

Text Acts 8:26-39
“How Will They Know?”

Some one once told me about his first day in the army. The men were all gathered together in a big quonset hut. The sergeant came in and yelled, “does anybody here know how to drive a truck?” A couple of the fellows raised their hands, figuring this would be a pretty easy work assignment. Well, what they didn’t know was that “driving a truck” was army slang for pushing a broom. If they had known that they wouldn’t have volunteered.

You’ve probably heard the joke about when the army platoon assembled and the officer came and asked for volunteers for a dangerous mission. The officer turned his back and told anybody who wanted to volunteer to take one step forward.

Whereupon every man in the outfit took one step backward.

It’s funny how there are certain jobs in the church which seem to be unpopular - just like pushing brooms in the army.

I don’t know of many things which will make Christians squirm more than the call to personal evangelism, that is, calling people to share the good news about Jesus Christ . This seems strange, but we all struggle with a reluctance to do it.

Evangelism is something everybody recognizes we ought to be doing, but we seem to always be able to come up with reasons as to why we either can’t or aren’t doing it.

Our Scripture this morning is taken from the book of Acts. The book deals with the events in the early history of the Christian church and about how Christianity began to be spread through out the world. In particular, we are looking at an

episode in the life of one of the lesser known figures of the NT, Philip, in Acts 8:26-39.

In this passage we have an account of one of the early examples of personal evangelism - one man leading another to Christ. Now there are certain points about what happened with Philip and the Ethiopian which are applicable to us today as we think about our responsibility to share Christ with the world.

I believe that this passage demonstrates that as true believers we must always be ready and willing to share the gospel.

The first point we see is that God is the master planner of evangelism. And by that I mean that God sets up divine appointments.

How did Philip and the Ethiopian happen to meet?

Well, Philip was told by an angel to go out to the desert road that led from Jerusalem to Gaza. If you look back in the first part of chapter 8, you will see that Philip had been in the region of Samaria, on the opposite side of Jerusalem. Philip had been doing great works up there in Samaria. So why should he drop what he was doing and go out to the desert? Well the angel didn't tell him that. Philip was simply obedient to the instructions of the Lord. God had a reason, but he wasn't sharing it with Philip.

That reason was the Ethiopian eunuch, a powerful member of the court of Ethiopia. Now this man was obviously seeking God. He was probably a Jewish proselyte or convert. The Scripture tells us that he had gone up to Jerusalem to

worship. He was what was commonly referred to in those days as a God-fearer. Now this man just happened to be on the same road that the angel told Philip to go to. Coincidence? I don't think so. And this man just happened to be reading one of the greatest prophecies about Jesus Christ in the OT when he meets Philip. Coincidence? No, I don't think so.

And then the Holy Spirit, having brought these two together, tells Philip to go up to the man.

Notice also, that this man is on his way back from Jerusalem. He had just been in the same city where the apostles were preaching Christ. He had probably even heard them himself. Why hadn't he become a Christian there in the middle of all the powerful preaching of Peter and James and John? The answer is that God's plan was for him to meet a ragged witness on a dusty road.

And it was also strange that this wealthy powerful noble from the queen's court, probably with a bunch of servants with him, would not only take notice of this common man walking along the road, but actually ask him to come up and ride in his chariot. Clearly, the Spirit of God was working in this guy's heart.

But doesn't this just bear out the words of Jesus when he said,

“No-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me **draws** him,”

And that word “draws” doesn't mean that God winsomely entices men to himself.

The word refers to the act of drawing water from a well. When you want water from a well, you don't call to it and plead for it to come to you. No you draw it out. You are the operative agent.

God is the orchestrator of evangelism; He brought those two men together at just the right time and place. And he still does that today; He arranges divine appointments for those He intends to draw to himself.

So what does this have to do with us? Well, it means that the pressure for successful evangelism is not on our shoulders. All we have to do is be faithful to God's command to explain the reason that we have eternal life. God will do the rest.

