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Sermon

Philip the What?

Philip the Deacon Acts 8:26–40
Sermon by Jeffrey A. Oswald

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO
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Dear Friends in Christ,

If you don't already know, you should, that it is Dean Burreson and his staff who diligently and faithfully produce the worship bulletins that guide our worship together here day after day, season after season, year in year out. That is one normal parish duty that we chapel preachers don't have to worry about. And that's a good thing, too, because, if today's bulletin had all been up to me, I would probably still be in my office right now, frantically trying to decide what to call our commemoration today. Even my sermon has across the top of Page 1 the title "Philip the What?" Let me illustrate for you my quandary by considering briefly the texts that *could have been* the basis for our message this morning.

Once we realize that we are not commemorating Philip-one-of-the-Twelve, but Philip-one-of-the-Seven, our thoughts probably go immediately to Acts 6. Here we read the account of a complaint, a matter of neglect, a need that had been identified among the Christians of Jerusalem. And that need was met by the appointment of seven men, "well spoken of and full of the Spirit and wisdom" (Acts 6:3), among whom was our Philip. So far so good, but there's barely a word of Acts 6:1–7 whose meaning has gone unchallenged and is not currently the center of debate in the study of Acts. The pulpit hardly seems the place from which to charge into such a fray, though countless preachers have disagreed with me on that point. What is important for us this morning is that Philip is nowhere here called a deacon. In fact, not one of



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the Seven is called a deacon. In fact, Luke does not ever refer to anyone as “a deacon.” But whatever service it was that these seven men were being appointed to carry out, Philip was judged by all to be qualified for it, and he proves himself to be willing to carry it out. Through the service of the apostles and the service of these seven men, “the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem” (Acts 6:7). So, even though Acts 6 provides important information about Philip, it almost raises more questions than it answers for us, and so seems a poor choice for the one text to use to commemorate him.

If we jump ahead to some twenty years later in the story of Acts, we find our Philip again making a brief appearance, although so much has happened in the meantime that I fear we readers are more plagued by narrative amnesia at this point than we are by difficult and unanswered questions. We read in Acts 21:8, “On the next day we [that is Luke, Paul, and their fellow travelers] departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him.”

How do *you* imagine this scene? Is this the highlight of Philip’s career when Saint Paul deigns to stay with him and his family? The waiter on tables welcoming the apostle to the nations? Do you imagine Philip’s hands trembling as he now serves at the table of the man from Tarsus? If so, then you’ve forgotten. You’ve forgotten the first impact these men had on each other’s lives, and you’ve forgotten everything that Luke has told you about them since.

Why is it that Philip is hosting Paul in Caesarea and not in Jerusalem? What forced Philip to abandon his much-needed care of the widows there? Why is it that Philip took to the road and began proclaiming Christ in Samaria? Because Paul, *this* Paul, sitting in Philip’s living room with his tired feet on Philip’s coffee table, was trying to kill him—Philip and every other person from Jerusalem to Damascus who professed his or her faith in Jesus Christ. If anyone’s hand trembled at that first handshake, if anyone looked at the floor because it was hard to look the other in the eye, if anyone felt that he was the younger brother being embraced by the older, I’m guessing it was Paul. But such feelings, if they were there at all, would have immediately been disarmed by the warm hospitality of Philip, a hospitality animated by the One who would one day say to Philip, “You have done it unto Me.” And it may well be the case that Paul and Philip were already old friends by the time this visit took place. Paul, you will recall was no stranger to Caesarea.

And yet, it is not Philip the Hospitable that we commemorate this morning. And I don’t think *he* would have been happy with the epithet anyway. I suspect the epithet Philip would have preferred is the one that Luke actually gives him here in chapter 21, the one that seems to best represent what Philip’s life was really devoted to: Philip the evangelist. Philip is, in fact, the only person that Luke calls an evangelist. He is the only person in the entire New Testament called an evangelist.

