

A Confession, A Challenge

Matthew 28: 16-20, Acts 8:26-40

A sermon given by the Reverend Casey W. FitzGerald on the Fifth Sunday in Easter, May 10, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Texts

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

Acts 8:26-40

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. 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 to this chariot and join it.' So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He 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. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

*'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.*

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.'

The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this 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 eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Something has been gnawing at me these last few weeks. I signed on to participate in a cluster of pastors who will be working on becoming “transformational” leaders. It sounded like a good topic, and a number of pastors I knew had signed up, so it seemed promising. It will be a six month process of group meetings, individual coaching, reading, writing, and a fair amount of personal, professional, and theological reflection—a time to reconnect with who I am becoming as a pastor and who I believe we are called to be as members of the body of Christ—to take the first steps in transforming myself and my ministry. I was really looking forward to the start of our retreat. But as I made my way through the assigned readings, I became increasingly skeptical—I had a sneaking suspicion that I'd gotten myself into something that I was, in fact, *not going to enjoy*. It relates to that dreadful “e” word and all that baggage that comes with it. The word I have associated with the large painted lashes of Tammy Faye Baker; the 700 Club; sandwich-board-wearing-pamphlet-bearing, narrow-visioned Christians...those *other* Christians. I am *not ashamed of the gospel, I say—but I am often ashamed of things that go on in its*

name. And so, when I hear the “e word”—“evangelism”—I tend to disregard what comes next. I can be equally narrow-visioned, it seems.

So you can imagine my dismay when I read these words from author Paul Borden’s book “Direct Hit”—our first reading assignment. He writes:

“Few pastors are willing to assume the role of a leader who takes responsibility for mobilizing the congregation to accept the mission of obeying our Lord’s Great Commission: to make disciples for Jesus. Instead, many pastors and other church staff presume that their job is to call individuals to personal discipleship.”ⁱ

The premise of Borden’s book is essentially this: we are not doing our jobs because we are not following Jesus’ command that we go and make disciples. We are not concerned with numbers and therefore, we are participating in the death of the church. We have quieted the Great Commission by telling ourselves that our qualitative experience is good enough, and not asking ourselves to really extend that experience beyond our church walls.

Scrawled lightly in pencil in the margin next to Borden’s words, indicative of a non-committal judgment upon myself, I wrote: “me,” and have been bothered ever since. Should I be worried that I have become too insular in my ministry??? Theologically, Mr. Borden and I come from very different places. When I read the book, my gut reaction was to be defensive and dismissive. After all, my *confession* is this: when it comes to evangelism, I tend to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. Maybe this is because the “evangelism” that I have been exposed to has too often manifested as judgment, it has been numbers-focused rather than focused on what I consider to be theologically responsible engagement. This makes me uncomfortable. And I am not alone. Historically, folks like me have come up with an alternative understanding of evangelism. We have claimed evangelism to be not so much a *verbal* action as a *social* action. It is the “they-will-know-we-are-Christians-by-our-love” interpretation of evangelism. This is the understanding of evangelism I’ve always been more comfortable with—though now that I’ve been doing all this thinking on the topic, it does seem silly to believe that good deeds are somehow exclusively identifiable within the confines of Christian ethics and morals, and thereby would be enough on their own to witness to God’s work in the world! While good deeds must be a significant aspect of evangelism, it cannot be denied that this definition also lacks fullness.

Clearly, Jesus wanted something more of us—we need only recall the Great Commission Borden pointed to in his book: Jesus says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” He probably wasn’t saying something he didn’t mean. So our job is to decipher what he *did* mean. In Greek, the noun “gospel” also means “message” and is linked in the Bible to the verb “tell-the-news.” Evangelism is this message announced—“a verbal, out-loud assertion of something decisive not known until this moment of utterance,” writes Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann. The Gospel itself is “the good news”—and we are to tell it—and not just to ourselves.

So if neither tradition has come up with an acceptable understanding of evangelism, and if we desire to respectfully heed the Great Commission, then our *challenge* becomes this: What should evangelism look like?

Theologian Elaine Robinson offers up an alternative word for “evangelism” that might help us as we try to figure things out—she calls it, “Godbearing.” She believes that we need to “reclaim a more authentic and life-transforming expression of the gospel.”ⁱⁱⁱ She explains: “Godbearing is expressed in the world as hearing the renewed image of God within, bearing God to others, and bearing with God the suffering of others.... The language of Godbearing expresses openness, otherness, service, restoration and

mutuality....Through Godbearing we make known and make real the healing, transforming, life-giving and-receiving love of God in Christ in the Holy Spirit.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I believe that both Philip and the Ethiopian are quintessential Godbearers.

