

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
Listening and Obedient
Acts 8:26 – 40

Today, we enter week seven in our sermon series on the book of Acts. We have followed the believers, as they spread the good news of Jesus Christ to Jerusalem. We have heard their witness to fellow Jews in the face of opposition, and await their witness to Judea, Samaria and the “ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8b). We have heard the story of the first martyr, the Greek also meaning “witness.” We heard last week what it means to be a witness – *not* similar to a defense attorney for Jesus, but a person called to the stand, to speak to, or witness to, the work of the Spirit in our lives. We were reminded that the *result* of our witness is not up to us, but to the Spirit.

A couple of weeks ago, we heard the story of the Greek widows being overlooked in the daily distribution of bread. Do you remember what the response from the apostles was? They gathered all of the believers together and told them to appoint seven men from among them, full of the Spirit and wisdom. These seven would have the responsibility of distributing food so that no one would be in need. And what did the people do? They chose seven *Greek* Jewish believers, representing the marginalized group. And what was the result? “The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7b).

One of those men chosen was a man named Philip. Philip will be our character study today. Philip was a Greek Jewish convert, full of the Spirit and wisdom. In chapter 6, he was one of the seven chosen to distribute bread to the

widows and to those in need. He isn't mentioned in chapter 7, but we pick back up with Philip's story in chapter 8, after the death of Stephen.

Stephen's death was a decisive turning point for the believers in Acts. Why? Because of fear that they too might be killed? No. The believers were *not* dissuaded by Stephen's death. They *didn't* huddle together, hiding, for fear of death. No, on the day Stephen died, "a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the [twelve] apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria" (Acts 8:1b). "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went" (Acts 8:4).

Philip went to Samaria and preached the good news of Jesus there. He cast out demons, performed acts of healing, and was listened to by many. Many came to believe and were baptized. This group of Samaritans, these Jewish half-breeds, commonly *hated* by the Jews at the time, received the good news of Jesus with joy.

But Philip didn't stick around to bask in the glory of the Samaritan converts. Verse 26 says that an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, telling him to go south from Jerusalem to Gaza. And that's what Philip did. (map) He left Samaria for Jerusalem, toward Gaza. A true act of faith, when persecution occurred in Jerusalem!

Perhaps Philip struggled much more with this command than what is written in verses 26 and 27. I can only *imagine* trying to reason my way out of this. *God, please don't ask me to go through Jerusalem. Why don't I stay here? People are coming to faith here. Or, why don't you send me somewhere else? How about I go around Jerusalem?* And maybe Philip didn't complain or argue at all and was simply obedient. We don't know.

What we *do* know is that Philip heard the angel of the Lord, and was obedient. He headed south, “and on his way, he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians” (Acts 8:27b). He had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and was reading from the prophet Isaiah.

Let’s stop here for a quick character study. This man was from Ethiopia; he was African. (picture) He was an important official in charge of the treasury of the queen. We can deduce that he was a Jew, because he had come from worshipping in Jerusalem and was reading the prophet Isaiah. But we don’t know whether he was Jewish from birth or a Jewish convert. He is referred to as a “eunuch.” We commonly think of eunuchs as being castrated, but this was not necessarily the case. The term “eunuch” “was often used...as a governmental title denoting high military and political officials.”¹ *If* this man was castrated, we can reason that he became a Jew later in his life, because “the law of Israel excluded [castrated men] from religious privileges enjoyed by other members of the community (Deut 23:1).”² In this case, his conversion to Judaism would have meant *partial* inclusion into the community.

Philip sees this man riding in his chariot, and hears the voice of the Spirit telling him to go to the chariot and stay near it (Acts 8:29). Can you imagine this scene? A chariot is trotting along, when all of the sudden, a man runs up to it and keeps pace with it. Finally, a story of a runner!

This image reminds me of visiting my cousins. When my siblings and I were young, we lived in Yuba City for a few years. Our cousins lived in Sacramento, an

¹ Steven Ger, *The Book of Acts*, 123.

² F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 175.

eternity of a car ride for a little one – a whole *hour!* We *loved* getting together with our cousins, and we were *so* sad when we had to part. Every time the van began to pile high with children, preparing to pull away from one of our houses, the other children of the family would ready themselves to chase after the van. When the van began to reverse out of the driveway, the sprint would begin! We would sprint after the van, seeing how far we could get before the van exhausted us, and our cousins would fade out of view.

