

Good News for the Successful

Based on Acts 8:26:40

January 13, 2008

This morning we'll begin a series of three stories about three different people who experienced a life-changing encounter with Jesus. The three people come from very different places in life. And the three people all had followers of Jesus who acted as spiritual guides. As we'll see, this guidance was subtle and prayerful and never insensitive and annoying. It was always done in humility and love and it pointed to Jesus not them as the guides.

I want to take you back in time 32 years to study hall at Edina-East High School. It was in that place, I believe, that God was orchestrating the events and circumstances of my life to bring me to faith in Jesus Christ. Actually, before that time God had already started orchestrating the events of my life. When I was 14 I just happened to pick up my sister's Bible and started to read it. When I was 15 I just happened to go to religious education classes at our local church where the leader talked about his "personal relationship with Jesus." And then I just happened to be watching television when Billy Graham came on and talked about a free study guide offer. If I finished the study guide they promised to send me a free book. I was a greedy teenager and I desperately wanted important people (like Billy Graham) to send me free stuff so I completed the study guide. They never sent me the free book but God even used that to cause me to finish another study guide. Then while I was a sophomore I just happened to run into a guy in my 5th period study hall at Edina-East High School. Mark and I had very little in common, but Mark built a bridge into my world. He didn't know it but God was already working in my life - and I was scared to death. I was searching for something, but I was doing my best to avoid Jesus. God knew my fear and Mark, who was praying and listening to the Holy Spirit, never badgered me or pressured me; he just kept loving me and asking me good questions about my life and showing me how a real follower of Jesus lived his life.

I want us to see that part of God's normal activity in the world is to connect people. Acts 1:8 promised "And you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses in Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth." A witness is simply someone who connects with others who don't know Christ. Mark Ritchie was one of the witnesses that God placed in my life. In the same way, in the story you just heard read, God was orchestrating the events of this scene to bring two people together: a man named Philip, who is a follower of Jesus already, and a man we only know as the Ethiopian eunuch. This is the story of how God brings people together. So let's look at the two people in this story, observe how God connects them and then see what difference this makes in our lives.

Let's look first at Philip. How was God working behind the scenes in his life, causing him to cross paths with this total stranger? First of all, Philip was a follower of Jesus (see Acts 6:1-7). But the really interesting part of his story begins back in chapter 8 verse 2 which says, "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem,

and all the apostles were scattered ...” Now skip down to verses 4-5: “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Phillip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there.” What’s happening here? Recall God’s promise and plan to bring the good news of Jesus to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8): “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (see Acts 1:8). It’s not in a program; it’s in a group of people. Now how did God do that? He allowed a wave of religious persecution to hit the early church. We tend to read verse two – “On that day a great persecution broke out” – and say, “O, no, that’s terrible. I sure hope that doesn’t happen to us in this nation.” But notice what happened through the bad news of the persecution: the Gospel spread like a wildfire. In other words, God used the bad stuff – persecution, disappointment, suffering – and turned it into something positive and life-affirming. Do you know what’s worse than persecution? Or what’s worse than say our church building burning down or our property being seized? What could be worse than that? There’s something far worse than all of that: getting too comfortable in our faith; not making an impact in our own community; not reaching out to others in the name of Jesus Christ.

So God is working behind the scene to orchestrate a connection between his followers and those who don’t know him yet. God allowed the persecution that moved Philip out of town (see verse 2). God was orchestrating Philip’s journey to Samaria (verse 5). In verse 26 God was orchestrating the “angel of the Lord” to come and tell Philip, “Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza.” God was orchestrating that there just happened to be a man there – a successful, influential leader from Ethiopia – riding in his chariot. God was orchestrating that the man just happened to be reading in Isaiah 53 about Someone who would suffer and die for his people.

Notice that throughout this story, Phillip isn’t responding to a strategy or a plan; he’s just remaining radically open to the guidance of God the Holy Spirit and then he responds. In verse 29 we read, “The Spirit told Philip, ‘Go to that chariot and stay near it.’” In verse 39 we read that the Spirit of the Lord told Philip to go somewhere else. Here’s the point: we are all called to be spiritual guides, to be a witness for what Christ has done and who He is. But there is no overall plan or program for this calling. You can’t find the plan written in the Bible. We have to live in a day-by-day open posture of asking for, listening to and then staying open for the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Most of us feel very uncomfortable with that. We’d rather have a script or a program or maybe even a Bible passage that would instruct us in exactly what to say. But the Bible doesn’t do that for us; we have to figure it out – but here’s the important part – as we trust the Holy Spirit to guide us day by day. But won’t that make us weird and offensive to people? Actually, that’s not what happened in this story at all – and that’s not what I felt from my friend Mark Ritchie. In this story Philip comes across as a helpful, gentle, available spiritual guide. Notice how he did that by just asking simple, direct questions.

