

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Welcome to our service and morning prayers here in the Appleton Chapel of the Memorial Church. I invite you please to rise and join in our responsorial Psalm, which is number 57 in your Black Psalter.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

"Be merciful to me, oh God, be merciful to me. For in thee, my soul takes refuge. In the shadow of thy wings, I will take refuge until the storms of destruction pass by."

Congregation:

"I cry out to the God Most High, to God who fulfills His purpose for me."

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

"Be exalted, Oh God, above the heavens, let thy glory be over all the earth."

Congregation:

"They set a net for my steps. My soul was bowed down."

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

"They dug a pit in my way, but they have fallen into it themselves."

Congregation:

"My heart is steadfast, O God. My heart is steadfast. I will sing and make melody."

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

"Awake, my soul, awake oh harp and lyre. I will awake the dawn."

Congregation:

"I will give thanks to thee, O Lord, among the peoples. I will sing praises to thee among the nations."

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

"For thy steadfast love is great to the heavens, thy faithfulness to the clouds."

Congregation:

"Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth."

Congregation:

(singing)

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

This is a reading from the eighth chapter of the book of Acts beginning at the 27th verse.

"Now there was the eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home. Seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then, the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over and join this chariot and join it.' So Philip ran to it, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him."

"Then, Philip began to speak, and starting with the scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water. What is to prevent me from being baptized?' He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away. The Ethiopian eunuch saw him no more and went on his way, rejoicing." Here ends the lesson.

Yesterday was the Feast of Philip, the deacon. Early saints, who's recounted in this story, it is told, we don't know much more about him than what I just told you in this small passage from the Book of Acts. In chapter 6 of Acts, just a little bit before this scene, the 12 Apostles, Disciples of Jesus, decide that they are too busy and need to select seven people to help them run the community.

In fact, the words they say are, "It is not right that we should neglect the Word of God to serve these people." Sort of a interesting way to phrase their commitments. And so, not wanting to neglect the Word of God with service, they select seven others to handle their accounts and to distribute food and resources, especially to the poor.

This was kind of a touchy situation in the Book of Acts. It says there are some disputes in the early church, especially between the Greek-speaking Jews and the Hebrew-speaking Jews. They were not sharing the resources. And so, Philip and these other six were invited to moderate that situation.

One of these seven deacons, Stephen, becomes the first Christian martyr. His death is witnessed and approved by Paul. After the death of Stephen, Philip left Jerusalem, possibly because of the persecution, and went to Samaria, the land of the enemy, and started ministering there.

The Samaritans were receptive to his ministry, and then, while there, Acts tell us he's told by an angel to head south and travel the road between Jerusalem and Gaza, and on that road, he meets the Ethiopian eunuch of today's story.

After the Spirit snatched him away, as we hear, he's placed in Caesarea where we assume he resided permanently. Acts 21 says that Paul was passing through Caesarea and stayed with Philip for a time. And that's all we know about Philip.

I think there's actually ... You know, you can tell from my tone as I told the story, there's a little bit of a reprimand here to the 12 Apostles who say that they do not have time to devote themselves both to the Word of God and to the children of God. And Philip does both. He preaches and he attends to the Word of God, and he also serves.

It reminds me of that ... You know, last week was the Feast of St. Francis, and it reminds me of that quote of St. Francis, "Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words only if necessary." Francis never said that, actually. It's a misattributed quote. What he actually said is maybe better. He said, "It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching."

Philip is also known, not just as Philip the Deacon, but also as Philip the Evangelist because of the story we're told here, because he goes to Samaria, and because he preaches the good news to the eunuch, and I have to be honest with you, I am a Christian who is relatively uncomfortable with evangelism. Most of my family is Buddhist, and I believe they are no less loved and no less destined for glory than anybody else. I'm not really interested in winning souls for Christ.

And so, I want to think about Philip as a model for evangelism. Think about this scene of Philip on the road to Gaza from Jerusalem where he encounters this eunuch who exists outside of every boundary that Philip is meant not to cross. He's called Ethiopian here, he was probably from Kush, which is now Sudan. Most eunuchs were enslaved. It's not clear that he was, since he was a court official, but certainly, he was entirely devoted to the royal family of Kush. It's possible he had been castrated. It is possible is celibate. It's possible he did not biologically accord with conventional sex assignment.

In any case, this person did not fit any sexual or gender norms at the time, but he speaks to Philip and Philip answers and sits beside him. I like this model of reaching across difference, but I also acknowledge that it can be dangerous because Christians have often encountered difference, and when they have encountered, they have tried to conform it and constrain it into their own vision of what life might be. But Philip does things very carefully here.

There is no requirement for baptism. When the Ethiopian asks for me baptized, Philip doesn't make him recite a creed or give an exam. They just go down into the water together. And then, miraculously, Philip disappears. And if we look past the miracle, I think we might see that Philip just goes. He leave the eunuch to himself. He doesn't try to constrain or conform his life, or transform him into some vision of his own. He just lets the person go on down the road, rejoicing.

When I was ordained, I think I've said this before from this lectern, but when I was ordained, the person who preached at my ordination warned me against an idea of priesthood where the priest comes and makes a thing holy. I think my tradition, where we wander close to dangerous ideas like transubstantiation, that sort of theology of priesthood is all too common. A priest comes in and makes a thing holy, and the person who preached, the woman who preached say, "You don't make a thing holy. You recognize what is already holy, and you call people's attention to it."

This person Philip meets on the road does not need to become holy for God. Philip simply needs to recognize the holiness already before him, the holiness even in, especially in, his difference. Without any condition, or demand, or change. He's already beloved of God, and Philip sees it, and that is the good news he has to share.

I invite you, please, to rise for the prayers. The Lord be with you.

Congregation:

And also with you.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Let us pray. O God, who has made of one blood all the peoples of the earth, and sent your Son to preach peace to those who are far off and those who are near, grant that we, following the example of your servant, Philip, may prove generous and patient ministers to all those who seek you through Jesus Christ, our Lord who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for forever. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Now, let's pray the prayer Jesus taught us, saying, "Our Father-"

Congregation:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespassed against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Please join in our concluding hymn, number 265.

Congregation:

(singing)

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Now, may the peace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be among you all this day and always. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

This transcript was exported on Oct 13, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Let us bless the Lord.

Congregation:

Thanks be to God.