

Bold in Spirit

Sermon 98 | Greystone Baptist Church | May 2, 2021

Acts 8:26-40

This week a number of us gathered online to watch a film called *The Two Popes*. Together we watched the first hour of the Netflix movie and took notes as the drama – “inspired by historical events” – told the story of the papacy from the death of John Paul II to Benedict to Francis. There is a moving scene about twenty minutes into the film in which Joseph Ratzinger, then the seated Pope Benedict, and Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, the future Pope Francis, walk and talk in the gardens of the Pope’s summer residence. Their conversation runs the gamut of theologically controversial topics and Church controversies. From human sexuality to the nature of God the two highly trained and experienced clerics debate the issues with all the intellect and reason that is available to them. Benedict comes down on the side of tradition and orthodoxy. Bergoglio learns from the people and the movement of the Spirit working among them.

You think the church is failing? Benedict asks Bergoglio
We are losing people.

You think that is the fault of the church? Not of western permissiveness... anything goes?
You say the church is narcissistic. Benedict continues
It seems to me that your church... our church... is moving in directions that I can no longer condone, or not moving at all when the time demands movement... it seems to me that we are no longer a part of this world, we don't belong to it... we are not connected...

A church that marries the spirit of the age... Benedict starts
... yes, yes, will be widowed in the next. Bergoglio finishes the statement.

Nothing is static in nature... or the universe, not even God.

God does not change! Benedict asserts.

Yes, he does, he moves towards us... Bergoglio counters back.

I am the way, the truth, and the life where shall we find him if he is always moving?
(Benedict)

... On the journey? Bergoglio responds with a humble smile.

Today’s reading from the book of Acts places the disciple, Philip, on the journey... on the road between Samaria and Gaza. The text is clear that this is not an ordinary road. It does not suffice to say that Philip was simply “on the way” to Gaza from Samaria. No, it was important to the author that Philip was sent down the wilderness road, and so into the wilderness he went.

Good students of the Bible that we are, we should already be thinking that God is up to something here. Right off the bat, in the very first verse, when we hear that a divine messenger has sent someone into the wilderness, down a wilderness path, we should have flashbacks to the wilderness of Creation, when God's spirit hovered over the chaos. If not that, then maybe we are thinking of the wilderness the Hebrew people survived on the other side of captivity, after God parted the waters of the Red Sea and then led the people with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night – for forty long years. Or perhaps the story of Elijah, comes to mind: the prophet of Yahweh, who was sent into the wilderness to Zarephath and encounters a widow there. Or maybe we remember Elijah's other voyage into the wilderness when he encounters God in the sound of sheer silence.

Yes, as good students of the Bible, we know that when we hear a tale of God (or the spirit of God) sending some poor, unassuming soul into the wilderness, something significant is going to happen. Somebody is going to meet them along the way, some measure of flour is going to be multiplied, maybe it's going to rain down quail and manna, or maybe – just maybe – somebody is going to meet God, in silence, in wind, in fire, or maybe even face to face.

Strange things happen in the wilderness. But one thing is certain, those who enter the wilderness do not emerge unchanged.

Up to this point in the story of the early church, Philip has played an important role along with the other disciples. Following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Philip and his friends have been living out the Great Commission, teaching the nations, baptizing, and making disciples. The Good News is spreading, in fact it's spreading so much that there are now nearly as many Gentile Christians as there are Jewish Christians. Even still, Christianity would not become a formal religion, separate and distinct from Judaism, for another 200 to 300 years.

Whereas the story started in Jerusalem, it has now traveled throughout the region. The disciples have been teaching in Samaria and now, as we read just a moment ago, Philip (who was in Jerusalem, then in Samaria), is now on his way to Gaza – via the Wilderness road.

On that road he meets an Ethiopian eunuch who is returning home from worshiping in Jerusalem. We don't know much about what brought the eunuch to this particular road. What did it mean that he was an Ethiopian traveling to Jerusalem to worship? Was he a lifelong Jew or a recent convert? Was he taking a risk in coming to the Temple?