In Philip we have a disciple who moves from place to place according to the will of the Spirit. The Spirit tells Philip to go over to the Ethiopian’s chariot and join it. Philip does not just go to the chariot, he *runs* to the chariot. And then we see the Ethiopian eunuch. His story is incredible. He continually seeks a faith that remains inaccessible to him. You see, in many ways, he leads a privileged life—he holds a high place in the queen’s court and we can see from the chariot and his possession of the scripture, which was very expensive, that he has wealth. But he is also an outsider because he is a eunuch. He is an outsider especially because he cannot live into the fullness of his faith, as eunuchs were not permitted inside the temple. But instead of being bitter and closed off because of it—he chooses to be open. It’s almost as if he’s been waiting his whole life for Philip to join him in the chariot. Like Philip, he is *open* to the Spirit. They are Godbearers in their openness. I wonder what our lives would look like if at any given moment we were open in such a way...open to God, open to ourselves, open to others.

Next, the Spirit calls these two strangers into dialogue. The Ethiopian hears the “good news” and finds God’s inclusion and restoration where once the way had been blocked—and he does so through this *conversation* he has with Philip. Words are spoken—the good news is proclaimed. Now, in this restorative moment, the Ethiopian does not somehow magically become the “Ethiopian formerly known as a Eunuch”—but we can see that he has received so much more than physical restoration. Because Philip took a chance in listening to the Spirit, in fact, he was quite practiced at it by this point—because he took a chance in engaging in dialogue with this wholly other person—the Ethiopian receives a grace and promise formerly unimaginable. Some imagine that because Philip had no prior knowledge of the Ethiopian or his condition, even *Philip* might have been astounded by this revelation of inclusion and grace. It is like Brueggemann explained, Philip has offered “a verbal, out-loud assertion of something decisive not known until this moment of utterance.” Maybe not known to either of them.

It is in the telling that new life begins. I think one of *our* stumbling blocks in this endeavor may just be that in today’s world we’ve lost our ability to talk about our lives of faith. I suppose you could come to church every Sunday your whole life and never have to speak out loud your own words about God. And that would be a real tragedy. Homiletician Tom Long wrote a wonderful book about “talking ourselves into being Christian.” He explains:

A common misunderstanding is to think that talking about faith means getting our belief system all worked out in advance before we open our mouths. When we speak about our faith, we intuitively think that what we are doing is finding the language to say what we already know we believe. That is, we get our beliefs formulated in our minds and hearts, and then we search for just the right words to capture what is already fixed and established. But things are actually more complex than this. We don’t just say things we already believe. To the contrary, saying things out loud is a part of how we come to believe. We talk our way *toward* belief, talk our way from tentative belief through doubt to firmer belief, talk our way toward believing more fully, more clearly, and more deeply.^{iv}

Something I’ll be thinking, and I hope you will too, about how we might begin to do this talking—to have more dialogue; how we might learn as a community and individually the language of faith—in and out of these walls. Maybe, *especially* outside of them. It’s probably way more important (and difficult) to figure out who you are in Christ once you leave this building! In many ways, I believe we are already doing this at Westminster. I do believe that this development of language and dialogue has been the primary reason for the growth of our active young adult membership. It takes the telling to begin to understand who we are and who God is calling us to be.

Our text tells us that once the baptism occurs, Philip is “snatched away” to keep on Godbearing in other lands. We are told that the Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing. He must have gone on his way *Godbearing*. Imagine how this news would sound to others like him, who longed so deeply for an inclusive word from God. In begin baptized, in hearing the good news, the Ethiopian, no doubt, continued his lifelong journey of transformative Godbearing. It occurs to me that we can never be “transformed,” as in something that has occurred in the past, once and for all time. If we are a Godbearing people, we are always *in a state of becoming transformed*.

Over the next six months with this cluster of pastors, and presumably much, much longer on my own, I will be wondering how it is that we engage in Godbearing—how we become people who are continually being transformed and transforming others because of the good news. What will be the result of a community of authentic Godbearers??? (Borden, my antagonist, certainly has some ideas.) I leave the question of what this will look like open to all of us. I am, unashamedly, looking to make you as uncomfortable and maybe even confused as I am in trying to figure out what this means for our lives—and for those who are outside of these walls. Indeed, I hope this *gnaws at you, too*.

Let the opening, talking, and Godbearing begin. Amen.

ⁱ Borden, Paul. *Direct Hit*, 20.

ⁱⁱ Robinson, Elaine. *Godbearing: Evangelism Reconceived*, 76.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 76-82.

^{iv} Long, Thomas. *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, 6.