So this means that you can't say that you can't witness because you are afraid you'll mess it up. God is in charge of evangelism. If we accurately present the gospel, we have done our part.

Now the sad truth is that not everyone will respond positively to the gospel. In this case, the Ethiopian did. He received Christ, he was baptized, and he went on his way rejoicing. Compare this with the rich young ruler of Mark chapter 10.

When he was confronted with Christ and what it meant to be his disciple, he went away sad. Why didn't he receive Christ? Was it because Jesus had failed to give an effective gospel presentation? Of course not.

In the same way, we are not responsible for people who fail to respond to our presentations. Our only call is to be faithful witnesses.

I've seen this happen time and again when doing evangelistic visits with my church. We go from house to house. We present the same gospel over and over again. Most people are not interested. But every so often we find someone who is positively hungry for God and receives the good news with joy.

Walford Thompson compares this with going to pick the perfect mango. You reach up to pull it off the tree and just as you reach for it, . . . it falls off in your hand.

Well, now you might be tempted to breathe a sigh of relief, [sigh] "if God is in

charge, then He doesn't need me. I can just sit here in the back row and watch." Well, that's just the attitude of the man who told the missionary, "Young man, if God is pleased to save the heathen, he will do it without help from you or me!"

That idea is dead wrong.

The reason it is dead wrong is that:

In God's plan, human beings are necessary elements of evangelism.

I don't know why, but that's the way he does it.

What was the first thing to happen in our scripture?

v.26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip . . .

Isn't that interesting? Now an angel of the Lord said

Well, if there was already an angel in the neighborhood, why did God go to all the trouble to arrange the meeting between Philip and the Ethiopian? Why didn't God simply have the angel go to the Ethiopian and explain the passage from Isaiah to him? That would have been simpler wouldn't it? Or why didn't God just immediately convey the truth of the gospel to the Ethiopian's mind? I can't answer these questions; all we know for sure is that God has chosen us human beings to be his messengers to bring the light of Jesus Christ to dying men.

A human agent is necessary. Now you may say, "OK human agents are necessary, but God uses special people for this like ministers and evangelists like Billy Graham . . ."

My answer to you is this. God has indeed used special people in mighty ways, but let's look at Philip. It is true that in Acts chapter 6, we read that he was selected as one of the first deacons of the church. He was a man "of good report, full of the Spirit and of wisdom", but his duties were the supervision of mercy ministries,

the distribution of food to poor widows. He was not an official evangelist, he was an ordinary church member who was willing to be used by God how ever and when ever God called him..

We see the same situation with the other Christians from the Jerusalem church:

Acts 11:19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.

20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.

21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

Now, who were these other Christians who performed this great work of evangelism? They were the apostles, right? Wrong.

Acts 8:1 says that “On that day a [referring to the persecution in connection with Stephen]” . . . “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.”

It was the “ordinary” (and I put that word in quotation marks) Christians who went forth from Jerusalem sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

Now of course we must do everything in our power to be well prepared for God’s divine appointments. We must know the Scriptures so that we can explain them.

Philip was able to start from the very Scripture the Ethiopian was reading and explain about Jesus. We must take advantage of every opportunity to learn more about the Bible and how to share the good news.

But the only thing that qualified Philip to speak to the Ethiopian was the fact that he understood the gospel and was willing to share it with someone who didn't. He was never explicitly told to lead the Ethiopian to Christ. The Spirit only told him to go near to the chariot. When he heard the Ethiopian reading the Scripture, Philip seized a natural opportunity to share the gospel. And all of us who are Christians can do that.

The necessity of the human element is also seen from the Ethiopian's answer when Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading.

And if you don't remember anything else from this message, I want you to remember this: Philip asked him, "do you understand what you are reading?"

And the Ethiopian answered, "how can I unless someone explains it to me?"

How can I unless someone explains it to me? Brothers and sisters, we are surrounded by people who do not understand the gospel, thousands and tens of thousands.

