

“Following God Wherever”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Acts 8: 26-40

I tend to be someone who likes routine, who finds comfort in schedules, who appreciates having a list and crossing things off of it. That’s just how I’m wired. Perhaps you are wired in a similar way. I know that there are other people who function in different ways, who are creative and spontaneous and who find joy in not having a list. Us list-minded, comfort-in-schedules folks still love you free-spirited folks as fellow children of God. But to be honest, you all are exhausting for us! I think you would say the same about us, wouldn’t you?

I think I find comfort and peace in schedules and lists because I value time in such a different way than I did a few years ago. I recognize that time is fleeting – for instance, in five years we will have no children at home. I live each day of each week of each month with a greater sense of being present in the moment. And I want to make sure I use my time in the most efficient way possible. That is why it’s helpful for me to have a routine at work where I dedicate certain hours of the week in the office for writing, for communication, for administration. Then, I’m free the remaining hours of the week for visits, for networking with others, for serving in ministry. And by having some boundaries on when I work, such as a dedicated Sabbath day on Wednesday each week, I am freer to spend quality time with my family and friends.

My personality type doesn’t always fit well with the vocation I’ve been called to serve in. There are times when I have to lay aside my expectations of how my day would go when I woke up in the morning. I’ll get a phone call that a member of the church has been taken to the hospital. I get word that someone has died and the family asks if I can meet with them later on that day. Someone walks in the office and is facing a crisis, and needs a listening ear.

Just last week, Harlan Rolfson came into the office holding a cloth over his eye – he had had an accident out by the barn and needed someone to take him to the doctor. In that moment, I didn’t think, “Now what about the list of items I had scheduled to do this afternoon.” I jumped up, got in the car, and got him to the doctor. He’s doing fine and is expected to recover completely, for which I and Don Charboneau are grateful! But all of these are reminders to me that despite my preference for routine and schedules, I have to be open to what God might do in the midst of unplanned and spontaneous experiences, and follow God wherever.

I have always appreciated this story from the Book of Acts, because it has been my personal reminder that I should never predict how God might

use me or someone else to share the good news of the gospel. When Philip woke up one morning, he didn't know what the day would bring. He had just been preaching in Samaria, and we read earlier in chapter 8 that it was through his preaching and baptizing of believers "that Samaria had accepted the word of God" (8:14). Philip was one of the original seven deacons (Acts 6:1-7), having been charged at that time to serve the widows and hungry in need. Now, his vocation had taken him from waiting on tables, to preaching the gospel and baptizing new believers. If he had had a "to-do list" to start this day, it likely was thrown out the window when the angel of the Lord appeared to him.

"Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza" (8:26). This was the angel's command to Philip. "So he got up and went" - probably based on the trust in God he had developed from his recent experience in Samaria. It was a road to nowhere - a "wilderness road" - but that didn't stop Philip. And when he went down the road a bit, he encountered someone very different than himself. "Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury" (8:27). This foreigner was sitting in his chariot, reading of all things, the prophet Isaiah. It must have been a strange scene. But it was a scene in which God was actively working.

The Spirit gives direction again to Philip: "Go over to this chariot and join it" (8:29). Philip doesn't meander over to the eunuch; "So Philip ran up to it." He doesn't see this encounter as something to fear - he views it as an opportunity to serve God, and he approaches this moment with vigor and excitement, even in his physical response. Philip then asks the stranger if he understands what he is reading, to which the Ethiopian says, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" (8:31). And with that, the one who the world might view with skeptical, condescending eyes is mentored in the faith by one of God's own servants.

Philip interprets the passage from Isaiah 53 for the eunuch, and helps him realize that it is Jesus Christ who is "the sheep led to the slaughter . . . for his life is taken away from the earth" (8:32-33). That knowledge spurs the Ethiopian to believe, and he is baptized by Philip with water that is found along the roadside. God acts in a way that is profound, immediate, and transformative. And it is comparatively short: "When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more" (8:39). Was the eunuch's newfound faith totally dependent on his guide? No - for the Ethiopian "went on his way rejoicing," and likely lived the rest of his earthly life as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. It was a brief moment in both men's lives. But it was a moment that God initiated, and both were receptive to the Spirit's leading, guidance, and teaching.

We might read this story and say, "Come on - when is God going to use me to share the gospel like this?" That reaction might reflect a great deal about how we tend to keep our lives as orderly as possible, so that we aren't put in such a situation as Philip. We work hard at keeping things in clear,

unambiguous categories, and we don't want to do something that might upend our perception of reality. We don't try something new, spend our time in a different way, or share what we really believe with others, because that might disrupt our schedule, change our perception, or even worse – make us realize that God has something different in store for us. We might say, “I really don't have the gifts for sharing the good news with a stranger.” But my guess is that what we really want to say is, “I don't want to take that risk for fear of someone rejecting me or causing me pain.”

Raise your hand if, after your first visit to this church, you came back because you were made to feel welcome. Nearly everyone here – how about that. How did that happen? It likely happened because someone greeted you at the door, or handed you a bulletin as you came in the sanctuary, and told you how glad they were that you were here. That would make you want to come back, wouldn't it? It probably did.

Then why are we so hesitant to serve as an usher or greeter for worship services at John Knox? There are a dedicated few who do this important task – frankly what I consider to be the most influential job every Sunday at church. Does that mean only a few feel that welcoming others in an intentional way is important? I doubt it. But perhaps we have forgotten how we are all called to assist in this way. Either we assume someone else will do that task better than us, or we don't want break up our set routine.

On average, we have around 100-110 adults here on a Sunday morning between our two worship services. If those adults served only four Sundays each year, then all Sundays would be covered to usher and greet people in worship at John Knox. Four Sundays a year. That's not too much, is it? Could that perhaps be a way to follow God wherever you are being led? Perhaps, in the process, you will show others the same grace, welcome and hospitality that Philip showed to the Ethiopian eunuch.

As mentioned earlier in the service, we've included the inserts we distributed last Sunday for the Sheep-Shepherd Luncheon in your bulletins today. They are entitled “Feeling Welcomed,” and I'd ask you to take a few moments this morning and fill them out, and either place them in the offering plates or in the basket in the main hallway. Tell us the story of who welcomed you at John Knox, and how that has influenced your faith. And then consider if that is something you can do now to “pay it forward,” as it were. Sure it might be out of your comfort zone. But maybe that's exactly what God is calling you to do!

Thanks be to God for servants like Philip, who remind us to follow God wherever God needs us, so that all might come to know that Jesus Christ is Lord. Amen.