

Last Sunday – Trudy and I were blessed beyond measure – thank you for your part in that. As long as we continue to be open to God and His Spirit, who knows what will happen?

In the Christian year today is Trinity Sunday. The day we mark the unique relationship that exists between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The following statements will be read in many churches today.

God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness,

Genesis 1:26

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

Matthew 28:19

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

2 Corinthians 13:14

All three express the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

That being the case I’d like us to read a Trinity experience from the book of Acts. And next Sunday we begin the longest uninterrupted period of the Christian year – it goes by various names, the one I like is ordinary time – the time when we just get on with following Jesus.

Acts 8:26-

26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ 27 So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian[a] eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means ‘queen of the Ethiopians’). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. 29 The Spirit told Philip, ‘Go to that chariot and stay near it.’

30 Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ Philip asked.

31 ‘How can I’ he said, ‘unless someone explains it to me?’ So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

32 This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

**‘He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.**

33 In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth.’

34 The eunuch asked Philip, ‘Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?’ 35 Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

36 As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptised?’ 38 And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptised him.

39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. 40 Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and travelled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

PRAYER

Outreaching, barrier-breaking, always on the move Spirit; Spirit of the living, risen Jesus, shake us up and move us out from our coziness so that we might enjoy being part of your gospel. Nothing holds you back, Spirit of God. No one, anywhere, is held back from what you intend to do. Father help us to become engaged with you in your mission to the ends of the earth so that your will is indeed done in heaven and on earth, Amen.

Acts is best seen as 'Easter continued.' The resurrection miracle didn't end with the empty tomb. The life-giving miracles continue in Acts as the gospel goes all the way to the ends of the known earth,

You might think that it would be enough for crucified Jesus to rise from the dead and return to his disheartened disciples. If you thought that was the extent of it you'd be wrong. Jesus not only defeats death and escapes the confines of the tomb; Jesus immediately moves into the whole world, and enlists his disciples to move out in his name. Nothing can hold back the relentless onward and outward movement of the Holy Spirit.

That's not a bad characterization of the Acts of the Apostles—an account of the constant advance of the Holy Spirit into the whole world. Acts begins with the promise that we will be witnesses from Judea, out into Samaria, even to the ends of the earth. In the first seven chapters of Acts, in the first days of the church in Jerusalem, a conflict arose between Jewish language groups. A compromise is reached, and the church moves on.

Actually it's the Holy Spirit who moves on. Nothing is able to hold back the Holy Spirit's mission into the world. Stephen and Philip go beyond Jerusalem and Judea into the wider Roman world. Stephen's story focuses on the intense conflict with Judaism and ends with his death. What the world did to Jesus, it does to the followers of Jesus. Stephen is martyred - he dies like Jesus, forgiving those who have killed him.

Then, after a brief reference to Saul's persecution of the church we hear of Philip fleeing persecution in Samaria where even Samaritans want to be baptized. The move into Samaria appears to be unplanned. Then there's the Spirit's blessing on the Samaritan baptisms (8:14-25).

Clearly Luke wants to show how the gospel leaps over all boundaries and barriers and goes all the way to the end of the earth

As we heard the story is set in motion by an angel who tells Philip to go south on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Philip had been involved in Samaritans coming to Jesus, now the Spirit moves even farther from the church's Judean centre, all the way out to an Ethiopian.

The Ethiopian is a well-to-do, prominent person, a minister of Candace, the queen of Ethiopia. While not a Jew, he's on the edges of Judaism. Somehow he's obtained a slice of Isaiah. Reading it, he can't understand.

We make a mistake if we read the Ethiopian as a marginalized, oppressed outsider. Ethiopia was considered to be an exotic, far-away place with great riches. The Ethiopian is a high-placed official in the queen's court.

The theme of today is inclusion – who's included and who isn't

Is there any more wonderful word than **included**? Is there any more painful word than **excluded**?

'Can I come, too?' asks the little child when the parents gather their things to go out for the evening – she's asking, can I be included

'What about me? Am I included in the plans?' we anxiously ask.

'Just got an invitation to the party - did you?' 'No, not yet; but surely I'll be included,' we respond.

'Sorry, sir, you're not on the list. I can't let you in unless your name is on the list. This is the official list. Sorry.' That reminds me of the wonderful line in Schindler's List. As Yitzhak Stern types the list that will become the official one he says to Oscar Schindler, **'The list is an absolute good. The list is life. All around its margins lies the gulf.'** Actually the list speaks of those who are included.

Jesus told a number of stories about banquets and parties in which some are included and some are excluded. Sometimes, in these parables of embrace and exclusion, the people who presume themselves to be in the 'in crowd' end up excluded. And those whom we tend to think of as 'outsiders' or the excluded end up included.

