

“Learning Discipleship from the Disciples”

Philip: A Deliberate Disciple

John 14:8-14

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In all the New Testament lists of the apostles, Philip appears fifth. After the two pairs of brothers, Peter and Andrew, James and John, comes Philip. He heads a group of four disciples. Always the same four, though they're sometimes in different order—yet Philip is always the first listed in this group. There are Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, and Matthew. There's another “Philip” in Acts, who was a deacon and an evangelist. It's easy to confuse him with the apostle, but he's a different character and we need to keep that straight.

The apostle Philip was from Bethsaida, on the north shore of Lake Galilee—the same town Peter and Andrew were originally from (John 1:44). That region tended to be more open to outside influences through business and trade. This may account for Philip's Greek name.

But, like the other disciples, and Jesus himself, Philip was a Jew who was steeped in the Scriptures and the traditions of Israel. He was another who followed John the Baptist until John announced that Jesus is the Lamb of God. Along with Andrew, Philip began to follow Jesus, who asked, “What are you looking for?” When they asked where Jesus was staying, he said, “Come and see.” And they stayed with Jesus that day. Andrew went to his brother Simon and told him, “We have found the Messiah.”

The next day, as Jesus was leaving for Galilee, he found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” The first thing Philip did was find Nathanael and tell him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” When Nathanael questioned whether anything good could come from Nazareth, Philip said, “Come and see” (Jn 1:35-46).

Some of the books and sermons I'm using to learn about the disciples describe Philip as deliberate or cautious. They see him as someone who thinks things through and gets all the facts before deciding or taking action. One writer, that I really like, even seems a little critical of Philip

(Kalas, *The Thirteen Apostles* 37-39). As I read his chapter on Philip, I found myself wanting to defend Philip. I identify with Philip in some ways. Maybe you do too.

One bit of evidence for Philip's being slow and deliberate is how he describes Jesus to Nathanael. Contrasted with Andrew's, "We have found the Messiah!" this is a detailed description and may be bit too wordy. "The Law" is a way of saying what Moses wrote, so you wouldn't have to say, "What Moses wrote in the Law." He tells where Jesus is from and who his family is. But maybe Andrew knew Simon wouldn't listen to a lengthy description—he had to speak quickly and to the point. And maybe Philip knew that Nathanael needed more information, so he went into more detail.

Our presentations of the gospel are not "one size fits all." There is basic information we need to communicate. But how we communicate it varies with our personality, the personality of the person we're sharing with, what's going on in their life, along with various factors.

When Nathanael asks, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Philip doesn't argue with him. I doubt that very many people are won to Christ through arguing. Instead, Philip gives an invitation—the same one he had heard from Jesus—"come and see." Let me show you who Jesus is. Let me demonstrate what following him looks like. You don't have to argue with people. You don't have to have an answer to every question they ask. But showing that you care if they find an answer can be part of your witness.

"Come and see" doesn't mean that we just sit back and wait for people to come to us. "They know the church is here and they can come if they want." In another town, I once did an experiment. I went to three different convenience stores and asked how to get to the United Methodist church. No one could tell me. What do you think would happen if we tried that in Durant? People may know there's a church here, but a lot of them don't know who we are or what we're about. We can't assume that any unchurched person knows anything about our church. We don't manipulate or coerce people, but we go to them with the invitation. We let the

invitation arise where we are, in conversations with people. And it becomes, "Come *with me* and see."

We mentioned this when we talked about Andrew, but notice the relationships through which the good news of Jesus is spread. The good news travels best along the networks of our relationships. If we're not motivated by love, if we're not sharing Christ's life in our relationships, then church programs and buildings and such won't matter much. But if we invest ourselves in people, we will see a return for the kingdom of God.

