have you had that happen to you? And they were clearly getting to know each other.

And so, it got to the part in the conversation where one said to the other, "Do you go to church?" Well, I stopped everything I was doing because I wanted to hear this now.

And the other said, "No, not really."

And so, the first person said, "I don't either. I think people go to church just to be seen."

And the other person said, "Yeah, I think that's right. People go to church just to be seen."

I chuckled and went back to my halibut.

There's an assumption in that statement, that church is about status. And if you're not careful, you might read the story of Philip and the Eunuch as making the same statement from a different perspective, that the story is really about reaching out and bringing in the stranger, engaging the other.

This is a house of prayer for all people, our gospel passages, the great commission, where all are to be included. You might think that's what this story is about.

And I think that's true as far as it goes, but I don't think ultimately the story is about status, as much as it is about desire.

Think of it. The Ethiopian Eunuch is, in fact, a stranger. He is, in fact, in a foreign land. He is, in fact, reading a scripture of the people who would not allow him to enter the temple because of his physical condition.

He was, in fact, brought in from the margin by Philip. But he's hardly of low status, at least in his own country. He is the head of the treasury of Queen Candace. He is riding in a chariot. He actually has a scroll, which is a pretty high status thing when you think about it.

And Philip is not of high status; Philip is actually of low status. Philip is one of the deacons, one of the seven chosen to distribute food to widows. He has the courage to approach the Eunuch. And the Eunuch accepts a lower status and Philip accepts a higher status in order for them to engage each other.

And if you think about it, we do this all the time. In every human interaction, there's a negotiation of status and it changes over time.

We're not always high status and we're not always low status. And in fact, I don't think those are moral postures. I think they're choices.

Sometimes high status makes sense. Sometimes low status makes sense. The question is, for what purpose? What is your desire? What do you really want?

Let me tell you a story. I think that this couple was right, that I at least do come to church to be seen – not to increase my status, but because I have this basic desire to be known fully and loved fully. The problem is I don't completely trust you. So, I'm not going to show you all of me because I'm afraid you'll reject it, which of course, means I don't really get what I want.

So, I have to proceed incrementally in small steps, revealing a bit of myself, accepting your love and acceptance, and then revealing a little bit more, which includes a choice of status, but for a purpose.

My desire is, in fact, to be seen fully, and I'm trying to screw up the courage to get there and you are helping me. I bet that's the same with many of you.

The story I want to tell you is a story of a young Lutheran minister. She had just gotten out of seminary and was assigned to a church and ultimately assigned to go visit a parishioner. This parishioner got visited every week. In fact, it was the last item that was delegated in staff meetings. She didn't really understand why this task had such low status, until she actually went and visited the parishioner. He lived in this rundown white clapboard house. He was a bit heavy. The house didn't really smell all that inviting. And he sat in an overstuffed, but ragged chair with an oxygen tank next to him.

She went the first week. She talked to him, they prayed together, she left.

And the next week at staff meeting, she volunteered to go back, her high status to engage his low status. But this time, at the end of her conversation with the parishioner, he said, "I think it's time to show you the cellar."

She got up, went to the top of the stairs, opened the door, but it was dark and foreboding and she didn't want to go down there. But he entreated her to continue, "Go on down to the cellar." And as she went down the stairs and turned on the light, she saw this huge, sophisticated weaving loom and all these stacks of what looked to be discarded rags in each of the corners of the loom.

"Yes," he said, "this is what I do. I gather up discarded rags and I weave them together into rugs." He invited her back upstairs, went to the kitchen, got a stack of beautiful rugs that he had created. Went through them, telling her the stories of where the rags came from and then gave her the most beautiful one.

She broke down into tears.

See the negotiation of status changing because she engaged him. He was seen by her and came alive. She took the rug back with her and the next week he died and she performed his funeral.

As she was teaching a class somewhat later, she told this story and somebody came out of the class in tears and confessed that, that parishioner was their uncle, but they had never been able to engage him.

He seemed like the black sheep of the family. The house was in the wrong neighborhood, it didn't smell good, and they couldn't really figure out what to talk to him about. And they knew nothing about him because they had refused to negotiate the status.

She, of course, gave that nephew the rug, so that his coming alive would continue brightening the life of his own family through her efforts.

We go to church to be seen.

It is, I think, what the Ethiopian Eunuch really wanted. If he wanted status, he'd have stayed at home.

He was willing to forfeit his status because he wanted to be seen. He wanted to be alive. He wanted to know what this promise was all about.

And Philip elevated his status, racing to the chariot, meeting the Eunuch where he was to explain the wonders of Christ.

It was in their willingness to negotiate status because of a common desire to be seen fully, to be loved fully, to

be accepted fully.

That's what this story is about and that's what it means to be a deacon, I think. And that's why I take our patron saint, St. Philip, with such joy, as it inspires us as a congregation to come to church to be seen and to see each other, which we can only do if we're willing to engage in the status negotiations that real relationships require.

I don't go to church because I think people just go to church to be seen. I go to church because I think people go to church to be seen, and it's a wonderful thing to be seen and accepted and loved.

And when that happens, you find those boundaries. It's not that you have to cross them; they aren't there. They simply melt away as we understand more deeply that God expresses love through all of us in very unique ways.

And every person with all of their differences that we encounter is another way we know God more deeply, another way we are seen more fully, another way we are loved into life.

So, come to church where you can be seen.

Amen.