

April 28th, 2024

Acts 8:26-40 “Follow the Verbs”

Last week we talked about mental health, which churches don't often bring up because it's something our culture isn't always comfortable with. I think we did exceptionally well, but then I think we're an exceptional church so no surprise there. But today, I'm going to stretch you. I'm going to put something on the table today that might send you running for the doors. I'm going to talk about the “e” word. (The what?! Oh my gosh, Monday was Earth Day ... is he going to talk about electric cars or those weird looking electric trucks?) No. The “E” word I'm talking about is, “evangelism.” Ugh. I see. You mean knocking on people's doors and inviting them to church? No. That's solicitation. You mean setting up a tent at the Saturday market and handing out literature? No, that's advertising. Are you talking about setting up a makeshift stage on the Chico State campus and “preaching” to students and professors on their way to and from classes? No. That's spiritual assault. Let's just consider the word “evangelism” and break it down. Here's something that gets overlooked. “Evangelism” contains the word “angel.” In the Bible, angels are ones who bring good news. Here are some examples of good news from Angels - “Babylon has fallen!” “Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus!” “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and goodwill to all.” “He is risen!” Prophets speak God's word too, but most of the time, their message is a call for people to repent. But that's not what we're here to talk about today. We'll save that topic for another day. Today, we're all about the good news ... that which is “evangelic.” Except, that word carries a lot of baggage these days.

Once upon a time the word “evangelical” meant that you were committed to proclaiming the gospel message that Jesus is the savior of humanity. Fifty years ago, *Christianity Today* described the evangelical movement as a “mixed multitude” of Christians from different walks of life, different races, different political beliefs, different religious communities, and a variety of socio-economic classes who were dedicated to carrying out the mission and ministry Jesus passed down to

his disciples. Jesus told the disciples, “Be like a lamp and shine bright!” It’s like the song we sang last week during Lilly’s dedication: Don’t hide your lamp under a bushel, let it shine! Jesus also told his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth!” Bring some flavor into this world! Don’t be so bogged down in tradition that God’s message becomes flavorless. Be flavorful! Be vibrant! And to be clear, evangelicals were much different than fundamentalists. Evangelicals thought fundamentalists were too tied down to rituals and traditions and lacked imagination when it came to living the good news. The word of God is like a seed that you scatter. You don’t even need to use words to spread God’s word! Live as Jesus lived, and you will be proclaiming the gospel by your actions. A favorite Bible verse among evangelicals was John 13:35 – “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (Did the pastor just say, “was” as in “past tense” again?) I hear you. Bear with me. Another favorite verse was Mark 12:31, “Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.”

Nowadays? Well ... things have changed a bit. Again, there is so much baggage that goes along with the word “evangelical.” The label is associated with “gay-hating, politically partisan, science denying, white nationalist, hypocritical, arrogantly self-righteous, and reactionary.” The perception many have of evangelicals is that they traded their favorite Jesus quotes in the gospels for out-of-context quotes from Paul’s Epistles or cherry-picked verses from the Old Testament, mostly from Leviticus and Deuteronomy. And I’m not saying this is true for all evangelicals. I’m just saying that the data collected from multiple surveys, including ones from more conservative Christian publications and institutions, consistently point to a huge dispositional shift among many evangelicals. A clergy colleague from one of the largest African American Disciple churches in Virginia once told me, “I no longer consider myself an evangelical. That word has been appropriated. I’d rather be called, ‘evangelistic.’” But I’m not even sure that a new label would help these days. Many evangelistic Christians aren’t sure if they’ll ever be able to recover this term let alone its once favorable reputation. But I believe that in the end, the truth will prevail and that the truth

“shall set us free” as John’s gospel says. But in order for that to happen, we need to reclaim what it means to live out Jesus’ ministry in the world. Thankfully we have some awesome examples in the Bible to show us the way like the one Tom read from Acts 8.