My older brother Steve is a United Methodist pastor in Kansas City. He told me that one day he was at the Y getting ready to work out. He noticed a man there that he had seen before, but had never spoken to. This man was looking at Steve and finally said, "Are you a pastor?" Steve told him that he was. The man said, "You look like a pastor." I'm not sure what that means. It reminds me of the old joke where someone asks a man if he's a pastor and he says, "No, I've just been ill for a few days." Well, when the man told my brother he looked like a pastor, Steve said, "I don't get that much." The man said it was a compliment. Steve asked him where he lived and he told him. He asked if he went to church and the man said no. Steve asked, "What do you do on Christmas?" "Nothing." So he invited him to come to a Christmas Eve service. The man ended the conversation with, "I need some guidance."

There's no conclusion to that story yet. Steve knows the man's name and is aware that he's from another country. It's not a dramatic "winning the guy to Christ" story, but it is a "come and see" story. And, after hearing that story, a woman in Steve's church was moved to invite a co-worker to a Christmas Eve service. It doesn't always have to be big and dramatic. We just have to be willing to talk with people and mostly listen to them and take a chance on inviting them to check out the church or check out faith in Jesus.

Do you know anyone who needs to meet Jesus? Is there someone with whom you can share the invitation "come and see"? If we're going to be disciples of Jesus, we need to be helping others come to him and start following him for themselves. And if we really love people, we will want

them to find what we have found in Jesus, to experience the love and grace and peace and purpose and meaning and adventure of following Jesus.

Philip shows us one way to do that. And he encourages those of us who may be a little slower to step and out speak with people, who want to gather information and explain it carefully. The church needs both Andrew's exclamatory enthusiasm and Philip's cautious precision (Kalas, 39).

We see that caution and deliberation in another scene in John's Gospel (6:1-7). Jesus and the disciples have gone across the Sea of Galilee. A great crowd has followed them because they've seen some of Jesus' miracles. So Jesus sits on the hillside and teaches the crowd. Then Jesus asks *Philip*, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" Maybe Jesus knows that Philip won't give a pious, pat answer: "Everything is possible for you, Lord." Or an overly pessimistic one: "Let's just get out of here as fast as we can." It says Jesus was testing Philip. Maybe he wanted to see how he would respond.

And Philip says, "This is a huge crowd. Even if we had eight months' wages, we couldn't buy enough bread for every person to have just a bite!" Philip calculates the need, but he doesn't factor in the resources they have in the power of Jesus.

This cautious and calculating statement by Philip is another reason some see him as slow and deliberate. He wants the whole story and all the facts so he can decide what to do. This reminds me of a man I knew that someone described by saying, "If you ask him what time it is, he'll tell you how to build a clock!"

Frustrating as it can be to those who want to get with it and get the job done right away, we need some people like Philip who pay attention to details and count the cost. Those who are like Philip also need to realize that we can't keep gathering data forever. We can get paralyzed into inaction by our constant calculating.

A geologist studying the strata of rock under St. Paul's Cathedral in London reported that the church building is moving down Fleet Street at the rate of one inch every 1,000 years. Someone reading the report said, "The church ought to move faster than that" (Gnanaraj Kore, "How Can the

Church Grow?" *Ministry*, Feb 2001 23, in *Homiletics*, Jan 2002 29). There's a time for action and movement as well as planning and study.

Let's move on to another scene that features Philip (Jn 12:20-33). After Jesus enters Jerusalem to the acclaim of the crowd, some Greeks who had come for Passover approach Philip. John again mentions that Philip was from Bethsaida in Galilee. Philip is one of the few disciples with a Greek name and, being from Bethsaida, he may have had Gentile trade contacts, because it was near predominantly Gentile cities (Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary New Testament*). Philip may have spoken Greek, so it would be natural for this group to approach him with their request: "We would like to see Jesus."

Here's cautious, deliberate Philip again. Instead of going directly to Jesus and telling him about this, he tells Andrew. Maybe he didn't know if it was proper to bring a group of Gentiles to see Jesus. Maybe he wanted a "second opinion." Like some of us, he may have wanted to do "further research" before taking a step like this.

But, with Andrew's affirmation and encouragement, Philip goes with him to tell Jesus. This gives Jesus an opportunity to talk about his impending death as being like a seed planted that produces a great harvest. Followers of Jesus give themselves away, die to themselves so they can live and bear kingdom fruit. Whoever serves Jesus must follow him. Where Jesus is, that's where his servants will be. And the Father will honor whoever serves Jesus.

