
The Gift Before the Task

**A Meditation for the 5:22 p.m. Contemplative Eucharist
observing the Feast of St. Philip, Deacon and Evangelist
by the The Rev. Canon George Maxwell**

I. The Room

Look up for a moment. Above us, the roof opens to the sky. Around us, eight walls.

The shape of this room is older than the cathedral we belong to. The first Christians built their baptisteries with eight sides, and they did it on purpose. Genesis tells of six days of making and a seventh of rest. Then, on the morning after a Sabbath, a tomb was found empty. The early church called that morning the eighth day: the first day of a new creation. So they built eight-sided rooms for baptism, because baptism is where a person steps into that day.

There is something else in the creation story worth noticing. Every day ends with the same refrain: there was evening and there was morning. Every day but one. The seventh day has no evening. It simply stays open, like the sky above us.

We are sitting in a room built for beginnings. Tonight I want to tell you about a man who kept beginning again.

II. The Tables

We first meet Philip in a dispute about food. The young church in Jerusalem is growing, and some of its widows are being overlooked in the daily distribution. The apostles say, in effect: we cannot leave our preaching to wait on tables. Choose seven reliable men to handle it.

Philip is one of the seven. That is how he enters the story: as the answer to a staffing problem. (Acts 6:2-4)

There is nothing wrong with that. Somebody needs to make sure the widows eat. But notice how we learn his name: on a list, next to a task. If the story stopped here, Philip would be a job description. Useful, dependable, forgettable.

And then he was moved.

III. Scattered

Within a few chapters, the church in Jerusalem is under attack. Stephen, another of the seven, has been killed. The believers scatter. The tables are gone.

Philip goes north to Samaria, the last place a respectable Jerusalem believer would choose. And there, among people his neighbors would not eat with, he preaches. It works. Crowds listen. The sick are healed. Luke says there was great joy in that city. (Acts 8:6-8)

If I were writing his story, this is where I would let him stay. We tend to think that is what a calling is: finding the thing you are good at and settling into it.

And then he was moved.

IV. The Road

An angel sends him south, to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. Luke adds a small note: this is a wilderness road. It calls to mind the word Genesis uses for the earth before creation: *tohu*, the formless waste before God has spoken.

So Philip leaves the crowds and the joy and goes to stand on an empty road. No congregation. No explanation. Only a road he cannot see the end of.

V. The Chariot

You have just heard what happens next. A chariot comes into view, and in it a man from Ethiopia, the treasurer of a queen, who has traveled a very long way to worship. He is also a eunuch. In the courts of that world, men in his position were very often made eunuchs for the sake of their service. His body itself had been shaped around his job. And the law of Israel kept men like him out of the assembly. He came all that way to worship a God whose house would not fully let him in.

Notice how small Philip's part is. He runs. He listens. He asks a question. Then starting from the very page the man is reading, he tells him about Jesus. Everything else has already been prepared.

The man is reading Isaiah, and the passage asks: *Who can describe his generation?* (Acts 8:32, 33, quoting Isaiah 53:8 as rendered in the Septuagint which is the Greek translation the Ethiopian would most likely have been reading). For a man like him, that word could only sound like children, descendants, a future. He has none, and never will.

But, Isaiah is not finished.

A few chapters later in that same scroll, Isaiah promises that God will give faithful eunuchs a name better than sons and daughters, an everlasting name that will never be cut off. (Isaiah 56:1-8). Now that promise reaches a foreigner on his way home from Jerusalem. Whether or not he had reached that page, he was about to receive it.

Then they come to some water, and he asks the question at the center of this whole story: *What is to prevent me from being baptized?*

Think of everything that might have prevented him. His nation. His body. The law. The years of standing at the edge. Every answer the world had ever given him.

And the answer is: nothing.

Nothing is taken from him first. He is not made into someone more convenient. He is not asked to stop being foreign, or to stop being what others had made him. The man who comes up out of that water is the same man who went in. But now he has a name that nothing can cut off.

That is what this room is for.

VI. Snatched Away

And then, at the very moment Philip has been most fruitful, the Spirit snatches him away. (Acts 8:40)

The Ethiopian never sees him again. Luke says he went on his way rejoicing. Alone, and rejoicing. He did not need Philip in order to be who he now was.

And Philip did not need to hold on to the Ethiopian. He turns up in Azotus and keeps preaching, town after town, up the coast.

I find this one of the most freeing moments in scripture. The Spirit will not let Philip become the hero of the Ethiopian's story. His worth was not in that conversion, any more than it was in the tables or the crowds in Samaria.

And then he was moved.

VII. Years Later

Philip appears once more, near the end of Acts. Paul, traveling to Jerusalem, stays at a house in Caesarea. It is Philip's house. Something like twenty years have gone by. Philip has settled. He has four daughters, and

Luke tells us they prophesy. (Acts 21:8,9)

Luke calls him Philip the evangelist. That is what he did. And Luke remembers him as one of the seven. Long after the tables were gone, that first calling still belonged to his story.

But there was something deeper than any calling, something true of Philip before anyone asked him to serve. When the apostles chose the seven, they did not look for men who would be filled with the Spirit once they took the job. They looked for men who were already full of the Spirit. The gift came before the task.

VIII. The Room Again

The roles of a cathedral change, even one that bears Philip's name. Programs begin and end. Clergy come and go. What we are good at in one decade may not be what we are asked to do in the next. Some of you know this about your own lives: the work that defined you, the role you played in your family, the thing you were known for. And then you were moved.

None of those roles is the deepest truth about us. They are callings, and they are good. But the blessing came first. Before there was anything to accomplish, there was a life God called good.

Even the great commission we heard tonight ends this way. Jesus sends his friends to the ends of the earth, and the last thing he gives them is not another task but a promise: *I am with you always*.

That is what happens in a room like this. Before any of us did anything, we were brought to water and given a name that nothing can cut off. Whatever you are being moved toward next, that name goes with you.

Look up again. The roof is open. This is the eighth day, the one with no evening.

Go on your way rejoicing.

Amen.