



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
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Pushing the Ends of the Earth

Text: Acts 8:26-40

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Have you ever accomplished something really great and expected to be greatly rewarded and appreciated for what you did, only to be greatly disappointed.

This happened to Philip. Philip had taken the 'ends of the earth' imperative in the beginning of Acts of the Apostles very seriously and had gone into Samaria and preached with great success. Even Billy Graham on his best day ever would have never matched Philip's great success in converting the people of Samaria. Philip expected that he was going to be able to stretch the ends of the earth out a bit further, maybe go to Athens or even Rome. After all, he was the new superstar preacher.

Thus it was that an angel of the Lord appear to Philip and said to him:

Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

And Luke, who has a habit of writing these little asides, adds, "*This is a wilderness road.*"

Whatever ego Philip felt, whatever pride he was feeling about converting the people of Samaria had been deflated. He obediently complied with his command and began his journey down the wilderness road expecting to find no one. He was not happy.

And things get interesting. Instead of finding no one he encounters one of the more interesting characters in the Bible. It is an Ethiopian eunuch. Luke tells us that this Ethiopian eunuch was part of the royal court of the queen of Ethiopia and he was in charge of the entire treasury. And he was sitting in the chariot, reading a scroll from the prophet Isaiah 53, a reference to the suffering servant narratives, "Like a sheep he was led to slaughter."

The scene was, if anything bizarre. The goal of Philip is to lower his head and walk on by. He did not want to engage any Ethiopian eunuchs. The command by Jesus was to go preach to the ends of the earth and Philip had already been burned by Samaria. The ends of the earth could not, in any way, shape, or form, include a random Ethiopian eunuch on the Wilderness Road.

And the Spirit prods him. "Speak to the man."

Philip should have seen it.

The Kingdom of God is like a man who has two sons.

The Kingdom of God is like a widow with two copper coins.

The Kingdom of God is like a shepherd who searches for a missing sheep.

The Kingdom of God is like a random Ethiopian eunuch reading Isaiah on the Wilderness Road.

And Philip is rude. He goes up to the man and asks, sarcastically, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The Ethiopian says, “How can I unless someone guides me?” So Philip ends up sitting down and having to explain it. He truly wanted to get on his way.

The Ethiopian eunuch is enthralled by the story of Jesus and wants to convert right there and then and asks Philip to Baptize him. And, lo and behold, there is water and so Philip is compelled to baptize the man.

This story is an interesting story on several levels.

For one, it is truly about pushing the ends of the earth. Often, when we read in Acts of the Apostles about preaching from Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth, we like to limit that. I can't even begin to tell you how much out of the loop this Ethiopian eunuch would be.

He worked for a royal family. He was not Jewish. He was not the same race. He was a seeker, coming to Jerusalem to Worship, but had no clue as to what or who he was going to Worship.

And he had been gelded to serve the Queen of Ethiopia. The Jews, who had strict purity laws would have flipped out on this one.

If this story had taken place in Jerusalem and Philip had to ask the wider church's permission to baptize this man, it would not have been granted.

If Philip had a cell phone and called in for clearance to Baptize the Ethiopian eunuch he would have been told no.

But Philip was on the Wilderness Road, being compelled by the Holy Spirit, and he had little choice.

We find out God is the God of those who no one else wants, who no one else includes. God is the God of the lost sheep, the lost son, and the Ethiopian eunuch. God is the God of society's strays. God is the God of society's wounded. And God is the God of effective preachers who are alone on the Wilderness Road. And somewhere, on that Wilderness Road, two men from very different worlds found that they were both people of the same God.

There's something else in here as well.

A few weeks ago I talked about the two characters in *Winnie the Pooh*, Eeyore and Tigger. If you have ever read those stories, you'll note that Eeyore is the somewhat lovable but somewhat whiney character who can always find reasons not to do things where as Tigger is always upbeat and raring to go. This story is a classic Eeyore/Tigger moment.

Philip so desperately wants to be Eeyore. He does not want to engage this man, he does not want to baptize this man, he really wants to be anyplace in the world other than the Wilderness Road. But God wants him there.

The church of the time, again, if this had been in Jerusalem they would have found 1001 reasons to not engage this eunuch from Ethiopia. There were many more reasons to say 'no' than there were to say 'yes.' Classic Eeyore moments again.

But when the Holy Spirit gets loose, things happen. People are sent to places they are not anticipating or wanting to go. People are encountered one would ordinarily not want to encounter. Decisions are made that would not usually be made. When the Holy Spirit gets loose lost sons come back home and are forgiven. Lost sheep are found. Lost coins are celebrated.

And preachers wandering in the middle of nowhere find a voice and strangers seeking to learn about God discover the presence of God when they were least expecting it.

Stuff happens.

I remember once watching a tape of a man who said that he read the Bible and got all excited about God and went to church and sat there week after week and wondered, "When does the stuff happen?" To me, when we make the stuff happen, we discover the Tigger within ourselves.

Philip, when he converted Samaria expected great rewards. He was rewarded with a journey onto a deserted road.

A traveler from Ethiopia was sitting, reading Isaiah, not making heads or tails out of it, not expecting to find out that his questions would be answered and he would discover Christ.

Sometimes things don't go as planned. But when the Holy Spirit is involved, it isn't the planning that's important, it's the response.