This is the image I have of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip sprints alongside the chariot, and keeps up with it long enough to hear the Ethiopian reading from the prophet Isaiah, and to have a conversation with him. Philip is in good shape!

He asks the eunuch if he understands what he is reading. The eunuch asks how he can understand, if no one guides him. He invites Philip into his chariot to explain it to him.

Philip begins with the passage he is reading, and tells him the good news of Jesus. Jesus was the One prophesied about in Isaiah, who was led to his death like an innocent lamb. He did not deserve to die, but willingly died, so that we might have life! We turn from our former lives and act in obedience. This sign of turning and obedience is baptism, through which we become a part of a family of believers.

The Ethiopian is so compelled, that as soon as he sees water, he wants to be baptized. He is baptized, and when they come up out of the water, the Spirit takes Philip away to Azotus (map), and travels north to Caesarea, preaching in all the

towns along the way. The Ethiopian goes home rejoicing, to the place considered “the edge of the world.”³

Philip is quite a remarkable character. He spreads the good news of Jesus to the Samaritans and to the ends of the earth, to half-Jews and to a converted, or foreign, Jew. He hears the Spirit and is obedient, even when his life might be in danger and when the task seems odd.

What is compelling is that the Spirit is, in fact, the protagonist in Philip’s story. What the Spirit desires to accomplish through Philip, the Spirit is successful to do.

Philip understands that the Spirit is in control, and that he is merely a vessel through which the Spirit can work. He trusts the Spirit and doesn’t say “no.” When the Spirit gives him an open invitation to share the good news of Jesus, he is quick to respond. He is quick to share the good news of Jesus, because that is his *pattern*. He is *always* ready to listen and to be obedient.

I’ve got to tell you – it is not always easy to listen and to respond with obedience. There have been times in my life when I have felt so stressed, that I have believed that the only way to survive is to turn inward for self-preservation. There have been times when I have been so fearful of what the Spirit might want from me, that I have failed to ask or to listen. There have been times when I have moved forward before the Spirit, thinking, *Of course this is what God would want from me, so I will just do it now*. When I have acted in haste and have moved ahead of the Spirit, has been when my relationships have suffered the most.

³ Bruce, 179.

Years ago, I had a conversation with my mentor. I was having a difficult time determining what I should do about something.

She responded with a question I will never forget. "Have you asked God about it?"

"No," I said, embarrassed.

"Sometimes when I am driving, I pretend that God is in the passenger's seat, and I ask Him questions and respond as if I was talking to any other person."

Her suggestion was profound, because up until that point in my life, I couldn't remember *one time* when I had asked God a question. I will admit that asking is still not my natural response. It often will strike me after I have started charting my own course of action. *Should I marry Alek? Will You give us a child? Do You want me to become a pastor? How would You like me to handle this conflict?*

Asking the Spirit questions is not a difficult task, but we don't often practice it. Why? Because if we ask a question, it means that we have stopped our course of action to listen. Once we stop to listen, we are responsible to be obedient.

As Oswald Chambers writes in *My Utmost for His Highest*, we would much prefer to ask for advice from other Christians than to ask God to speak to us. Why? "It is because we know that when God speaks, we must either do what He asks or tell Him we will not obey. But if it is simply one of God's servants speaking to us, we feel obedience is optional, not imperative. We respond by saying, 'Well, that's only your...idea, even though I don't deny that what you said is probably God's truth.'"

When we finally *do* hear God, we feel humiliated. "Lord, why was I so insensitive and

obstinate?” When we finally *do* obey Him, our delight is “tempered with the shame we feel for having taken so long to do so.”⁴

Jesus tells his disciples in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will obey what I command.” Listening and obeying is the response of love. There is no other way around it. We *cannot* show love for Jesus while continuing to disobey his call and the voice of the Spirit. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in *The Cost of Discipleship*, “Jesus summons [us] to follow him not as a teacher or a pattern of the good life, but as the Christ, the Son of God...There is no road to faith or discipleship, no other road – only obedience to the call of Jesus.”⁵

This is the road you and I are called to travel, to obediently follow Jesus and the voice of the Holy Spirit. This journey will have bumps and unexpected turns along the way, but remember: the purpose of this journey will be for good, to glorify Jesus.

May we continue to hear and to be obedient to the voice of the Spirit as God leads us along this journey. Amen.

⁴ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, February 12.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 58.