

“There’s No Such Thing as a Private Faith or How I Found my Voice!”

John 15: 1-8, Acts 8:26-40

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I want to begin this morning by singing the praises of every person who has ever agreed to speak on Laity Sunday. Raise your hand if you have ever stood in this pulpit to share your story as part of the Stewardship Campaign or on Laity Sunday. That is remarkable. It takes a lot of courage to accept that invitation. It also takes great faith to trust the Holy Spirit will give you the words to speak and that we will be gracious enough to receive it. It is always a privilege to hear where and how God is alive and at work in someone’s life.

I want to tell you about a church in New Haven, CT. This church, Church of the Redeemer, was led by a remarkable pastor named Lillian Daniel. One year, during Lent, she invited members of the church to speak in worship about where and how God was at work in their lives. In her new book, *“Tell it Like it Is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony,”* she describes how this came about. After a book group “devoured” *Practicing our Faith* the pastor thought it might be interesting to have people share their own stories. She remembers having lively discussions about many of the practices in the book including Sabbath keeping, saying yes and saying no, and discernment. Oddly enough, the chapter that drew the least conversation was the one on testimony.

As they explored the chapter about testimony they treated it more like an anthropological study. Most of them were neither familiar nor comfortable with the practice of offering testimony. She says, their response was not unlike the way people speak of their experience of New York City, it’s a nice place to visit, but you wouldn’t want to live there. The person who wrote the chapter grew up in the Christian Methodist Episcopal church where testimony was not only welcomed, but a common practice. For most of us in the United Church of Christ, offering testimony is unfamiliar, uncomfortable and nearly unthinkable. For the Church of the Redeemer to embrace this practice was pretty remarkable.

Lillian believes all people have a hunger to share their faith, but don’t always feel comfortable doing it. When asked, people will often say yes, however few would volunteer without first being asked. Sometimes we

need a little bit more than a nudge to make our way into the pulpit. Sometimes it takes the work of the Holy Spirit to get us there. The practice of testimony transformed that church in New Haven. They came to understand that faith is nothing without people to share the journey.

I am struck by the story this morning of Philip's chance encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip was busy helping to grow the church in Jerusalem. He was a deacon, ministering to the widows and orphans, serving meals to the needy. When that church experienced persecution, Philip was sent to minister in Samaria. However, when trouble erupts Philip finds himself on the run again.

When we meet Philip in the eighth chapter of Acts, he is on the Gaza Road, a wilderness road in the middle of nowhere. Philip wonders why God would send him to such a God forsaken place. He has been a faithful disciple and powerful preacher, bringing many people to believe in Jesus. Was this his reward for converting so many new Christians, a dreary march down a lonely, abandoned road? Perhaps the angel who sent him there was mistaken. (However, we know that rarely happens.) Perhaps she really meant to send him to the next major city, somewhere, anywhere, but this desolate highway. However, the angel was not mistaken. This is precisely where God intended Philip to be.

Next thing you know a chariot approaches carrying someone important on his way back from Jerusalem. It just so happens that Philip is on that stretch of road and it just so happens that he hears a man inside reading from the prophet Isaiah. We all know the likelihood of these two things "just happening" without the help of the Holy Spirit. The man in the chariot was an Ethiopian eunuch. He was obviously a person of faith, but he was an outsider, a person of color, a foreigner, a person of power and wealth who because of his condition was excluded from the temple. He had gone to Jerusalem to worship and was busy reading scripture on his ride home. At the spirit's nudging, Philip approaches the chariot to see if the eunuch needs any spiritual assistance. He asks him if he understands what he is reading. The Ethiopian responds, "how can I understand unless someone guides me."

The early church and the contemporary church understand 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 an important component of the Christian faith and the best education never happens in isolation. Many

of us would like to believe that we can be good Christians apart from a community of faith. After all, if I read my Bible, pray and seek to treat others as I would like to be treated is that not sufficient? As much as we try to convince ourselves otherwise, faith is a team sport. 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 back 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, our relationship to God, God's relationship to us and our relationships with one another.