In the first days of the church, Christians had to learn that a primary implication of the gospel is: you're included. Philip's directed by an angel to get up (same basic word that's used for 'resurrection'). Get up and go out in the middle of the desert.

That's a strange command even from an angel.

Implication I: Though the church might like to rest, consolidate and stay comfortable God intends for his church to get up and be on the move, moving even into the wilderness.

Philip obeys and goes into the desert to encounter a strange man (in a Nissan chariot) as you'd expect. He's presumably rich, possibly powerful, since he's in a chariot and since he's a high official in the court of the Ethiopian queen. He's been to the temple in Jerusalem. He has a scroll of the prophet Isaiah, but he can't make any sense of it because, not being able to enter into the temple for instruction, he doesn't understand the words about a 'sheep' who is 'led to the slaughter.' Philip teaches the Ethiopian that the words speak of Jesus, the Lamb of God who was crucified.

Implication II: Though the Holy Spirit reaches out and draws people toward God, somebody has got to interpret; someone must name the name and tell the story of Jesus.

And then the Ethiopian asks a surprising question: What would keep me from being baptized?

You expect Philip to respond, 'What would keep you from being baptized. Well, one, you're an Ethiopian; two, you're not quite a man; three, you're not Jewish; and four we're in the middle of the desert.'

'Look, here's water even in the desert!' exclaims the Ethiopian.

And Philip, even though he may have grave reservations about the propriety of baptizing a non-Jewish Ethiopian eunuch, baptizes him. Watch carefully: the gospel has just leapt over another human boundary.

Implication III: The Holy Spirit loves to leap over any barrier or boundary we put up in order that the good news of Jesus Christ ('you're included') may come to everybody in every corner of the earth.

Implication IV: If we're to keep up with the Holy Spirit—if we're to worship Jesus as Lamb of God— then we've got to go, get out of our comfort zones, and follow the Holy Spirit in God's boundary-breaking mission into the world.

I doubt that many of us here put restrictions on God's love as it's shown in Jesus. I doubt that anybody here thinks that Jesus's love is limited to people who look like and talk like us. Sometimes I wonder.

Implication V: The way we live, the way we act out our following Jesus, is as if we think that Jesus died and rose just for us and nobody else. BUT!

Philip tells a different story. We just have to go where we're sent. The Christian church, that's us by the way, is sent on a mission because it's the nature of the Trinity to be talkative, invasive, and persistently gregarious and pervasive. If you don't believe me then dive almost anywhere in the Acts of the Apostles, and you'll see the Holy Spirit moving into the world by enlisting people like Philip, people like us, to interpret, to talk, and to share the good news: we're included.

You're here this morning because the Trinity — God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — refuses to reign in heaven without you. In some way or another Holy Spirit got the message to you: you're included. God is relentlessly determined to have a people drawn from one end of the earth, exploding all the way to the other end of the earth with the joyful good news, **'Hey! You're included.'**

'This man parties with sinners,' they said against Jesus in Luke 15. 'He can't be the Messiah.' And Jesus replied, **'I'm going to clean up these sinners and make them live right, be righteous and middle-class so they'll look like you.'** NO! Jesus replied, **'Which one of you shepherds has a lost sheep? Will you not go, leave the ninety-nine safe in the pasture, and beat the bushes? And when at last you find that lost sheep, will you not say to your friends, 'Let's party! I found my lost sheep?'**

Jesus's stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost boy in Luke 15 are stories about God. God is the searching shepherd, the seeking woman, the waiting father; God, the great includer. Jesus never got into trouble for excluding people. Jesus got into all sorts of hot water because it was said of him, **'This man receives sinners.'** This includes those we think are excluded. Do you think we've really got that?

Surely the Acts of the Apostles is written so we'd know that's our job—to deliver the good news, **'you're included.'** We're to live as the church in such a way that shows the world the truth of that which we speak: 'You're included.'

Every baptized Christian must find a way to offer a witness, a testimony to the hope that is within you and me. And every unbaptized Christian needs to be baptized! Some of us are terrified at the idea of having to describe openly God's work in us or others. As Ross Lockhart puts it, 'we're tongue-tied Christians.'

And yet, by the Holy Spirit's work, somebody has to say something, somebody preaches, somebody explains to those who have not yet understood the good news.

Tradition says that the Ethiopian left Philip and went back home and founded the church of Ethiopia, the church that endured through centuries of persecution, and today the Ethiopian church is spreading into all the world through the migration of Christians from Ethiopia. What if Philip had stayed home in Jerusalem and refused to go to the desert? What if he'd responded to the Ethiopian's questions with, 'Sorry, I just can't explain what those words mean? They're meant for Jews like me, not for outsiders like you'? What if Philip had responded to the Ethiopian's request for baptism by saying, 'I'm sorry. I'll have to check with head office and see if you're worthy'?

Let's rather say to wherever God calls us to give people the good news, **'Hey, you're included.'**