We know there were others, for Paul tells us that God has given His Church evangelists (Eph 4:11), and Paul even tells Timothy to do the work of an evangelist; but it is Philip alone who is referred to as ὁ εὐαγγελιστής, “the evangelist.” And to see Philip the evangelist at work, we have only to turn back to Acts chapter 8, to the text that finally seemed to be the best choice upon which to base our commemoration.

Acts 8 chronicles two important moments in Philip’s career, but it is in the second where we get to hear a little more clearly the evangelist’s voice. Luke summarizes Philip’s message in Samaria for us with just these few words: “he proclaimed to them the Christ.” Philip preached, Philip did wonders, and there was much joy in that city. But it is along that desert road that stretched from Jerusalem to Ethiopia that we get a little clearer picture of Philip’s evangel—and of Philip himself.

That it was the Spirit of Christ that Philip was full of is shown in a rich variety of ways throughout this passage. Philip’s willing obedience, *glad* obedience, to go and do whatever was needed is almost dizzying as Philip first heads north, then heads south, then runs to catch the chariot. And don’t forget, at the end of the episode Philip gets “snatched” by the Spirit and dropped in Azō’tus. And he simply carries on from there.

Philip begins his conversation with the eunuch by asking a question that sounds very much like his Lord, who was always asking, “Have you not read?” and “How do you read?” And Philip’s response to the eunuch’s question, “About whom does the prophet say this?” is much more Christ-like than we might first think. We hear the words that the eunuch was reading:

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.

—and we immediately say, “That’s Jesus, of course.” In fact, we probably would not have let the eunuch get past “he was led to the slaughter.” But, F. F. Bruce reminds us:

There is no evidence that anyone before the time of Jesus had identified the Isaianic Servant with the Davidic Messiah, but [Jesus] seems to have identified them in his own person and by his own act. When he insisted that it was *written* concerning the Son of Man that he should “suffer many things and be treated with contempt” (Mark 9:12), it is difficult to think of a more suitable scripture as the basis of such words than Isa. 52:13–53:12.¹

And the same is true when Jesus insisted, “Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And you know what came next: “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Lk 24:26–27). Philip, it seems, gave the eunuch the 12½-minute version of the same sermon. When and where and how Philip had come to be so filled with the Spirit of the Christ who opens minds to understand the Scriptures is not told us, but that Philip was an evangelist in the truest sense of the word cannot be doubted. And by the conclusion of this episode, Philip has brought us geographically, ethnically, and dramatically in mission to the door of Cornelius.

Martin Luther regarded Philip as one of the “little preachers” through whom God works “great things.”² Speaking of Stephen and Philip together, Luther wrote: “Certainly they were not asked or called by anyone, but they did it on their own initiative and by reason of a common law, since the door was open to them, and they saw the need of a people who were ignorant and deprived of the Word.”³

Who was Philip? *What* was Philip? The difficulty we have in answering these questions only serves to enhance the beauty of Luke’s account of Philip’s career of service and to magnify the importance the memory of him holds for us today. Philip must certainly be the patron saint so desperately needed by a church that strains out the gnat of a title or position description and swallows the camel of a lost opportunity. While we complain about how difficult things are getting in Jerusalem, Philip, unbidden, has converted Samaria. And yet, when someone needs a cup of cold water in the Lord’s name—or a fount of living water in the desert, a bed for the night or a hot meal for the journey, a kind word or the Good Word—and what difference does it make if it’s a widow or an apostle or a confused magician or an excluded foreigner from another continent who is needs it?—Philip is there. He is willing. He is ready. He loves. And he serves. And what he offers is nothing but what he has received. And in and through and with it all, what he offers is always the good news of Jesus Christ. He is Philip the Evangelist.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (Rev.; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 176.

² Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 17: Lectures on Isaiah: Chapters 40–66* (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan et al.; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), Is 66:7.

³ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 40: Church and Ministry II* (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan et al.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 37–38.