People who do not understand that Isaiah was talking about Jesus Christ, the son of God, who took the body of a man, who came to give his life as a ransom for our sins.

People who don't understand that they are living under a death sentence, a sentence of eternal hell - the consequence of their sins against a holy God.

People who don't understand that their only hope of salvation is faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who died and rose again from the dead.

And they can't understand this unless someone tells them. Are you willing to tell them?

“How can I unless someone explains it to me?”

I won't pretend that it's always easy to be a witness to Jesus Christ.

All too often, unbelievers will mock and persecute Christians who stand up for Jesus. But we have to learn to look beyond the sinful scoffing of such men. We've got to see them as precious creatures created in the image of God. We have to see that every man is just possibly one of those that Christ died to save. And like Philip, we must be ready to seize an opportunity to share the gospel.

God is sovereign in evangelism and he uses human instruments and he expects his instruments to be bold in evangelizing.

A lot of people, once having recognized and grudgingly admitted that God does in fact expect all of his people to be his witnesses, throw up one last line of defense. “Well, my lifestyle is my witness. People know that I am a Christian - if they want to ask me about God, I'm here.”

You know, our Christianity is not always as obvious as we think it is. I know a former Air Force fighter pilot who was flying with another pilot and he happened to make a casual remark about his church. Now these men had been working together and flying missions for several months. When my friend made that casual remark, his copilot exclaimed, “What! Are you a Christian? So am I.” Several months of close contact and neither of these men had realized that they were both evangelical Christians.

What would have happened if Philip had just walked along the road waiting for the Ethiopian to ask him for spiritual help? That man would be in Hell today. But Philip didn't wait to be asked. He perceived a need and he took the initiative.

This was a bold move on his part. The Ethiopian might have ordered one of his retainers to strike Philip for daring to speak to him without being asked first.

In the same way, we've got to take the initiative in sharing the gospel.

I know that for most people it is a scary thing to do. We are afraid of rejection.

We are afraid people won't like us or they will think we are some kind of religious fanatic. That is the number one reason why Christians don't share their faith - fear.

But this is a fear that can be overcome. Just like a child who is afraid of the water, start little by little. Start at the shallow end and gradually wade out into deeper water. And before you know it, your fear will be forgotten.

It's not hard as you think. Just say what you know. Start by inviting your friends and neighbors to come to church with you. Did you know that most people who have never gone to church say they would if somebody would ask them to?

We've got Thanksgiving coming up soon - what a perfect opening!

Just be alert to opportunities. A death in the family, a serious illness, loss of a job or other economic pressure. Worry over children and the condition of the world...the latest headlines; all or any of these things can be openings to sharing your faith. People are constantly buffeted by life. That's part of living in a sinful fallen world. They need answers. They need hope. They need to know why they are here on this earth. And more than anything else they need to know Jesus. We have the answer to all of life's questions. Jesus Christ....

You know, maybe what I have said here today hasn't made any sense to you.

Maybe you are like that Ethiopian on the road from Jerusalem. Maybe like him, you are one of those people who are still searching for the answers to life's

questions. If so, why don't you follow his example. The thing that separates us from God is sin. The thing that separates you from God is your sin. That passage that Philip explained told about Jesus Christ, the Son of God and about his death as a sacrifice for our sins. Don't be like that rich young ruler and go away from this place sad. Instead, be like that man in the chariot who put his faith in Christ alone. He went away rejoicing . . . and so can you.

Brothers and sisters, God is sovereign in evangelism. His spirit moves when and where He wills.

But he has chosen to use feeble human beings like you and me to be the instruments He uses to bring people to faith in Christ. That is an awesome privilege and an awesome responsibility.

A minister was talking to a man who claimed to be a Christian. "Have you shared Christ with your neighbors?" he asked him. "No, . . . the dying thief on the cross never shared Christ and he went to heaven," was the reply.

"Well, my friend," said the minister, " the difference between you seems to be that he was a dying thief and you are a living one."

May God grant that that never be said of us.

Amen.