
We Are About Transformation, Not Conformity!

Observing the Feast of St. Philip, the Deacon

We are giving thanks today for the life and witness of our patron saint, St. Philip the deacon and evangelist.

Philip was one of the seven men appointed in the early church to assist the apostles by managing the distribution of food and resources (Acts 6:1-6), and he played a key role in spreading the gospel beyond Jerusalem.

Known for his missionary zeal, Philip is particularly remembered for his evangelistic work in Samaria (Acts 8:4-8) and his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40), where the Spirit led him to explain Isaiah's prophecy and baptize the eunuch.

After baptizing the eunuch, Philip continued his ministry, eventually settling in Caesarea, where he hosted Paul and was known for his daughters, who prophesied (Acts 21:8-9).

I want to focus this morning on Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch.

We think of this meeting as being significant because it demonstrated the inclusivity of the gospel. It reminds us that the gospel reaches beyond ethnic and religious boundaries. Here it drew the circle wider to include a Gentile and a court official of high standing, who was also a eunuch—a category of people often marginalized in Jewish religious life.

It is not the lesson on inclusivity that strikes me about this story, however.

It is the transformative power of the encounter between Philip and the eunuch.

When I say transformation, I mean an internal shift, an awakening to God's grace and the Spirit's work.

Let us look at the story more closely.

We meet Philip as the Spirit guides him to go south along a desert road. Philip is not following his own agenda, nor is he being strategic in the way we might expect. He is simply open to the Spirit's promptings. That openness leads him to an encounter with an Ethiopian eunuch—a foreigner, someone marginalized because of his status and identity.

The eunuch is reading the prophet Isaiah, but he does not fully understand what he is reading. So Philip, instead of preaching or asserting authority, simply asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?" It is a simple, respectful question that opens the door for conversation. Philip meets the eunuch where he is and engages him with humility.

What follows is a transformative moment for the eunuch.

Through their conversation, the eunuch comes to understand the good news of Jesus Christ, and his heart is moved to the point where he asks to be baptized.

There, in the middle of the road, Philip baptizes him.

And immediately afterward, the Spirit takes Philip away, leaving the eunuch to continue his journey, rejoicing in his newfound faith.

Notice what Philip does not do.

Philip does not tell the eunuch who he should be or what he should do. Philip does not demand that the eunuch conform to a particular group identity, ethnicity, or social status. He does not ask him to give up being an Ethiopian or a court official, and he does not disqualify him because he is a eunuch.

Transformation is about the eunuch's relationship with God, not about his need to join a particular religious group or adopt a set of practices. The eunuch is welcomed just as he is into the family of God.

I am afraid we are not always as committed to transformation.

We are often more comfortable with conformity. For whatever reason, we are more comfortable fitting people into a pre-existing box. We create boundaries—who belongs, who does not – that we use to define what it means to be part of the group, and whether intentionally or not, we exclude those who do not fit.

The irony is that even well-meaning efforts at inclusion can sometimes turn into systems of conformity, where we exclude those who do not agree with us about who should be included! It is hard, of course, because we inevitably think that the new boundaries make sense. They are needed to protect those who were previously excluded.

In the end, though, we have changed the rules of the game but not the game itself. A new group identity replaces the old and creates its own version of exclusion. We are still playing the game of conformity. Just listen to the voices of the newly excluded.

Philip is not doing this. He is creating space for transformation without any need for conformity. How is he doing this? Three ways: he listens with openness; he lets the Spirit guide him; and he allows the eunuch to encounter God on the eunuch's own terms.

Philip's witness is no less revelatory today than it was when he made it.

Let us revisit what Philip teaches us and how it might be transformative.

First, Philip listens to the eunuch with openness.

Like Philip, we must be listeners. Really listening -- to the Spirit and to those we encounter -- opens us to previously unimaginable possibilities. It is so easy to assume that we know what others need, particularly when they might need whatever it was that we needed. It is so much more helpful to let them do the talking. All we need to do is ask, "Where are you in your journey?" or "What do you need?" and let those questions lead us into deeper engagement.

Second, Philip trusts the Holy Spirit.

It is important to remember that transformation is God's work, not ours. Our job is not to control the process or to set rules for how someone should change. We simply need to make space for God's work to unfold in each person's life. This requires a certain level of trust—that God's Spirit will lead people in ways that are best for them, even if those ways look different from what we might expect.

Third, Philip welcomes the eunuch without conditions.

Just as the eunuch did not need to change his status to be included in the family of God, we are called to welcome people as they are. Our church can be a place where people of all backgrounds, experiences, and identities can encounter the transformative love of God, without the pressure to conform to a specific mold.

There is something else about transformation that we can learn from Philip' story.

You cannot be an agent of transformation without being transformed yourself!

It is easy to focus on the eunuch's journey, but what about Philip?

In Philip's case, he, too, is transformed by this encounter. The very act of offering space for the eunuch's transformation broadens Philip's understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. It is not about inclusion for the sake of inclusion. It is more radical than that. It is about being transformed by refusing to exclude.

Just as Philip learns something profound in his encounter with the eunuch, we, too, will be changed when we open ourselves to the work of the Spirit in others. When we make space for others to encounter God and be

transformed, we also allow God to transform us. We become more open, more loving, and more aligned with the expansive grace of God.

We give thanks today for the life and witness of our patron saint, St. Philip the deacon and evangelist.

In his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip teaches us a valuable lesson about what it means to be church.

Church is where we practice the radical inclusion that creates the space for relationships and encounters that lead to profound change—not just in others, but in us as well.

Simply said, we are about transformation, not conformity.

Thank you, Philip!

Amen.