

Sermon Preached by  
The Rev. Canon Andrew G. Chisholm  
St. James, Kingston  
May 3, 2015  
**Text: Acts 8:26-40**

I am in the planning stages of building my second model railroad layout in the basement of our new home. Building a model railroad was something I wanted to do all my life, but until about 10 years ago I had always been intimidated by the kind of skills involved in building it. Thanks to one of Canada's top model railroaders moving to Merrickville about ten years ago, I was introduced to a whole lot of great people with the same passion and obsession with trains that I have. Through the process I have actually been learning about all sorts of things and becoming a bit handy. I used to say, and it still mostly true though, that there is no handy in this Andy

A few years ago I was getting frustrated with my car. I could not figure out why it was acting so sluggish on the road. I tried everything I could think (which wasn't much) to try to figure out what was wrong. I finally decided to take out the owners manual and had a look at the shop manual online. I soon realized that I was in trouble. I couldn't understand the thing at all. It may have been the best written car manual ever made, but I had so little understanding of cars, that it was almost useless to me. My extremely handy friend Dave, who had bailed me out of many a desperate situation before came by that night and I knew I was going to be alright. We took the car out for a test run and opened the hood, had a look at the manual and in a matter of five minutes eliminated about a dozen possible problems. He explained to me in terms I could understand how this car of mine worked. I thank God that I have a friends like Dave in my life who take the time so that I can understand and explain such things to me.

Now after all of the testing, Dave looked at the pedals and discovered I had somehow shoved the floor mat under the accelerator - the reason the car was sluggish is because handy Andy had a rubber mat jammed under the accelerator.

I think of Dave when I think of the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch that is today's

lesson from the Acts of the Apostle. The Eunuch had the manual for life in hands but could not understand and God placed in his life, Philip, who could guide him and explain to him what the prophet Isaiah was saying.

The Man was an Ethiopian Eunuch! There were all sorts of reasons why this was a problem for Philip. I suppose the first thing that one of us would notice is that the man was black. That was no problem for Philip. The issue for Philip and his compatriots would have been that he was a eunuch. There was no room such people in first century Judaism as the Laws of Moses forbid such people from being part of the faith community.

Philip could see that this man was seeking to know and worship God. He clearly already had some kind of faith and knowledge of God as he was on his way back from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem where he would have worshipped in the outermost part of the temple, the court of the Gentiles. He was also reading and studying the prophets.

Being a eunuch was problem number one. Problem number two was that he was also a Gentile. Up to this points all of the new followers of Jesus had been Jews first. Philip's world of God's family was being challenged and expanded right under his nose. Whatever precedents were being set here, Philip knew it was the Spirit of God who had called him to come alongside this man so how could he not share his knowledge of God with him. What he knew of Jesus would have helped him to know that once again something new and wonderful was happening.

So Philip, confident that an angel of God had set him in path of this man, explained what knew of the Scriptures to the Ethiopian. The passage from Isaiah 53 that he had been reading is one that is easy for those of us who know about Jesus to see that the prophecy is about Jesus. Philip told him all about Jesus, that he was the one the prophet was speaking about. The Ethiopian said yes to Jesus and was baptized. Philip showed what these new believers stood for and accepted and loved a man that others would have rejected. Philip showed the love that was to be foundational to what the Christian

Church was set up to be.

This is an incredible story on so many levels. It is so close to the story of the Road to Emmaus when Jesus walked along with Cleopas and his companion and explained the scriptures to them. That story ends with them breaking bread together, celebrating the Eucharist. This story follows the same pattern and ends with the other great sacrament, baptism. And interestingly at the end of both stories the interpreter of scripture disappears right after the sacrament and the those remaining are left to marvel at what just happened.

What strikes me in this story is how quickly everything happens. Philip hears the Holy Spirit prompting him to go to the wilderness road between Jerusalem and Gaza, so he drops what he is doing and goes. God needed him in that very moment; had he not gone then, the chance to impact this Ethiopian's man's life would have passed and who knows if and when he would have a chance to hear and understand again. It is a reminder to me of how many times I have missed opportunities of serving God because I didn't listen or ignored the prompting of the Holy Spirit in my life.

I'm not sure if you identify more with the Ethiopian or with Philip. In many ways each one of us is a lot like the Ethiopian. We are part of a faith handed down from generation to generation, and we depend on guidance from others. We can never learn all we need to know about God and life with God without accepting guidance throughout life. When I think of all the guides I have had in my life they have been, Sunday school teachers, colleagues, and mostly and an awful lot of talented fellow pilgrims along the way. As our faith matures, we are also called to become guides for others. Being a follower of Jesus means that we thrive on passing on the good news and living the good news. It's about paying it forward to the next generation and those who have not had the same nurturing we've had.

This Sunday is Missions Sunday at St. James. When your Missions Committee was planning this service we looked at the texts of the day and agreed that this story is very much about mission.

Mission at its roots is about taking the Good News of Jesus out into the world and asking the Holy Spirit to fill us and guide us to be agents of change and hope in the world. The Missions Committee works hard to select groups that reflect the mission of St. James and of the church. One of the things they have been struggling with, is something that all who take mission seriously struggle with. It is the question, should be working at the root causes of evil, pain and suffering or providing help and relief to those who are victims of systemic and other evil in the world. The answer I think is both.

Last Tuesday was the meeting of St. James Mens Group. We were having a discussion about holy anger, about how we direct and channel the anger that we have at the evil things in our world that inflict pain, suffering and torture on people. It was a great discussion. I think the way the discussion was summarized at the end is helpful when we think about mission. Someone said, “we need to be working with two hands simultaneously doing works of compassion on one hand, and throwing sand into the cogs of systemic evil in the other.” Certainly Jesus showed both compassion and righteous anger in his ministry. Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian Eunuch was real act of mission. He showed compassion to someone who was excluded and looked down on by many in his world, he changed the church by widening its view of who the people of God could be. He became like my handy friend Dave, helping me to understand things that I needed to understand.

What a great story to hear on this Mission Sunday. As we reflect about Philip teaching the Ethiopian about the Good News of Jesus so long ago, let us remember who leads us into mission, into bringing the love of God into the world. Let us remember our calling to be working with two hands simultaneously doing works of compassion on one hand, and throwing sand into the cogs of systemic evil in the other. And thanks be to God for those who were Philips in our lives; may we too be found so faithful. AMEN.