In today’s reading, we’re introduced to Philip. Philip is a major character in the book of Acts. This isn’t the first time he shows up nor will it be the last. Philip was one of seven followers of Jesus chosen by the apostles to lead a food distribution ministry in Jerusalem. Philip was Greek by the way. That’s the first of many atypical things I want to point out about this story. One of the first conflicts in the early church was between Jews and Gentiles. The majority of Jesus’ followers were Jews who recognized and confessed that Jesus was the Messiah who would deliver the Jews from their Gentile oppressors. And yet here’s Philip, a guy who is about as Gentile as they come, carrying out an important ministry for the Jerusalem church. You’d think that in the earliest manifestation of the church all of the major players would be Jewish or, at the very least, from Judea. But Philip was Greek. He was an outsider. He didn’t fit in. Yet here he is! Nobody was saying, “You’ll never be one of us because you aren’t from around here.” Instead, church leaders were saying, “You appear to have some gifts and graces for ministry and we would like you to be in charge of this food ministry.”

Next, we meet an official of the court of an Ethiopian queen. No, her name was not “Candace.” Her *title* was “Candace” which means she was a Queen Mother who would bear the next heir to the throne. When Acts was written, “Ethiopian” was a generic term for dark-skinned people who lived south of Egypt. Even though this official traveled to Jerusalem to worship, he was not a practicing convert to Judaism. How do we know this? Because in order to perform his duty in the queen’s court, he had to willingly be castrated. And Deuteronomy 23:1 makes it crystal clear that anyone in his situation was to be excluded from the worshipping assembly. And yet, here he was reading a scroll of the Prophet Isaiah which tells us that he was a curious seeker.

So, we have our characters in place. A Greek Gentile who follows the Jewish Messiah and a black eunuch who works for a queen of a pagan nation. Sounds like the setup for a corny joke, right? Well, for the readers of Acts, that's exactly what it would have sounded like. The situation is absurd. No way would this happen. What's the punchline? Okay, let's fast forward to the 21st century. There are a lot of folks today who are curious about God. All these surveys that you read pointing to how evangelicals appear to be losing their way and losing their credibility also show that there are many in our culture outside of the church who are interested in exploring spiritual matters. But like the Ethiopian eunuch, whether it's due to experience or hearsay, they just can't seem to make their way through all the requirements or traditions or perceptions that characterize a worshipping community. And again, whether these perceptions of the church are true or not, they are the barriers that churches of any persuasion face today when it comes to connecting people with God.

In light of these barriers though, I believe this story of Philip and the Ethiopian official is a great example for healthy, respectful, effective faith-sharing and learning. This is how we re-claim the "E" word. But in order to do that, we've got to follow the verbs in this story –

"Go." That's what the angel said to Philip. Actually, the angel said, "*Get up and go.*" Not *to* the church, but *away* from the church. Not in Jerusalem, but over there on the road leading out of Jerusalem. Instead of inviting people to dine in, we need to be like Grubhub or Doordash and take that good news to the people wherever we go.

"Join." This is what the Holy Spirit told Philip to do. "Go over to the chariot and *join* it." Before we *say* anything, we've got to go and join. We can't expect people to join our church if we haven't taken the time to join in the lives and traditions and experiences of others. And joining can take a while. Especially these days. We Christians have a lot of work ahead of us if we're going to regain the trust we once had. And no, we're not going to regain people's trust by beating them over the head with our

bibles or grabbing for power so we can change the laws of the land to force people to see and do things our way. That's just plain lazy. The hard work is getting to know people and discovering what their heartfelt needs are. Could you imagine Philip, saying to the Spirit, "Ew! No! I'm not going to get in a chariot with a black pagan eunuch. He's not like me so I don't have to like him! Let him figure Isaiah out for himself. He's not my problem. And while we're at it, let's talk about this food ministry. We can't just go out feeding people who are hungry. We've got to make sure they're deserving."

While we're on that subject, here's two other verbs to consider: "*Listen* and *Ask*." Philip heard the Ethiopian reading the Isaiah scroll. Philip had gone, he had joined, and then he listened and asked a question. Most of us excuse ourselves from sharing our faith before we even try because we don't think we're up to the task. The fact is, faith-sharing is already happening, and God is doing all the real work. We just need to go and join and listen and ask good questions. God leads, and we follow. Philip sits with and gently guides the Ethiopian official to faith in Christ. We in the church sometimes say we need to "lead people to Christ." Okay, I get that. But maybe, especially in today's world, the better metaphor is to "midwife" or to assist in the natural process, starting with belonging and moving toward belief as the Spirit leads. In other words, being more evangelistic.