

“Washing Away and Receiving”

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When we read the Bible it is so important that we put it in its context. This is one of the shortest passages of all the Lectionary and if you just read these three verses, you would think that this story is about Peter and John – but it is really not. It is about someone else entirely. It is about the Apostle Phillip, and you have to read a chapter or two before, leading up to it and a little bit past it, to find out what the real meaning is.

So when we read our Bible we don't ever try to read just a verse or a couple of verses, because inevitably it is out of context. You read that chapter, or two, to put it into its *proper* context. Also, when we read the Bible, we read it understanding that these are stories of human beings – they are not about angelic figures – they are not even about Apostles, as much as they are about human beings like you and me. The best way to read the Bible then, is to put ourselves into the shoes, or in this case the sandals, of the people in the Scriptures themselves.

So today rather than give you some sermon about something else, I would like to explain the story that comes from Acts, chapter 8. It is about a man named Phillip. And, Phillip is an Apostle, but he started out as an Apostle, not of Jesus – but an Apostle of John the Baptist.

Phillip wanted to feel God more meaningfully and, like so many others, he went out into the wilderness to find John, who was baptizing for the forgiveness of sin – that maybe God would reside there. Well, he gets there, he is moved by John; but then he experiences Jesus' baptism and he realizes that John the Baptist is not the answer, but is just leading us to the answer. So, he [Phillip] follows Jesus and becomes an Apostle. He even talks to Jesus when Jesus confronts him and says, “Join me.”

Phillip was the one who said, “But I need to go bury my father first.” Do you remember that story?

Phillip was so enamored with Jesus, and the truth and the light that Jesus offered, that he proclaimed the Gospel himself to Nathaniel, and Nathaniel came to the faith, and became one of the 12 Apostles. That was the impact that he made.

Now, Phillip wasn't perfect. He was the one who, when Jesus was feeding the five thousand, said, “I'm worried about the expenses.” He was more worried about how they were going to pay for it than what Jesus was able to do miraculously. As I tell the story that will become more ironic; because Phillip is the one who performs more miraculous deeds than just about any Apostle – any one of the twelve.

Jerusalem was becoming a dangerous place. This was very early on that this story happens. Stephen had just been stoned to death. He had been imprisoned and murdered for his faith. Everyone was scared. All still, Saul – who would become the Apostle Paul – Saul was still persecuting the Christians. He hadn't even come to his Damascus-Road experience when this passage was described. And here was Phillip, in fear for his life.

They gathered together in that church in Jerusalem and they decided who and where they would go and what they would do. And he – Phillip – who had done so much for the Church, so much for this new fledgling faith, was told he should go to the Samaritans in Samaria.

Now that was about the worst place in the world to go. That would be like being told to go to Grand Forks, North Dakota. [Laughter.] It was by far the most gosh-awful place in the world. OK, maybe Minot, North Dakota. [Laughter.] (Both places, by the way, I have lived.) It was the worst place because the Samaritans were hated by the Jews. *Hated*.

It all began with the frustration that they were the same people. The Samaritans were people who were involved and part of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. But then, all of a sudden, there was this incredible fear and overthrow of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians in 722 BCE and the Samaritans fled. They moved south and with them they took they took the sanctuary of God, and that created an uproar.

The Jewish people believed it should stay where it was, even though the Assyrians were knocking on the door, and the Samaritans moved the sanctuary of God to Samaria, and the Jews never forgave them. They hated them ever since.

That type of prejudice was hard to beat. And, that is why we tell the story of the Good Samaritan was such irony, because they were such hated people.

Yet, what in the world did Phillip do? He went to the most hated people and he proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus. And, he did it in such a way that he was one of the first to show miraculous signs from God. He showed miracles. He performed healings and exorcisms to free everyone from what bound them to this earthly world. People came to him in droves and, yet, it wasn't all easy. Not only did Phillip have to proclaim a Gospel and overcome his own prejudice to love these people, to see them as one of his own, but he was up against a lot of pressure, because Phillip was having to face a man named Simon Magus, and Simon Magus – meaning magician – was also showing miraculous works: magic. He, too, had a following that was even bigger – and he was a Samaritan.

So, the people of Samaria were more inclined to follow Simon – and Simon watched Phillip. Simon knew his magic was, you know, “behind the back.” He knew the tricks. But he couldn't figure out Phillip's tricks. How was Phillip doing these amazing things, these healings, these exorcisms? And, he didn't have anyone faking him. He didn't have a card under his sleeve. He [Simon] couldn't figure it out. So he and the rest of Simon's entourage – his disciples – followed Phillip everywhere he went in Samaria, trying to figure out what his trick was.

Finally, one day Phillip turned to Simon and said, “There is no trick. You can stop following me to find that out. You, you are doing miraculous deeds in your own name – through your own trickery – and you are brilliant at it; but I can do so much more – not because of what I can do – but of what God can do through me. It is only God who can do those miraculous things. I'm just the instrument of that healing.”

All of a sudden it hit Simon: That this isn't a trick – that something greater than himself is doing this amazing work. And, all of a sudden, Simon – the magician – the one who had so much power and prestige, just days and weeks before, fell on his knees. Each of his [Simon's] disciples looked around and got down on theirs and said, "Phillip, baptize me. I want what you have. I don't want to have to rely on myself anymore. I want what you have. I want God in my life."