Not only do we need each other, we also need to reach out to people who are different from ourselves. We need to set aside our fear, to approach the stranger and believe that nothing can keep us from being part of the body of Christ. It was Philip's willingness to witness, to share his story, that moves the eunuch to seek baptism, right then and there. That is why the practice of testimony is so powerful. We all need to be heard. We need to find other people who understand our circumstance. We need to be challenged by those whom we would just as soon not hear. We need to know when we reach out there will someone there to reach back in love. We are never complete until everyone is invited to the table, until the one who is left out, the one who frightens us or bewilders us, or anger us is made to feel welcome.

Philip asks a simple question of the eunuch, "do you really understand what you are reading." What he gets is not exactly a simple answer. The eunuch replies, "How can I without someone to guide me? How can I when you don't let me in your church? How can I when you are so afraid that you won't even talk to me? How will I ever understand until someone takes the time to sit with me, to treat me with dignity and engage both my spirit and my intellect?" God sends Philip to break down these barriers, to build a relationship and to reveal to this man the very nature of God. Philip is not put off by his answer. He sees this as an opportunity to tell him all about Jesus and the way Jesus changed his life. As a result, the Ethiopian eunuch asks Philip an equally brave question, "what is to prevent me from being baptized?" Philip doesn't tell him to make an appointment, he doesn't invite him to a new members class or quiz him on his understanding of UCC polity. He finds the nearest body of water, goes with him into the water and welcomes him into the body of Christ.

The Ethiopian eunuch doesn't ask for a teacher, he asks for a guide. There is a difference. We value the role of teachers. I am not sure we fully appreciate the role of guides. Teachers impart knowledge. Guides reach out and say, "this is the road I traveled. You might want to try it, however, whatever road you choose, I'll walk with you." Philip becomes the eunuch's guide. He does not treat him as an outsider or someone who is inferior. He is simply another person hungering to hear about Jesus. So Philip shares with him his experience of Jesus, not stories about Jesus, but the ways Jesus has touched his life. By the end of the trip, the eunuch asks to be baptized, not because he knew more about Jesus, but because he had an encounter with Jesus. Some people have the gift to teach. I believe many more of us have the gift to guide.

How many of you can testify to just such a person in your life, not someone who told you what to believe, but whose way of life told you all you needed to know? Philip was unafraid to approach the stranger, to go where God needed him to go and to create a place where the outsider was welcomed and trusted and cherished. Have you ever felt lost and alone, on a wilderness road to nowhere, when God gave you a purpose and offered you someone with whom you could share your story? The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch seems odd and farfetched until we see ourselves as the outcast, one who yearns to understand God's word, who yearns to have our spiritual hungers fed, one who has been turned away and excluded.

The church ought to be a place where we can share our stories. Whether that happens here in worship, in small group bible study or around the circle of mission advisors. We long to know there is a place where we are loved without condition and accepted without reservation. This is such a place. Sometimes it takes the movement of the Holy Spirit, however, for us to reach out and to welcome the one who is needy.

Why was Philip in that God forsaken place; that felt more like punishment than adventure? When you find yourself on a wilderness road, don't panic. Perhaps that is precisely where God needs you to be. Who knows where that road may lead you? It may lead to a second grade classroom in Hartford. It may lead you to some day share your story in this pulpit. It may even lead you to become president of the church where your witness, grace and testimony will affect people in ways you could not have imagined. It is on those wilderness roads where we unknowingly meet God. Woe to us if after having such an experience we are not willing to share our story. For it is not

only in the breaking of bread, but in the sharing of our stories, that we come to recognize the Risen Christ in our midst. May it be so! Amen

Opening prayer

Creator God,

Water is a symbol of life.

All creation needs water in order to live.

Jesus came to be living water for all people.

You call us to offer a cup of cold water in your name

As a way of welcoming others and to remind us that all your

People are worthy of our love and welcome

Just as they are worthy of yours.

Help us to share your love this day and every day.

We pray in the name of the one who is living water, even Jesus the Christ,

Who taught us all to pray saying...our father...