So how do we do that on a day-by-day basis? How do I stay open to the work of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit calls me as a spiritual guide to others? Trusting in the Holy

Spirit isn't a strange, advanced, extreme practice for super-Christians. No, it's just normal, ordinary Christian spirituality. The New Testament says it very clearly: "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons (and daughters) of God" (Romans 8:14). That's pretty simple: to be a child of God means that the Holy Spirit is leading me. How do I do that? You just ask for it – moment-by-moment. So as you begin your day, you ask the Holy Spirit to lead you. As you get your kids up for breakfast and out the door for school you ask for the Holy Spirit to lead you. As you study and go to classes you ask for the Holy Spirit to guide you. As you go through your work day or as you volunteer or as you stand beside other parents on the soccer field or as you walk around your neighborhood you continually pray, "Okay, God here I am. I'm ready and I'm open. Lead me now."

The ancient followers of Jesus from Ireland, the Celtic Christians, referred to the Holy Spirit as "the Wild Goose." By that they meant that the Holy Spirit is wild and free and can't be tamed. If you follow the haunting call of the Holy Spirit, he'll take you to places you never imagined. Again, we don't always like that. We don't like surprises; we want a script and an agenda and a complete set of guidelines. The Holy Spirit says, "Follow me today. Listen to me. Open your life up to me – and it won't be a predictable script." The Christian writer A.W. Tozer once said, "When we come to the place where everything can be predicted and nobody expects anything unusual from God we are in a rut." Well, the Holy Spirit doesn't want us to get in a rut.

The point is this: God is working way more intensely and way more powerfully than you. God is way out ahead of you in very person you meet. We need to pay attention, to pray constantly, to be sensitive to how the Holy Spirit is nudging us to speak to other people. There's a reason why people cross your path. It's no accident. The people that sit next to you in class, that share an office or a cubicle with you ... you are there by divine appointment.

Remember this isn't just about trusting the Holy Spirit for wild and exotic spiritual experiences; it's about trusting the Holy Spirit as God moves us out into the community to connect with people, as witnesses of Jesus. So there's Philip, who is following the lead of the Wild Goose and then there's the other person in this story who is being pursued by the Wild Goose. What do we know about this man who is identified only as the "Ethiopian eunuch?" First of all, he's black. He comes from the area we would know today as the Sudan. In late antiquity blacks weren't the victim of racism; to the contrary, they were often appreciated as being the fairest and longest living among human beings.¹ Second, he's most likely Jewish and that's why he's reading the prophet Isaiah and he's coming from Jerusalem.

¹ Why is this story important? Because the key verse in Acts is found in chapter 1 verse 8. Notice the last phase ... "to the ends of the earth." The Gospel of Jesus is radically inclusive in the sense that everyone from every tribe and tongue and people group will be invited. The story of this Ethiopian would be seen as Exhibit A of this reality of a Gospel for all peoples. Ethiopia was equated with the ends of the earth. So now that is being fulfilled. Christianity has been accused of being a religion for white, middle to upper middle class Americans. But that wasn't the way it started and that's not the turn it's taken recently. For instance, did you know that in the next 25 years there will be 2.6 billion Christians on the globe? By 2025 – only 17 years from now – 50% of those Christians will be from Africa and Latin America; and 17% will be from Asia. That means that less than 33% of all the Christians will be in America, Canada, Australia and Europe. Most of us will be in a minority of world Christianity.

Third, he's very successful. He's not your stereotypical "down-and-outer" who is ripe for conversion because he's strung out on drugs or wallowing in failure. He's doing very well in life. How do we know that? Verse 27 tells us that he was "an important official in the charge of the treasury of Candace, queen of Ethiopians." Candace wasn't a personal name; it was the name of an entire dynasty of royal rulers. He's an important political figure – the chief treasurer for the entire nation. As part of his success he's also a very literate person. In verse 31 the Greek style that he uses is elegant and refined – and Greek was probably his second language. By the way, Luke, the author of Acts, likes to tell the stories of down-and-out little people and up-and-out important, powerful, well-educated people. Actually, this is a very strategic way for the Holy Spirit to lead the early church. Why? This important treasurer will come to know Christ and he will return to his home country and share the good news of Jesus with others. He already has a huge platform to share Christ so people will listen to him.

So why would he need anything? Well, he does have one glaring spiritual need: he's a eunuch, which probably meant that he was castrated. From the point of view of Judaism, his status as a eunuch placed him on the fringes of Judaism. He was forbidden to enter into a full-status worship of the Living God (see Deut. 23:1). There was a barrier between him and his God. Although the Old Testament also promised a day when even the eunuchs would be gathered into full participation into the life of God's kingdom (see Isaiah 56:3-5). Isaiah promised a day – the day of Jesus Christ – when the eunuchs' spiritual hunger would be satisfied in Christ, the Messiah.