So Phillip baptized him – immersed him in the name of Jesus Christ. Each disciple of Simon after him came forward, and they were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, over and over. Dozens and dozens, if not hundreds, came forward. All of Samaria was changed, because their greatest wise man was not wise in comparison to this Jew, who talked about another Jew named Jesus, who knew a Messiah from the same God they had worshiped so long ago.

Now, word got out all the way back to Jerusalem. Peter and John were the lucky ones. They had the plum job. They were at the national cathedral of the known world, at that time, in Jerusalem. The Jewish people were not coming to Peter and John and the Jerusalem church in droves, in part, because if you did you took a chance, you would end up like Steven and get stoned to death – but also because the Jewish people, in part, were not willing to accept Jesus as their Messiah.

And yet, Peter and John, in their arrogance, came down to check out what was going on in this back water of Samaria. Now, if Phillip was full of pride he would have copped an attitude and said, "You send me. You are up there in Jerusalem on your high and mighty post. You're not baptizing dozens and hundreds at a time and, yet, you come down here and you tell me how to do my job?" But Phillip didn't do that. Phillip really believed and again showed Simon and his disciples what it meant to be a Christian: to be humble enough to say, "OK, you want to see? Come look. I have nothing to hide."

Peter and John were so impressed with Phillip. They watched the faith of these people and realized that they were not heretics – realized they were not evil people – they were just like you and me. They said, "Just one thing, Phillip. You are baptizing them in the name of Jesus, and that is beautiful – but you need to allow them to receive the Holy Spirit. Baptize them in the name of Jesus and in the name of the Holy Spirit."

Now, some people say that the Trinity is not true, because the word "Trinity" does not once appear in the Bible. It's true. But, this is one of those defining moments when the Trinity is developing into a core understanding. Just because the word isn't shared in the Bible doesn't mean that the concept isn't in the Bible, and this is one of those moments where Christianity becomes not just one God, but three persons of that Trinity: Father; the Son, who has already been baptized, used for baptism; and, the Holy Spirit, which is now being instituted.

Now, from that moment, did we go from baptizing in Jesus' name, to baptizing in the Holy Spirit's name – to baptizing in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. And now, the Samaritans were filled with the Spirit and they continued to share that Gospel to and fro, all over.

Now, I tell you that story, not so you'll understand how the Trinity developed, but even more importantly, for how we are to respond in the midst of our own struggle and adversity. We can learn a great deal from Phillip:

One: Our religion, our faith, the way we look at each other as human beings is learned – is understood – by the way Phillip responded. When we look at other human beings, we don't look at them as "the other." Believe me, if they could have built a wall between Israel and Samaria they would have done it, but that is not what Jesus would have wanted. Jesus wanted the Samaritans and the Jews to become one people, and you can't do that when there is a dividing wall. So he brought them together as one; saw them as people just like them, and they were peaceful from that time for generations after – where they had not been peaceful before that.

Two: If Phillip had been arrogant, or if Peter and John had been snobbish, it never would have worked. It took humility to listen, to tread lightly and to really work at not hurting the other one's feelings, in order for both sides to be heard and for the work of God to occur, and for the Spirit to move.

Finally, we have to trust that the Spirit of God is still miraculously at work in our lives; if Phillip could have been tortured and killed, had he not believed that God would do something miraculous, to allow the ministry to continue to thrive and grow. And, today, many, many churches – in fact, perhaps most of Christendom – struggles with the belief that we can do anything except continue to decline and die. But we must truly believe that the Holy Spirit is continually at work allowing us to grow, develop in our own faith and to share that faith with others in a way that will allow people – even heathen people like Simon – to fall on their knees.

You know, I would much rather preach the Gospel to somebody who has never had any faith, than somebody who claims to have faith, but is doing it in an outlandish way.

I have struggled my entire ministry with Jim Bakker. I was in my first church – I was 25 years old – and I'm preaching, and I have a woman in the second from the back row stand up and call me a hypocrite, because I am not following the example of Jim Bakker's television ministry. Now, at 25 years old, and probably my second or third sermon I had ever given this little town in northern Wisconsin, and I had to figure out what I was going to say to that woman. I knew what I wanted to say to that woman [laughter], but I didn't.

Not a year later, she was in my office asking for money because she had given it all to Jim Bakker, and she had nothing left to pay her taxes on the home that she had on the lake.

Jim Bakker ended up having a sex scandal and – more importantly – he defrauded his own flock of \$158 million. Ouch. For the past 15 years after he got out of prison, Jim Bakker has started another community. He started this place called "Morningside," in Blue Eye, Missouri. He is gathering his flock and you can buy a condo, you can buy a stand-alone home, you can buy a cabin, and you can be there when God comes again – because Armageddon is going to happen to this world; and, we are all going to die of radiation poisoning and destruction of this world. But, God will protect Morningside first, so if you buy a place there, you will be safe. But you also need to buy the bottled water, because the bottled water is like baptismal holy water, and it also has the spiritual saving power, so that

radiation will not affect you. And, it's only \$150.00 a bottle for a limited time, by midnight tonight.

That is much harder to preach to, than somebody who has never heard the faith, hated the faith, or is questioning the faith.

It was easier for Phillip to proclaim the Gospel because those people could evaluate the truth and the integrity of the faith easier, than charlatans in their own faith.

We need to be praying that the message we share from that Bible (that Jim Bakker holds up each day from his television ministry. How in the world he came back from that?) – and we need to share that [the message from the Bible] – that is our Evangelism; so the world will not think we are him, but that humbly we can offer a baptism that is truly meaningful and life changing.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.