
Philip the Deacon and Buster the Iguana

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Feast of St. Philip

Years ago, when I was first a priest, I spent countless afternoons drinking sherry and eating cheese biscuits, cucumber sandwiches, and candied pecans in the apartments of elderly widows in Charlotte, NC. I always looked forward to these visits, not only because of the good company but, yes, also because of the tasty snacks. I knew not to eat much lunch before I went so I would have room to show proper appreciation for whatever was being served. I had been coached on this by my mentor, a seasoned priest in her early 70s. “Julia,” she reminded me at least once a week, “whenever someone you’re visiting offers you something to eat or drink, you make sure you eat or drink it. This is very important. Never refuse someone’s offering.”

I have followed this advice for 25 years now and not once have I regretted it. Not even when the “treat” being presented was the chance to hold an ominously large and scaly pet iguana named Buster, who always looked at me funny out of the side of his eyes, as if to say, “I know you’re not really that into me.” *Never refuse someone’s offering.*

This afternoon’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles tells the well known story of our cathedral’s patron saint, Philip the Deacon. There are many critical components to this reading, many components without which the story could not unfold as it does: Philip’s attentiveness to the call of the Holy Spirit; the way, when he hears the Ethiopian eunuch reading from the prophet Isaiah, instead of just going on about his business, he actually stops to ask if the man understands what he is reading. Then, of course, there is the baptism—Philip’s baptism of the Ethiopian right there on the spot.

There are many critical components to this story. The one that especially catches my attention today, though, is the readiness with which Philip accepts the Ethiopian’s offer to join him in his chariot. Because so much of the rest of what happens hinges on Philip’s acceptance of this invitation. An invitation to sit down next to a man very different from himself.

I wonder how this must have been for Philip. I wonder if, when the Ethiopian man beckoned him to enter his chariot, Philip hesitated, thinking to himself, *Wait a second, this is all wrong. For starters, my mother told me never to get into a moving vehicle with someone I didn’t know. Stranger danger! Second, this guy rubs shoulders with royalty, and I’m a deacon. I’m here to serve, not to sit, especially not in this fancy contraption.* But Philip did accept the Ethiopian’s offer to have a seat—an acceptance without which the rest of the story would not have transpired. Not the interpretation of scripture, not the baptism, none of it. All of which gives me pause.

You know, in my work as Canon for Mission here at the cathedral, I think and pray a lot about what we as a parish can do for others, how we can better serve our sisters and brothers and especially those who are in need. This is part of my job—to help this community discern how we can live out our baptismal covenant to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.” Of course, our calling as followers of Jesus is not simply to do things for others but also to recognize and accept the gifts others have to share with us, especially those “others” our society tends to discount, those whom many may consider “takers” rather than “givers:” people living with disabilities, the poor, the elderly, the sick, immigrants. When we acknowledge all that these beloved children of God have to offer—when we acknowledge and accept all these sisters and brothers have to offer . . . well, this is when the magic really happens.

Like it did at one of our first Lunch Together gatherings this past summer, when those of us present were treated to a spontaneous recitation of beautiful poetry by one of our guests who just happens to make his home on the streets but who also has the most magnificent way with words. Or like it did on a cold night back in

January, when, as the parish prepared to cut another generous check to one of our Cathedral Giving by Design beneficiaries, we were treated to some exceptional singing and dancing by those same beneficiaries—the middle school students at the Global Village Project, young women who have survived war and famine and religious and political persecution to come to a country that does not always welcome them. On both of these occasions, something magical happened. Something magical happened because, like Philip the Deacon, we accepted an offering from what many would consider an unlikely source.

I wonder . . . I wonder if, in the spirit of our patron, this might be a special vocation of The Cathedral of St. Philip—to be a community that sees the giftedness of others and honors within each human being that which is sacred and noble and beautiful and true. To be a people who hear and accept the invitations of those whose offerings might otherwise be rejected. To take strangers and widows and orphans, people who look or act or speak differently than we do—to take them up on their invitations: Come and sit by me. Tell me the news of the day, and then let me share something of myself with you. Let me share something of myself with you, whether it's a chariot ride or a MARTA ride or a song or a story or a glass of sherry or a cheese biscuit—or even an iguana named Buster. Amen.