For now let's just notice how people can have it all together on the outside – success, education, an important job, respect – but they still have glaring spiritual needs on the inside. They look intact and complete but inside there are gaping emotional, relational or spiritual wounds. (Ravi Zacharias quote). So "down-and-outers" aren't the only ones who need the Gospel; "up-and-outers" need the good news of Jesus too. Up-and-outers usually have resources and opportunities, but they are just as separated from God. And they have perhaps an even bigger challenge facing them: how to make a difference with all the gifts that God has given them. If you're an up-and-outer (and most of us here are) then God will hold us to a higher standard. The Bible puts it this way: to whom much is given much will be required. If you have a top-notch education; if you have financial resources; if you're on a career track that has no limits in sight – then beware. God expects more out of you. You will have to give an account of how you used the gifts you were given. Don't waste your life. Don't miss your day of salvation. Spiritually speaking, as you stand before a holy God, you are just as needy, just as much a beggar, as the wino that straggles around the streets of Manhattan.

What does God want from you? He wants your openness. Achieving the status of an up-and-outer can lead to a subtle arrogance: I'm a notch above others; I don't take advice; I give advice; I don't listen to others; I give orders to others. Much to his credit, this Ethiopian man was willing to acknowledge his need for direction. Notice his response to Philip's question – "Do you understand what you are reading?" He says (see verse 31): "How can I unless someone explains it to me?" In other words, this bright, intelligent,

successful, powerful man is not a know-it-all. He admits that he needs a spiritual guide. “So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.”

I love that image because that’s such a powerful picture of what the church is all about. The church is all about healthy relationships. And all of us need that. We need mentors in our faith. We all need to invite people to sit beside us and then tell them, “Hey, I’ve been wondering about this. Can you explain that to me?” It’s awful and stifling when everyone in the church knows all the answers, has ceased to ask questions and doesn’t need a spiritual guide. Let us strive to be a place where its safe to ask questions and deal with the gaps and the perplexities of life with safe guides.

They are reading Isaiah chapter 53. It’s a tough passage, but it’s about a suffering servant who will be bear the sins of his people (see Isaiah 53:4-6). Clearly, it’s talking about Jesus, but the Ethiopian doesn’t know that. That’s why he asked the question in verse 34. So we read in verse 35 that Philip “began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.”

What difference does this story make in our lives? How can we participate in God’s plan of Acts 1:8? What practical steps can we take as individuals and as a church family to make that a reality?

1. First, you can join what God has already started here at Three Village Church? Here’s a great idea for some church out there: they could start to bring the good news of Jesus by reaching out and building bridges with the future leaders and influencers of different countries – like the Ethiopian eunuch in this story – who would then return to their own countries changed and ablaze with the love of Christ. Maybe they could even start a church about two miles down the road from a major university. O, and then they could place a bunch of professors and other staff people from the church on the university campus. O, and then they could start inviting the students for free lunches. And then they could ask people in the church family to adopt some of these young, bright future leaders into their homes for meals and radical love and hospitality. What a great idea! Hum, you know, it all sounds vaguely familiar. It seems like I’ve been to a church just like that. Yea, what’s it called? By golly, that’s our church!

Friends, sometimes we ponder and wrack our brains with questions like: “What is our mission? What are we doing to make a difference in the world?” And then we wake up and realize that part of the vision and part of the mission is right under our nose. It’s right in front of us. There is no accident that the Holy Spirit has planted us right next to a major university. So, my brothers and sisters, when we ask you to help with student lunches and student hospitality, remember this: we are sitting on a mission field and it’s a privilege and an honor and a pot of gold.

2. Second, you can remember that you are a spiritual guide. You are called. Does that frighten you and upset you? Good, it should because it’s way over our heads.

In your own power, we are horribly ill-equipped. But we are still called to be a witness for Jesus. See Acts 1:8 – that was and is God’s plan to share the good news of Jesus with the world. “Who me?” you say. Yes, you, God says. But I’m so ordinary and so unspectacular. I have so far to go on my own walk with Jesus. I’m so imperfect and flawed.” Yes, but you are still my witness. Start to truse the power of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 1:8 that was the promise – “you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.” You shall receive power. This book is often called the Acts of the Apostles but it should really be called “the Acts of the Holy Spirit” because the Holy Spirit is the hero at work here. As a friend of mine said about this book, “The Holy Spirit acts *through* the apostles whenever he can, and *in spite* of the apostles whenever he has to” (Rick Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism*, page 33.

3. Getting close enough to join people on their journey through life. Notice verse 31 – “So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.” Wow, that’s a powerful scene. This Ethiopian Eunuch trusted Philip enough to invite him to come into his life. That’s what we want in our relationships with those who don’t know Christ. How do we get close enough? Here’s one suggestion from my friend Rick Richardson who suggests asking two simple questions: (1) What do I love to do? and (2) How can I get involved with others?
4. Most of the witnessing takes place in the context of community – it’s just the church being the church but always with an outward face. Maybe your small group can just start praying, “Holy Spirit guide us as a group. Where do you want us to go? How can we get close to people who don’t know Christ? How can we take Acts 1:8 seriously? Where have we been planted and how can we make a difference there?” The very first thing you can do before you develop a strategy or before we tell you what you must to as a small group would be for your small group to start praying about it. Ask God. Open yourselves up to the power and direction of the Holy Spirit. Being filled with the Holy Spirit – how does that happen? We begin by asking for it.