

Dear Congregation!

Can anyone of us imagine our own life story without encountering other people? How would the road of our life look like without relationships? Two words come to mind: Loneliness and despair. In fact, life without meaningful relationships is unimaginable.

The story in our sermon text today makes that very clear. It's a story of life and encounter, a story of relationship. We are drawn into the story of a rich man from Ethiopia and his life changing encounter with another man from Jerusalem. The piece of road that they share together, leads them to water, life-giving water, and baptism. I invite you to come along for a bit on this desolate road between Jerusalem and Gaza, where this special encounter takes place. The story is written in the book of Acts, chapter 8:

*But an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert road. And he rose and went. And behold, an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a minister of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of all her treasure, had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." So, Philip ran to him, and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the scripture which he was reading was this:*

*"As a sheep led to the slaughter or a lamb before its shearer is dumb, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken up from the earth." And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, pray, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip opened his mouth and beginning with this scripture he*

*told him the good news of Jesus. And as they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip, and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught up Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip was found at Azotus, and passing on he preached the gospel to all the towns till he came to Caesarea.*

The Ethiopian, a rich court official and treasurer of the queen is on his way from Jerusalem back home. The road is desolate and lonely. Not a person in sight. He went to Jerusalem to pray. As a Gentile and a eunuch, he was excluded from the Jewish congregation. The eunuchs of the Bible were usually castrated males or those incapable of reproduction due to a birth defect. The purpose of intentional castration was to induce impotence and remove sexuality, especially for those serving a queen (for obvious reasons). It was a common practice in ancient times for rulers to castrate some of their servants and/or advisers in order to subdue and pacify them. According to Jewish law this Ethiopian eunuch was unacceptable and unwelcome in the Jewish congregation. However, his good financial position allowed him to purchase an expensive scroll containing the writings of the prophet Isaiah. This he now read on his way back home. He is looking, searching for answers, life-giving answers that he could not find in Jerusalem. Who is this God? Does this God love me? Does He accept me? Does He even know about me?

Then suddenly there is someone next to him speaking to him: "Do you understand what you are reading?" In comes Philip, the deacon and evangelist from Jerusalem. He was working outside of the Jewish region in Samaria. On his way back from Samaria to Jerusalem he got a message from an angel, a messenger of God, who drew his attention to the desolate

road in the desert leading to Gaza. Go to that chariot and accompany the man sitting in it for a while. When Philip came closer to the chariot he heard the familiar words from the book of the prophet Isaiah being read aloud. In that moment he realized what his task was meant to be and joined the man on the chariot.

This poor man was helpless and without counsel about the words he was reading. He then asks the first of three questions.

"How can I understand unless someone guides me?" The early church and the contemporary one knows that we do not come to faith alone. We learn from others and we pass on what we know to the next generation. Education has always been a very important component of the Christian faith, and the best education does not happen in isolation. That is why we ask parents to commit in providing for the instruction of their children in the Christian faith. All this can be hard for us to accept, for we are a people who value our independence and our individualism. Our whole lives long, we want to do it ourselves. When we are children, we pull away from our parents and let them know in no uncertain terms, "I can do it!" When we are older, we somehow confuse driving ourselves and our dignity. We think that to give up the first--driving--is to lose the second--dignity. Between childhood and maturity and for all the ages in between, we want to be able to do it all, and we want to be able to do it all on our own. But life really isn't easy and when it comes to life and faith it is a team sport.

We don't have to do it alone. We are much better at it when we pull together, when we learn from one another, when we interact with each other, when we reach out to others and experience their reaching out to us. In fact, most Christians will tell you, you can't be a Christian alone. It is simply impossible, for relationships are the basis of Christianity, of our humanity in fact, and our relationship to God and God's relationship to us, our relationships with one another. Essentially, God is a relational God. God is not a religious God. We are

not here to practice religion. We are here to learn that God wants to be in a loving relationship with us. We are made for relationship, primarily with God and then also with other people, fellow travellers.

Conversation always results in relationships of one kind or another, so the Ethiopian engages Philip in a conversation. Through the encounter with Philip and in conversation with him the Word of God became truth for the Ethiopian and his own life. He asks Philip another question. It is the second of three, the middle question, the middle of the text. In biblical studies we were taught that we always had to pay very careful attention to what we found in the middle of the Scripture, in the centre, in the vertex of two lines drawn through a text, in its intersection.

Now the word vertex comes from the same word as vortex, or whirlpool. What is the centre when everything is whirling around us? That same word means top of the head, and it also means deep within the heart. What is at the centre of this story? What pulls our head and heart together? How can we understand this? Is the prophet talking about himself or another? Luke, the author of Acts, says that Philip began to speak, and starting with this Scripture, he shared with the Ethiopian the good news about Jesus. Philip explained to the eunuch the meaning and identity of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 as being fulfilled in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He told the story about a God who entered our story, the God who walked the streets of our lives. He was also an out-cast, shunned for His message of God's love and His kingdom. He took on himself all our pain and sin and carried them on the cross where he died. He didn't say a word. In everything Jesus Christ became as one of us, even in our deepest despair and helplessness that causes us to be at a loss for words sometimes. This God comes to us still, walks beside us on the streets of our lives, shares our pain and suffering, our joys, and sorrows. Jesus is the Lamb of God who gave His life for ours so that

we may live. He comes to us in the waters of baptism and in bread and wine.

That is it. Jesus is at the centre. We do not point to ourselves or to our churches or denominations, or even to great books or good programs. Rather, we are always pointing to Jesus who is at the centre of our faith. Indeed, we do need him at the centre, the crux, the vortex, the vertex, when life is swirling and when we are trying to keep our head and heart and everything else together. We need to know who is at the centre, and, therefore, who can centre us.

In contrast to the silent Lamb that did not open his mouth, Philip can't help but to open his and tell this stranger about the Love of God in Jesus Christ. As they travelled together for some distance, they came upon a pool of water, an oasis in the desert, perhaps. Maybe the Ethiopian could experience from what Philip told Him about the unconditional love and grace of God in Jesus Christ, the water as an oasis in the middle of a hot and desolate road in the desert. He realized that God's Story with the human race is also his own story, that he is indeed part of this story. For him it is now clear: This God does love me, does accept me, does know about and care for me. Nothing could separate me from the Love of God, not my background, not my fate, not my disability or handicap, not my fear or my pain, nothing.

Hence the third and last question by the Ethiopian: What is to prevent my being baptized? What is to prevent me from entering and becoming a part of the Story of God's Grace and Faithfulness? Well, nothing, nothing at all.

The reaction of the Ethiopian and the baptism that follows reminds of a fish on dry land gasping for air. When put in the water again the fish gets a new lease on life and swims away with new energy. So it can be when we come from the parched, dry land and dusty roads of our everyday lives to the sanctuary for the life giving Word of God, to be reminded of God's love for us and His faithfulness; to be reminded that this God never

leaves nor forsakes us, no matter what part of the road we find ourselves on; to be reminded of our baptism and God's gift of the Holy Spirit and His unconditional Love and Grace. That's what we need to sustain us on our way, whether we know it or not, like a fish needs water. Let's dive in and rejoice! Amen.

Prayer:

Gracious God, we give you thanks for those who ask important questions and for those who travel alongside as we seek life-giving answers. Centre us when everything around us is swirling. Focus us when we find life difficult. Connect us when we feel cut off. Renew us when old categories no longer hold. Baptize us with your Spirit, that we may be fresh and free. In the name of the One who is our centre, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.