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Providence Presbyterian Church
June 1, 2025
Seventh Sunday of Easter
Psalm 22:25-31; Acts 8:26-40

“Water Is Thicker Than Blood”

“Be it ever so humble, there’s no place like home.” There is probably no more cherished institution than the family. We love our families. Politicians tout “family values,” as if we all understand what that means, when the reality is that different families value different things. Nevertheless, we are attached to our families. Most of us would die for them. Many who have fallen in war have done just that.

We are fond of saying, “blood is thicker than water,” meaning that family is where we can go when no one else will accept us. And yet that is not always the case for all families. To be honest, family is not only the source of our greatest strength, but can also be the source of immense pain. Anyone who has ever been in counseling knows that a lot of time is spent talking about our family. Yes, the blood of the family is thicker and more indelible than any other attachment in our lives sometimes for good and sometimes for ill.

Our lesson for today from the Book of Acts begins with Philip who is told by an angel to head south to the desert. This Philip is not the Apostle Philip, but one of the seven Deacons appointed by the apostles to care for the growing church. Philip the Deacon stepped into the role of evangelist after the stoning of Stephen and was very successful in his ministry in Samaria.

The first thing we should note is that any time an angel shows up, something very important is about to happen. So we should read the rest of this story sitting on the edge of our seats, ready to catch a glimpse of the mighty movement of God.

While in the middle of the desert, Philip meets a strange traveler, an Ethiopian, a member of the court of Candace, Queen of the Ethiopians, a man presumably of a different race, of uncertain gender, and exotic nationality. The Ethiopian had somehow gotten hold of a scroll of the prophet Isaiah and is having trouble making sense of what he is reading, something about a lamb being led to its death. “Who is the writer speaking about, himself or someone else,” asks the Ethiopian?

Fred Craddock, deceased professor of preaching, in writing about this passage, asks, “Why is this man so interested in this obscure, though beautiful passage from Isaiah?” Craddock answers his own question with, “I’ll tell you why he is interested. He is a eunuch.

The scripture says quite plainly in Deuteronomy 21, ‘The eunuch shall not have a place in the congregation of the family of God.’” There was no place for the eunuch in the family of God because it was all family oriented. As a eunuch, he will never father a family.

This Ethiopian outsider has been to Jerusalem to the temple where he was unwelcome. Why would he go where he was unwanted? Because all humans have a built-in need to belong to a family of some sort, even if they can’t have a family. So, the Ethiopian was puzzling over this particular passage because in it he thought he saw someone with whom he could identify, this sheep which is separated from the other sheep and set apart for sacrifice.

Philip told the Ethiopian that the passage was about Jesus and how he died and rose again. He must have taught well, because the Ethiopian asked him right there on the spot, in the middle of the desert, mind you, to baptize him. Now, water in a desert is hard to come by, but lo and behold, they came to some water and Philip baptized the man who had been marginalized by the church. Then, as if to confirm God’s pleasure with this astounding turn of events, the Holy Spirit descends upon Philip and whisks him away. By baptizing a man who had no family and who would never father a physical family, Philip adopted the Ethiopian into the largest family in the world.

Right there in the desert, a Middle East man baptized a black man, a Jew reached out to an Ethiopian with water for his soul, an insider welcomed an outsider, a hetero man embraced a sexually disoriented man. In this new family, the water of baptism is thicker than blood and we are given the responsibility of taking that water to the world.

Notice that this surprising, stunning act of evangelism was not Philip’s or his church’s idea. It was God’s idea, which is where evangelism, spreading the good news of Jesus Christ begins. The root word of evangelism in Greek means “good news” Thus, evangelism is simply spreading the good news.

But you can’t always tell that by the way some people try to spread it. In Woodland Park, where we live, every Saturday morning there are a group of students from Charis Bible College standing at the intersection of Highway 24 and 67 with signs that say things like, “The wages of sin is death” or “Repent and sin no more” or “Repent before it’s too late.”

Several weeks ago I pulled up to the stoplight and watched one man in particular. I had my window rolled up and simply watched his facial expressions and body language and I saw nothing good. I saw anger, frustration, annoyance, irritation and judgment. I didn’t see anything about him that made me want to engage him in conversation. In fact, everything about him drove me away from whatever he was promoting. That’s not the kind of evangelism God wants us to be about.

Evangelism, reaching out to the world is God's idea before it is ours. Before the disciples became apostles, those who were sent, they were pretty content with things as they were. They were happy with their little flock of followers, people just like them. Most of us are quite content with the family just as it is, with people just like us. We're comfortable this way, in our own homogenous spiritual circle. But God has a different plan in mind.

The Holy Spirit pushed Philip out into the desert and the next thing he knew he was calling this Ethiopian, "brother." Out in the desert, Philip discovered that the gospel, the good news was even bigger than he first thought. Philip, a Middle Eastern Jew is sent to welcome a black African eunuch to the family of God.

Our surprising God leaped over another boundary, pushed down yet another wall, kicked open another once-locked door because God intends to include anyone who would accept Jesus and be baptized in water that is thicker than blood. With the urging of the Holy Spirit, Philip realized that God's plans for him and the church were so much bigger than he had previously thought.

There have been a number of news stories lately about people who discovered a secret room in their home, usually an older home that had gone through several transitions. Imagine for a moment that the secret room is not just a room but a vast and expansive mansion full of countless rooms. There are rooms upon rooms, stretching as far as the eye can see. That is what Jesus told the disciples.

God's house/family is so much more inclusive and welcoming than we can imagine. That's what Philip discovered that day he was compelled to go into the desert. I find it fascinating that the Holy Spirit seems to be doing a lot of whisking that day. The Holy Spirit whisked Philip off into the desert and then when he had baptized the Eunuch, it whisked him away, which reminds us that when we yield to the Holy Spirit most anything can happen.

Philip probably wasn't thinking of going into the desert let alone baptizing a man who was a religious outcast, but he was open to the leading of the Spirit. We often find ourselves doing things we never expected when we are open to where the Spirit would have us go. Notice also, that the Spirit didn't call Philip to go to the big city or a popular place but to the desert.

Likewise, the Spirit may lead you into a desert of sorts for a purpose. It might be a desert of a troubled relationship, or the desert of broken trust, or the desert of disease, or the desert of depression, or the desert of unrealized dreams. God led Philip into the desert, not around it, and provided him with the resources to get through the desert. How else can you explain the presence of water in a desert just when he needed it for baptism?

The Holy Spirit compelled Philip to go directly to the Ethiopian who just happened to be reading from the prophet Isaiah. Upon hearing the Ethiopian read from the scroll (and by the way, how does an outsider have a scroll, which is generally reserved for synagogues?). The point is that God provides what Philip needs to welcome, love and serve this stranger.

Many of us shy away from following the urgings of the Holy Spirit because we feel unprepared and ill equipped. This episode shows us that God doesn't send the equipped; God equips the sent.

Perhaps the Holy Spirit is nudging you to go into unknown territory to serve or to heal or to train or to share the gospel. The world is full of folks who are outsiders in need of compassion and understanding so they can experience the grace and love of God firsthand.

In other words, you may be someone's Philip with words of welcome demonstrating how big and inclusive God's family really is. Finally, remember what it is that marks your entrance into the family of God - baptismal water which flows across all human barriers and boundaries and binds us all into one huge family. Wherever you go, remember that we are bound together by water that is thicker than blood. Thanks be to God for reaching out to us and through us to through water that is thicker than blood. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen