

5 Easter B 2018 April 29, 2018
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Persons of Wisdom
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

As our neighbors at Ohio University and some of us here this morning begin a week of final exams leading up to graduation, it is perhaps a good time to reflect on the Philips in our lives. Those people who, like Philip in the Acts of the Apostles we heard in our first reading, reached out to us at one time in our lives to offer not just knowledge or guidance, but wisdom that opened up a whole new world to us.

Perhaps for some of you, your Philip was a teacher or professor. I can still remember Mrs. Foresth, my 7th grade English teacher who was the first to recognize and challenge my writing skills. Her words of encouragement helped transform me from an average student to someone who realized it was possible to do better in school and helped me see learning could be something enjoyable. Mr. Weir, my high school biology and environmental science teacher, opened for me the beauty and challenge of making the world a better place by learning about the state of the earth. The books he challenged me to read gave me insights, hope, and entre into a lifetime of caring for God's creation and helped me become part of a wider community of environmentalists from all walks of life. Maybe you can remember such a teacher or professor that helped spark a passionate interest you still have to this day.

For others, it may have been peers or a community to which you belonged that served as a Philip for you. When I was a student at Northland College in Ashland Wisconsin, I worked as a Residential Assistant and then as a Director of a Residential Hall; the supportive, receptive way the community responded to my work in residential life helped me see my vocation. That I was drawn to leadership in a community that works together. Maybe you can remember a time when a community helped show you something like that about yourself.

For some of you, maybe it was your parents who were Philip for you. When I was about 10 or 12 years old, I came to my mother with a question about something I had read in the Bible. My mother responded by introducing me to a set of books on one of the many bookshelves in our house called Barkley's Bible Commentary. She told me she wasn't sure how to answer my question, but a place to start is reading Bible commentaries, as these had been helpful for her. She showed me how to use them, and in so doing opened for me a whole new

world where not just the words of scripture but how people interpreted and applied the words of scripture to their lives were available to me. Maybe you can remember a time when your parent opened up for you a whole new level of understanding an aspect of life like your faith.

I could go on, but you get the idea that throughout our lifetimes, there may be people who reach out to us and help us begin to interpret information, knowledge, or life experience into something that does more than create clarity of understanding but opens up for us whole new realms of engagement, relationships, and growth. And maybe, just maybe, those wise people were listening to the Holy Spirit, like Philip in our reading from Acts that we just heard today.

It's a dramatic story, isn't it? We might wonder about the man who wasn't given a name, just called a eunuch. We heard he was someone of importance in the royal court in Ethiopia. Commentators tell us he may or may not have been a physical eunuch, as the term could be used in the days when these books of the Bible were written to refer to a person who worked for royalty. But whether or not he was a physical eunuch, he was a foreigner, a man from another place, who had come to Jerusalem to worship and he wasn't Jewish. He was, despite being an outsider, reading Jewish scriptures, and Philip felt a calling to go to this man.

Notice when Philip asked the man if he understood what he was reading, the man asked a lovely question: "How can I unless someone guides me?"

It seems to me there is more to his man than being foreign, important, and wealthy. He was wise, because although he had the scriptures, although he had a document filled with information, poetry, and knowledge, he recognized he needed help, he couldn't understand it on his own. He didn't have access to a Commentary yet. But he did have Philip. And did you notice Philip didn't lecture the poor man with facts, he didn't talk about how important he was as someone who had known Jesus personally. Instead he described the good news of how Jesus fulfilled the very scriptures the man had been reading.

Now the words the man had been reading were from the 53 chapter of Isaiah, and that is important to the author of Acts, because those words from Isaiah were the promise of God to God's people when they were in exile. When they were foreigners themselves in a foreign land longing for the past, longing for the place where they belonged, longing to be accepted. In a poetic way, the author of Isaiah promises such belonging will be fulfilled through a suffering

servant, and when Philip showed how Jesus filled that suffering servant promise, the man described as a eunuch discovered something much more liberating than knowledge; he discovered a God he had been drawn to who loves not just one group of people, but all people. For God's purpose, Isaiah revealed, was that the suffering servant didn't die just for the people of Israel, but for all people. That means the eunuch who had been an outsider didn't have to be an outsider any more.

