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## *Serving Does Not Require a Title*

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler  
The Feast of St. Philip – Year C**

This past week I was reminded of Jack Handey and his Saturday Night Live “Deep Thoughts!” Here is one of his finer examples:

“Before you criticize someone, you should walk a mile in their shoes. That way when you criticize them, you are a mile away from them ...and you have their shoes.”

I think of that old saying, walking a mile in someone’s shoes, when I think of Philip the Deacon, in that story where he came across an Ethiopian eunuch sitting up in a chariot, puzzled by life and by a strange scripture from Isaiah.

Here at the Cathedral of St. Philip, St. Philip the Deacon, I hope we know the story of how Philip assists the Ethiopian eunuch by climbing up alongside the Ethiopian. Philip didn’t just walk a mile in the guy’s shoes. Philip got up into the chariot with him. Philip got in the car with him. Philip got into his life with him.

We keep the feast of our patron saint, Philip the Deacon today. But, here’s the thing. In the New Testament, most of our present-day titles didn’t mean much yet. I am talking about titles we tend today to take for granted, titles like bishop (which really just meant overseer), and priest, and apostle, and disciple, and even the title, deacon.

Here at the Cathedral of St. Philip the Deacon, we have heard many a sermon about Philip. He was one of the first seven deacons, we say, along with Stephen. And there is much uncertainty about whether the two Philips in the New Testament were the same person or not: Philip the Apostle or Philip the Deacon.

Today, I have a new twist in our discussion. The main thread is the same: Philip was called to serve! We live into the ministry of our patron saint, Philip the Deacon, by serving! By serving, in whatever form service takes. Our mission statement to the city and to the world ought to be the very words of Jesus: “I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27). That’s the main thread, and it is still the same.

But today’s twist is this: In Acts, chapter 6, the Philip who was chosen and prayed over to serve at table, was also one who practiced *apostolic* service; Philip also served the word! We tend to think of Philip and Steven as the first deacons, and so we tend to dress them in the garments which we give to deacons now. We put a stole diagonally over their shoulder and we designate them to set the table.

But the scholar, John Collins, in an incisive book called *Deacons And The Church*, makes a special study of the word “deacon” in the New Testament, and according to Luke. He notes that the word *diakonia* (from which we obtain the word, “deacon”), in all its cognates, can mean all sorts of ministries. It is translated service, of course, but it is also translated, simply, ministry. It does not mean only what we think deacons do today.

In particular, in *The Book of Acts*, chapter 6, when Luke tells the story of how the Greeks complained that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution, the word “food” is never mentioned at all. It doesn’t say the Greeks were being neglected in the daily distribution of “food,” but simply in “in the daily distribution.” That word “distribution” is *diakonia*, service!

The widows were simply not being ministered to, and maybe because no one spoke their Greek language and knew their Greek customs. So, the seven new people assigned to them, including Philip and Stephen, were all

Greek. They spoke Greek. And they didn't minister *food* to these Greek-speaking people. They ministered *words* to them! They spoke their language! They preached and they taught them. In other words, they fulfilled apostolic mission to them! They were acting as apostles!

They didn't just wait tables. They preached and taught! This is why Stephen immediately delivers one of the great sermons in the Book of Acts. And this is why Philip, our own patron deacon, teaches and explains scripture to the Ethiopian eunuch. Just after Acts 6, the two great sermons, the two great explications of the word, were delivered by two of those seven people! Stephen preaches the word so forcefully that he is put to death. And then, Philip, our own St. Philip the Deacon, explains scripture to the Ethiopian eunuch in such a way that the Ethiopian wants to be baptized! They are not serving tables.

And this is why it doesn't matter how we title Philip these days, as either deacon or apostle, or minister or servant, or what. He fulfilled the ministry of Jesus by serving, in whatever way was necessary.

Philip most certainly did not have the proper title "deacon" when he set out on the wilderness road. He may have even had the title, "apostle." In the same way, the opportunity for service comes to every one of us, but in different ways. And it doesn't matter what our title is: president or vice-president or errand boy. General manager or field manager or bat boy. Father or mother or priest or deacon, or layperson or preacher, or whatever.

Titles are not the permissions to serve. We all have permission to serve. No matter what title we claim for ourselves and no matter what title is given to us. Serving does not require a title.

How do we follow the example of our patron saint, Philip the Deacon? We follow his example by serving. Part of that service means being willing to stop, willing to pause with someone, and talk about God. Service means talking about gospel and grace. Any baptized person, of whatever title, can preach!

That means you can preach! You do not need to be ordained to preach. You don't need to be ordained a deacon, or a priest, or bishop, or anything. You can explain good news and grace, whoever you are, and wherever you are. When you comfort another friend or family member, you are delivering grace. When you are teaching a friend or family member, you can deliver wisdom and grace.

You can serve grace wherever and whenever you are. When you pause your life and sit with a friend, listening to their issues, you are serving them. When you pause to respond to a request for aid, you are serving. When you help a colleague with their assignment, you are serving the gospel of grace, the gospel of love.

What matters is service. Do you remember what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said about service? He said,

*Everybody can be great. Because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. ... You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.*

"A soul generated by love," blessed Martin said. Philip the Deacon was a soul generated by love. When he stopped, when he paused, he didn't take someone else's shoes and walk off with them. Philip climbed up alongside the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip paused to get into someone else's life.

Today, we are pausing to get into someone else's life, too. We are pausing to baptize some new Christians today, just like Philip baptized someone. We are pausing to get into these peoples' lives! Whatever our title is, we are all baptizing today. We are taking time to serve the gospel.

AMEN.