

Spiritual Listening; Faithful following

Acts 8:26-38
April 21, 2024

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

Two Sundays ago, Laura Gillett came into the sanctuary with Logan as worship was getting started, which is a perfect time to come – anytime anyone arrives is a perfect time. As Logan entered the Sanctuary, he shouted something I couldn't quite hear, and as any of us would have done, Laura told him, "Not so loud!"

Many of you heard that morning what I later learned Logan shouted – "I love this place!" Wow! The perfect time to arrive, the perfect Spirit to embody, and the perfect shout of joy and thanksgiving. We are a blessed church.

We should all have the enthusiasm and unabashed boldness of Logan when it comes to his love of God, as expressed through his love of First Presbyterian Church. However, when it comes to church, we can be a little timid. That comes with being Presbyterian.

And yet, as a longtime pastor and longtime Presbyterian, I know that during worship and throughout your lives, ya'll are shouting Halleluiah and Amens in your hearts and sending up joyful praises of thanksgiving – in your thoughts and prayers. We are a thoughtful, quiet bunch when it comes to our faith. Not all of us, thank God, but by-and-large, that's who we are. And there's nothing wrong with that. There's a lot of good that comes from being thoughtful in the Faith.

We see this in today's New Testament lesson where Philip the Evangelist encounters a stranger from Ethiopia seeking a closer relationship with the Lord, and deeper understanding of God. Like a good Presbyterian, Philip was going about his business while trying to discern the will of the Lord through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. So when an angel of the Lord says to him, "Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes ... from Jerusalem to Gaza," Philip gets up and goes.

It's interesting that Acts tells us the Lord told Philip to travel a wilderness road. It seems that taking time to step back from the hustle and bustle of life just might be important when it comes to encountering God, going deeper in the faith. Yeah, of course, it's important.

If you're not finding the time and place to reflect on your faith, you're missing out on hearing the Lord speak to you, missing out on going where the Lord would have you go, meeting whom the Lord would have you meet. That's a lot to miss out on.

Give some thought to that right now – listening to the Lord. Where in your life could you regularly spend time doing some spiritual listening. Many of us do that while reading or listening to devotionals, taking a walk or a bike ride, setting aside time for prayer. And then

there's others of us who don't spend much time listening at all; we're always talking. That's something to consider, don't you think?

Listening for God is one of the best ways of going deeper in the faith. And if you're not going deeper, you're not getting very far on your spiritual, faith journey. At best, you're holding your own. And, really, there is so much more to our faith lives than just coasting along.

Philip was all about getting out there and living large when it came to his Faith in the Lord. And as he did that, he had some amazing experiences.

Listening to the Lord's guidance, Philip goes to the wilderness road, and there he meets the last person you'd expect to meet coming from Jerusalem, an Ethiopian eunuch.

Jerusalem was the hub of Jewish worship, the place where people went seeking an encounter with the one, true God. And yet, the Ethiopian eunuch would not have been allowed in the Temple, because of his sexuality, or lack thereof. That's what a eunuch is; someone without a sex drive. They were considered spiritually unclean and discriminated against because of it.

So it must have seemed quite odd to Philip when he meets the Ethiopian – not only coming back from worship in Jerusalem – but reading from the sacred scroll of the Prophet Isaiah. That's strange. And yet, Philip doesn't criticize him. He listens to the Ethiopian, this stranger, this outcast traveling down a rough and tumble wilderness road.

Running alongside his chariot, Philip says to him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" In asking this, Philip shows an interested in what the Ethiopian is doing. He wants to hear what he's thinking, where he's at in his life. You see, not only does Philip listen to the Lord, but he listens to others, even and especially those who are different from him.

Do you; do we? Do we listen to others who are different from us, or do we do more talking than listening, maybe listening to the critical voice in our head instead of the loving guiding voice of Jesus. Listening is so important to our spiritual growth, our faith journey.

Think about it. If you're doing all the talking, the planning, the directing, how can the Lord work in your life through the people he brings alongside you? Think about that, and then make the decision to actually set aside some time to listen for the Lord, find a spot in your life for some quiet, soulful listening.

And then take that spirit of listening with you out into the world, listening to others. There's no greater blessing in life, for you and for them.

We see this where Philip takes what the Ethiopian is reading, what he is into, and shows him where the Lord is to be found in it. The “sheep (in Isaiah) ... led to the slaughter,” the “lamb silent before its shearer,” the humiliated soul who is denied justice, the “life ... taken away from the earth,” taken up from the earth – this all points to Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

Philip has so thoroughly embraced the Lord, embraced the faith, that he is able to use what someone else is focused on to point to Christ, to show where Jesus is to be found, where the blessings of God can be seen and experienced and appreciated.

When the Ethiopian sees how faithfully and fully Philip embraces the Lord, he’s inspired to do the same, he’s ready to go deeper in his faith. “Look,” he says, “here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

This outsider who was rejected at the temple for being different is now bold enough to ask for the Lord’s acceptance. And this disciple – who’s Lord was also rejected at the Temple but raised up by God – this disciple is bold enough to baptize an Ethiopian eunuch, embracing him as a brother in Christ. That’s a story worth living; that’s an encounter worth having.

And the good news is we all have the opportunity to be like Philip, to follow the path of Philip – Philip who took time to listen for the Lord, Philip who opened his heart and listened to an outsider, Philip who used his love for the Lord to embrace an outsider on behalf of the Lord.

Listening for the Lord, listening to others; embracing the Lord, embracing others. That can be the hardest thing you’ll ever do as a follower of Christ; and the most rewarding. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

You give us life; we must offer commitment. You give us Scripture; we must study. You give us children; we must serve as good parents. You give us talents; we must minister accordingly.

You give us the church; we must extend fellowship. You give us the gospel; we must share the Good News. You give us money; we must invest in the eternal.

You give us each other; we must live in love – love of you and love of neighbor. We pray for those we call neighbor and friend, and especially those needing to feel your love, receive your comfort, embrace your spirit of hope and peace.

And we are thankful to you, O God, as the giver of all that we call good and perfect. Transform our gratitude for what you have placed within our hands into significant means of serving others as well as you. We pray all this in Jesus name, using the words that he taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.