Then Jesus prays. Should he ask to be delivered from his hour, his time of suffering? No, he declares, he will fulfill his purpose. Then he asks that God be glorified. And God speaks from heaven about the glory of his name. The listening crowd thought they heard thunder, or maybe an angel's voice.

Then Jesus talks about his death judging the world and driving out the prince of the world (that is, the devil). Finally addressing the foreigners Philip and Andrew brought to him, he says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." Jesus, lifted on the cross, powerfully attracts everyone. Do you feel that magnetic pull of Jesus? Will you resist it or give in to it and be drawn to him? Jesus is lifted up in

crucifixion, in resurrection, in exaltation. We lift him up in our witness and he draws people to himself. It's not our power or persuasion that brings people to Christ, but we are a means of grace God uses to draw people in.

Let's move on to the final scene that features Philip (Jn 14:8-14). In the upper room, Jesus has washed the disciples' feet, he's predicted one of them will betray him, he's said that he's going away. Peter interrupts Jesus with a question. After Jesus answers him, Thomas has question. Jesus talks about being the way to the Father and how the disciples know the Father and have seen him.

Now Philip has a request. He says, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." There's nothing wrong with that request. It's consistent with Philip's need for as much information as possible. Kenneth Wyatt says that in his portrait of Philip he wanted to capture him at this moment (*The Apostles* 22) of questioning, almost challenging, Jesus. What Philip says here opens the door for one of Jesus' most stirring statements.

We want to know God. We have a hunger to know God because we are made to know God and live in right relationship with God. We see this in St. Augustine's famous prayer: "...you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you" (*Confessions* Book 1, sec. 1). "Show us the Father." If we could just see God, that would be enough.

A. W. Tozer wrote, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us" (*The Knowledge of the Holy* 1). What is God like? That's one of our great questions. It's one thing to know *about* God, to say the right "God-words." That's important, but what's vital is knowing God, being in relationship with God.

The next big question after, "What is God like?" is, "Where did you get that idea?" We tend to collect various images and ideas about God from our experience, our family, what people say, maybe a few snippets of Scripture. We put all that together and that's our idea of God. But it may not always be accurate—and Philip would want us to be accurate. J. B. Phillips wrote a little book that's become a classic: *Your God Is too Small*. He addresses our destructive images of God, those inadequate ways of thinking about God that we pick up in various ways and places. Then he

goes on to describe constructive ways of thinking about God that center on Jesus.

Jesus says, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus and believe. Jesus is God's picture of himself. Jesus is God with us.

The words of Jesus are the Father's words. The work Jesus does is the Father's work. And, Jesus says, you who are my followers will keep doing the works of God and in even greater ways than I have done. When Jesus says we will do greater works, he's talking about the wider scope of what we do. No longer limited to one location, the works of God can be done by all of God's people everywhere.

Experiencing those works involves prayer. Jesus makes an amazing promise here. "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it." That has to mean more than just tacking "in the name of Jesus" onto whatever request we have, however selfish or foolish it is. To pray in the name of Jesus is to pray according to the character and nature of Jesus. It's to pray the kind of prayer Jesus could pray. We're asking God to filter our prayers through Jesus and we're seeking God's glory. Even given that, there's a lot more available to us than we are usually willing to ask for.

There's a lot about Philip that I like and respond to. If Philip is deliberate, that can mean cautious and slow to move. But deliberate can also mean intentional. We are not accidental disciples. We intend to follow Jesus and witness and serve. Let's join Philip in following Jesus intentionally and then in finding someone we can go to with the invitation to come and see Jesus. Let's be willing to count the cost, but with the awareness that God has resources beyond what we can see. Let's be available to help all kinds of people who want to see Jesus and know him. Let's realize that in Jesus we know God and we can experience God in mighty ways as we pray in the power of the Holy Spirit through Jesus who shows us the Father.