

“WHY BELIEVE? I - BE ON THE LOOKOUT!”

Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
May 6, 2012

Acts 8:26-40

John 15:1-8

One day a pastor by the name of Martha Greene, and her husband Bob, found themselves in a precarious position. They had loaded up a truck with furniture to drive it to Chicago, and along the way, on a long stretch of rural area near Stevensville, Michigan, the truck broke down. Died.

Try as they might they couldn't get anyone to stop and help them. (This was years ago, before cell phones and AAA.) Cars and trucks were zipping by, but no one would stop. Finally, a big 18-wheeler drove by, then slowed down and pulled over.

Listen to what happened next, in Martha Greene's own words: “The driver leaned out of his window. There he sat high up in his smoke-filled cab. He wore a baseball cap, he had a long pony tail, a three-day stubble on his face, and tattoos all up and down his arm. In my normal daily life (she says) he was a man I would have never encountered, and in fact, he was a man I might have avoided, partly because he would be in the smoking section of the roadside diner and I in the non-smoking part, but also because he was so different from me.”

(On-line, “Where Will the Holy Spirit Take Us Next?, Rev. Martha Greene)

She goes on to say that his name was Philip. And even though he was headed to Grand Rapids, he took a detour to drive them to where they needed to be. She said she will always be grateful for his kindness and generosity to them. On any other occasion, she wouldn't have been caught within a mile of that man, but somehow on that day, in her need, with him was exactly where she needed to be, and by the grace of God, she was.

Her story is not dissimilar to the story of another man named Philip - Philip the deacon in this morning's Epistle lesson. Most assuredly, Philip would have not been caught anywhere near an Ethiopian eunuch on any given day. Why? Because Philip was a deacon in the church, and the Ethiopian eunuch wasn't allowed anywhere near the church.

Because he was a eunuch, he was considered unclean and unworthy. He was not allowed to enter the temple, he was an outsider, no one of faith could talk to him, no one of faith could eat with him, no one of faith could touch him.

And yet, an angel of the Lord sent Philip to him. The scripture says that the Ethiopian was sitting in his chariot reading the scriptures, from Isaiah, to be exact, and he needed someone to help him understand what he was reading. Oh, how hungry he was to know what they meant, and most especially, to know if the God they spoke of, the God of all creation, could be his God too.

Despite all the reasons not to, including the fact that no person would have expected him to - Philip went over to the Ethiopian and sat down right next to him, and shared his faith. He helped the man understand what he was reading, he told him the story of his faith, and so moved was the Ethiopian that he wanted to be baptized, which he finally was.

Oh friends, this story is not just an account of something that happened years and years ago. This story is as fresh today as it was then, because there are so many people out there, who want and need to be in here (and when I say in here, I do not just mean in the church, I mean in here - in the life of faith). But they're not, because they feel like outsiders.

It's not that there are rules against them being here, like there were for the Ethiopian eunuch. We don't have those rules of clean and unclean anymore, at least not on the books. Sadly, sometimes we make our own "unwritten" rules about who we'll welcome and who we won't. And sadly, many people decide for themselves that they might not be welcomed, and so stay away and don't embrace any kind of faith because they feel unworthy.

They might stay away from the faith and church because they're poor, or homeless or jobless. They might feel like they wouldn't be accepted because they're divorced, or a single parent, or gay, or never had children, or don't have money for the offering, or can't hear very well, or can't speak English, or they never have set foot in a church before and so don't know anything, not even the Lord's Prayer. For those and so many other reasons, so many people live outside the church and outside the life of faith, and wait for someone to invite them in.

That someone, for the Ethiopian eunuch was Philip, and that someone for the people around us, could be you or me. Just as the Lord put that man in the path of Philip, so He will put people in our paths for whom He wants us to care and with whom He wants us to share our faith.

Be on the lookout, for you never know when that person will show up. It could be a family member, a friend, a co-worker, a neighbor, or a person you run into on the street. Someone, sometime, will come into your life who is hungry for the Lord, but just doesn't know what to do about it.

And as a child of God, and disciple of Christ, your job and my job is to be ready whenever that happens - to be ready to share our faith. Relax - you don't have to quote scripture, unless it's appropriate and you're comfortable doing that. You simply need to be ready to tell your story - to tell that person about God's love in your life, and how the God who loves you loves them as well. Be ready to tell them about the God whose love never excludes anyone, who doesn't ever say "you are not welcome in my house." Share with them that we are all one in Christ - all sinners saved by grace, and grace alone.

If you've ever found yourself on the outside looking on, you know that it doesn't take much to make you feel included - a word, a pat on the back, a smile, an invitation to sit down and join someone. That's all people are looking for - to know that they matter, that someone notices them, that someone cares.

When we do that, when we notice those who are out there, those who are outsiders for whatever reason, we are showing them in a very real and tangible way the love of God in Christ Jesus. And when we share our faith with them, we are letting them know that the God who loves us, loves them as well.

My friends, we are children of a God of inclusive love - who has enough love for everyone. The scriptures are filled with stories of Jesus reaching out to everyone, and how he was so good at reaching out to those who were seen as outsiders - people like the woman at the well, Zaccheus the tax collector, blind Bartimaeus, the man with demons - the list goes on and on. He showed us, in fact, His very life was a beautiful portrait of inclusive love and caring.

Sadly, our world doesn't show that to people very well, so it is our job, as Jesus' followers, to be on the lookout for those who are hurting, lonely, afraid, and with no faith - it is our job, to reach out particularly to them and tell them the story of that good and gracious God, who loves them more than they know.

As you come forward today for holy communion, be in prayer that God will, like He did for Philip, direct you to someone who needs to know His love, someone who feels like an outsider, someone who is searching for more. And that, when He does, He will give you what you need to care for them, to the end that they may come to a saving relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May it be so.

Amen.