On the other hand, his status as a eunuch granted him certain privileges and pleasures. He had access to the queen, and apparently the ability to borrow a carriage and to travel throughout the region. However, these amenities did not come without cost. At a young age, he was castrated so as not to be seen as a threat to the women whom he would spend his life serving. Because of this, he would never have the ability to perform a traditionally

masculine role, and he would never be able to fulfill the religious expectation to marry, to be fruitful, and to multiply.

Perhaps it is because of this humbling experience that the eunuch connects with the text from Isaiah:

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth...

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe this generation? For his life was taken away from the earth.

Under normal circumstances, these two, a Galilean Jew who was a disciple of Jesus and an Ethiopian eunuch, working for the Queen, would never have met one another. Under normal circumstances they would each be relegated to their worlds of work and leisure. Under normal circumstances, these two would never be on the same road, much less at the same time.

But this was no ordinary road, and this was not a normal time. This was the wilderness road, at the time discerned and directed by the Spirit.

In fact, the Spirit plays such an important role in this narrative that Barbara Brown Taylor (a famous preacher, teacher, and writer) says that the Spirit could and perhaps *should* be treated as a third character in this story.

“The story is *thick* with the presence of the Holy Spirit,” she writes, “which raises interesting questions about how that Spirit works. If God is the Law-maker, then God is also the Law-bender, or at least the Law-transcender who both places limits on the faithful and inspires them to challenge those limits when right relationships with God and neighbor are at stake.” (*Feasting*, p. 457)

And the leadership of the Spirit, urging faithful people across lines of difference, across geo-political boundaries, across racial and ethnic divisions is a theme that appears in both testaments. It is not really a Jesus thing – as a New Testament Christian might be inclined to believe – rather it appears to be a Spirit thing, a God thing, to push the limits and cross the line, always in erring on the side of loving God and loving neighbor.

Once we begin to understand *this* central truth, we can begin to see how important the Spirit is in this reading from Acts related to the emerging church in the ancient nearest, but also (perhaps even more importantly) how it relates to us as we struggle to re-create and re-imagine the church that our children and their children will want to inherit.

The real excitement of the biblical narrative in focus today comes when the two are traveling the road together, reading and interpreting scripture. They come across a body of water and the eunuch asks Philip: *Look, here is water. What is to prevent me from being baptized?*

Traditionally, there would have been a number of reasons to refuse or delay this baptism. He wasn't part of the community. He couldn't live the life expected of a man in the ancient world... he would never fit into the conventions of patriarchy and he would never be a picture of masculinity. We aren't even sure if he had a moment of repentance, of confession, of absolution...

But Philip jumped into the water with him, boldly affirming the movement of the Spirit as God moved closer to the people that day... on the journey.

Like an artist who first learns the rules of color, texture, shadow, and light... then learns to break the rules in all the best ways, we too are co-creators with God learning the rules and then boldly following the Spirit as she calls us forward... closer to one another... closer to our neighbors... and closer to the heart of God that is longing to set us free. Free to love, free to grow, free to learn, and free to change.

Perhaps Barbara Brown Taylor is right: If God is the Law-maker, then God is also the Law-bender, or at least the Law-transcender who both places limits on the faithful and inspires them to challenge those limits when right relationships with God and neighbor are at stake."

Friends, we are living in a time in which there are more than enough reasons to be divided. Sure, we could search our dogmas, our theologies, and our interpretations of scripture to find reasons to continue to separate ourselves from one another... from our neighbors who are different from us.

But I believe that if we take today's reading seriously, we might just find within it a call to be like Philip, like the eunuch... who were both bold enough to get up and follow the Spirit down the wilderness road. ... the road less traveled... the road of risk and uncertainty... but also the road of Holy promise.

So the only thing left for us to consider today is... as we face our world, our God, and all of our neighbors near and far... will we, too, be bold in Spirit?