I love when the eunuch asked the powerful question: "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" For there are parts of the Old Testament, especially in the book of Deuteronomy, that forbid a eunuch from becoming part of God's people. But now that Jesus had fulfilled the promise of restoring all people to God's love, there really wasn't anything to stop him from being baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection life and the Body of Christ, and he realized that awesome truth.

That may very well be the meaning behind those lovely if a bit tough sounding words of Jesus in our Gospel today; the words about vines and branches, especially the branches that get pruned. The master gardeners among us can tell you much better than I about the importance of pruning and how what looks like destroying a plant is actually a way to make room for new growth, and fruit. I once heard a master gardener say that an unpruned vine will grow in on itself and die. Pruning helps the plant grow outward, so it has room to produce fruit, whether that fruit is berries, or grapes or flowers.

It might be tempting to read the words of Jesus and think Jesus is talking about people: people will be pruned away from him. Or maybe people will experience pruning, having our ideas or hopes or dreams pruned away, so we can better listen or see what God is calling us to. And that interpretation may be helpful at certain times in our lives.

But it might also be that Jesus was talking about pruning away ideas or rules that no longer applied after his death and resurrection. Ideas or rules that would have kept someone like the man described as a eunuch from being a part of God's people who have a special relationship with God. Now that those vines had been pruned, he who had not been welcomed, was welcomed into a whole new way of living, one where he could grow ever closer to God, and through his baptism was incorporated into the Body of Christ, the community of all people who follow Jesus. No wonder the last thing we hear about this man is he went away rejoicing.

All because of Philip and his wisdom.

Even more so than the man described as a eunuch, we have access to so much knowledge and information. The internet is lousy with it. It is not hard to google anything we are curious about and the popular search engine will produce more information and knowledge than we probably have time to consume. But consuming information does not make us wise. Like the eunuch, there are times when we all need more than just information, we need wisdom.

Certainly, there are lots of definitions of wisdom. Not all of them are on the internet. One woman told me she had wisdom because of her age and experience, and that I needed to listen to her and do what she told me. Another woman the exact same age told me the longer she lived the more she learned that she doesn't know as much as she thought and therefore has no right to tell anybody what to do with their lives. Who is the wise one? How can we tell the Philips in our lives?

Scriptures can give us a clue. In the book of Proverbs wisdom is described not as the correct words to say, or number of years one has lived, but as the ability to see and recognize God in all places: in creation, in worship, in scriptures, in prayers, even in culture. This means if we are watching a movie or TV show and are suddenly struck by something a character said as being of God, we may be encountering wisdom. One writer described wisdom as something we cannot attain but can only pursue. He said pursuing wisdom is like falling in love; it requires work and study and community support all our lives. It might help us to think of wisdom as something we practice, practice listening to and for.

When I started this sermon, maybe you were someone who couldn't remember having a Philp in your life. Maybe my illustration turned out to be a painful experience for you; and if it was please accept my apology because it was not my intent to cause hurt or pain or expose a hurtful wound. Perhaps, if you reflect, there may be other ways you have experienced the Holy Presence in your life, even if you didn't have a Philip to help you recognize it. It doesn't have to be a person; it might be words to a song, or something in nature, or part of a movie or TV show. God loves you so much God will use any and every way possible to speak to you, even if you don't recognize it.

One way we as a community can embody the Body of Christ is to listen to each other when we describe our experiences of God's Presence, whether it is in Holy Communion, a hymn, in the cherry blossoms or a TV show and share in each other's joy at recognizing an opportunity to grow closer to God and each other. In this way, together, we can practice the pursuit of wisdom; of recognizing the Holy in our midst and following when the Spirit calls us to new ministry or new encounter or to continue to grow a current ministry. That is how we can continue in our spiritual growth into God's dream for us as individuals and as parish.

For the Philips in our lives, in each moment when God is Present, and the moments Holy Wisdom opens for us deeper relationship with God and each other we can this day and every day say, alleluia.