
Joining the Family

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 11 February 2024

2 Kings 5:1-14 • 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 • Mark 1:40-45



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

There is a story in the Bible about Philip, one of the new Christians who were spreading the word about Christ. One day an angel visits him and tells him to travel to a certain road in the desert. He goes, and there he meets an official from the Ethiopian court, who was travelling in his carriage on the way home from Jerusalem. Philip sees him sitting in his carriage, and notices that he's reading the Scriptures — the book of Isaiah. So Philip asks him if he understands what he's reading, and the Ethiopian replies, "How can I understand it, with no one to explain it to me?"

This is the dream of every minister — someone who is hungry for the word of God! So Philip sits down next to him in the carriage, and begins to explain all about God, and Jesus, and the promise of eternal life for those who have been

baptised. He tells him that we are baptised in water, according to Jesus' command.

So as they continue down the road, the Ethiopian notices that they are passing by a lake. He turns to Philip and says, "There is some water! What stops me from being baptised right away!" And so they stop the carriage, get out and Philip baptises the man right then and there.

It's a great story, and a very encouraging one on many levels. First, the Ethiopian is obviously caught by the Spirit. He was led by God initially to start reading what the prophet Isaiah wrote, and when Philip begins to explain things to him, he is eager to hear and learn more. And when the opportunity for baptism comes up, he jumps at it and rejoices that he has joined the family of God, and will receive the promise that Jesus makes of life after death.

Second, we learn from this story that God often arranges things to happen in a certain way. Philip is told to go to the road and the place where the Ethiopian will be passing by. Philip is clearly chosen because of his knowledge, his faith and his obedience to Christ. In going where he is told to go, and doing what he does, he is doing God's work.

And third, we see that worship is a joy. God wants us to be happy and wants to keep us with him in his love and care. The Ethiopian clearly sees that the new life he is entering is a gift of God to him, personally, and it brings him great joy.

I feel something of the same joy when I have the privilege of performing a baptism. I know what it means to live in the love of God, and through me, God is giving that gift to another person. It is a blessing from God to that person. I am just the instrument of that blessing, but it is a service which I feel as a blessing myself. It is a sharing of something good. It is like taking a bite of something delicious, like really rich chocolate ice cream — my favourite — and then turning to a friend and saying, "Try this — it's really good. You'll love it." And then seeing the reaction on your friend's face as they taste how good it is. It's an invitation — my friend could always say, "No thank you," and that would be the end of it. I won't force them to try the ice cream. But if they do, I get the added joy of seeing how much they like it.

And what does this baptism really mean? It means the baptised person has joined the family of God. We speak about that family as if it were a body. Each part of the body is needed and valued: the hands, the legs, the feet, the ears. There is a well-known passage in the Bible speaking about this:

The body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for

that reason stop being part of the body. ... As it is, there are many parts, but one body. (1 Corinthians 12:14-16,20)

So we are all together in one family, one body. We can lean on each other in times of trouble, rejoice with each other in the happy times. And it also means that we all have our different talents. Some people are good at music. Some are good at fixing things. Some are good at teaching others how to do things. All the parts of the body and all the gifts and talents we have work for the good of the whole body, just as your feet, say, help your whole body to move around, and your eyes help your whole body to see where you're going.

The way we celebrate this is to share Communion, which is the eating of the bread and the drinking of the wine. It celebrates the last supper which Jesus had with his friends before he died. They shared a meal to show their love and care for each other. Like any supper, there is an invitation: come and join us. You are all invited — but if you feel you don't wish to take Communion, that's fine too. It's like the ice cream; it's something that we want to share with you.

And the ceremony of baptism also opens up the gift of eternal life. Jesus promises that when we die, he will take us with him personally to our home in heaven. There we will meet with those who have gone before us in a wonderful family reunion. In the Bible it says

God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Revelation 21:3-4)

This is the gift from God for all of us who accept his invitation. So we give thanks that our parents today have accepted that invitation for their boys. Thanks be to God for their love and care of these children. In Jesus' name. Amen.