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When Our Words Don't Seem Enough

(Acts 8:26-39 NRSV) "Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) 27 So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship 28 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." 30 So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 32 Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. 33 In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." 34 The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" 35 Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 36 As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" 37 38 He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing."

"How can I [understand], unless someone guides me?" But Philip, there in the story that we heard from Acts, makes the guiding business look easy, doesn't he? The plot of this story is so neat, so compact; the problem is set up, addressed, and resolved in the space of a few minutes with no ambiguity or complication. But the deck is rather stacked for Philip. First of all, what more receptive and ready audience could be found for an evangelist's message than that of Ethiopian eunuch? He made it easy for Philip to look good. The Ethiopian wasn't just out joyriding but was returning from a religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem – and he's reading his Bible. Moreover, he is a high court official, polished, polite, sophisticated. And if all of that weren't enough, there just happens to be a body of water there beside the road in the middle of the Gaza desert,

which oh-so-conveniently fits with the Ethiopian's desire to be baptized. After I read this story, my first thought is: I sure wish that all my attempts to offer guidance should come so easily and be so successful.

But they don't, do they? The process of speaking a helpful word of guidance just never – at least for me – seems so neat, so clean, so efficient, so quickly effective as this story from Acts portrays it. For all of us have had that experience of having someone say to us in confused tones *"How can I understand unless someone will guide me?"* And haven't we all sometimes confidently answered that cry of need, offering guidance for their perplexity? But then have you ever found – as I have sometimes – that that confident guidance we meant to offer seemed to instead come out as so much meaningless mumble, our words ineffective and even unwelcome? Or, how many of us have stood in a home where death or illness has visited and felt our words turn to mush in our mouths? How many of us have tried to speak a saving word, offer guidance, and it turned out that what was wanted was not a guide at all, but a magician, someone who could magically make all things better?

In George Bernanos' novel, Diary of a Country Priest, there are some lines that express this all-too-common frustration of all of us who sometimes try to guide, to speak the right words, to do the right things in response to human need. Hear what the priest in the novel has to say: *"I know that as I spoke [my] words they came so clumsily, so haltingly as to seem ridiculous. I could scarcely manage to frame the[m] intelligently.... I've done my best, and what's the use?"* That's us sometimes too, isn't it? Too often we may find that our attempts to be Philip – to be guides for the perplexed whose words are exactly what is needed – end up being more like this country priest's. And that is when we turn self-critical: if only I had more polished words, if only I were the right sort of person then maybe my words would be the words that work.

How many of you own a GPS, either in your car or on your smartphone? You know how magic it is to put in a destination and then have a pleasant voice guide you with turn-by-turn directions. And if I ignore that guidance and drive a different way, your GPS recalculates where you are and without any hint of impatience with your unwillingness to follow its directions it then tells you new directions to get there. It doesn't say, "I said turnaround you chowderhead!" More than once I have wished there were a GPS for giving guidance about other things; I wish I had a little GPS that could tell me exactly the right thing to say in any situation, exactly the right words to use, exactly the things to speak that will make me always as effective as Philip was there in the Gaza desert as he so successfully guided that Ethiopian.

But I don't have that kind of GPS, and neither do you. I wish I could get emails and text messages and maybe a Facebook message – or I'd even settle for a Tweet – from God telling me exactly what to do and say, but none of those things ever happen. I wish the **results** of my words always matched up with my good **intentions**, but they don't – and they don't for you either, do they? But in that regard, even if we find it hard to identify with Philip, we can surely identify with the place that he and the Ethiopian were passing through. The story tells us that they were in a wilderness, and the literal translation of this word is "a lonely place." Now here's we **can** identify; we **do** indeed know about lonely places sometimes, don't we? There are days when it seems that all around us things are changing in ways we don't know if we like. All around us it seems that the world is less the Christian realm of God and more the realm of those whose lives are untouched by the gospel. It sometimes seems that more and more of the world around us acts as if the Golden Rule were really written "Do unto others before they do it unto you." We see a world of too much war, too much hunger, too much despair, too much violence and we tend to say "*What can I do? My efforts, my words are just not enough. Even if I wanted to be a good guide I hardly know what to say.*" It

is indeed a lonely feeling.

But my friends, you and I have made a wrong turn here, and while we may not have a GPS to tell us that, it is true we have nonetheless made a mistake in our routing. The mistake we make in considering this story is of Philip and the Ethiopian, is to envy their **human** characteristics and to decide that we can never measure up. Our mistake is the same one that the country priest in Bernanos' novel made when he says *"Somehow I can never quite believe that God will really employ me – to the utmost."* Our mistake is one that it is too easy to make when reading any Bible story, the mistake of thinking that the lesson of every story is that we are to go and emulate and imitate the characters, for when it turns out that our efforts at imitation and emulation go awry we are left thinking that we are failures, that our words aren't and can't be and won't ever be enough.

What we are forgetting, and the wrong turn that we have made, is that we have focused on Philip instead of focusing on God. It was not Philip's circumstances and personal power and charming self that made his guidance of the Ethiopian so successful, it was the **power of God** working through him. It's a power, my friends, that can sometimes infuse our words with God's words. A power that can reach out to those outcast in their despair, or hopelessness, or cynicism, or apathy. To the teenager outcast in loneliness. To the child who feels all alone. To the couple having challenges. To the person in grief because of the death of a loved one. For look again at the story: for all his apparent culture and polish and sophistication, the Ethiopian himself was one who was, for much of the ancient world, outside the pale. An outcast himself. Not only was he from Ethiopia – which any Greek or Roman of the day would tell you was outside the "civilized" world – he was a eunuch – which meant according to the code in Deuteronomy that he could never enter the Temple of the Lord. And yet –

God's power did reach out to him and it was a power that did not depend on the polish or Philip's words. The words may have been Philip's but the power was God's.

And the power of God can do the same with us. Meager and mumbling, stumbling and stammering as they may feel to us sometimes when attempting to say the right thing, to offer good guidance, God can nonetheless use our words to guide people in ways that we would have never thought possible, in ways we never would have expected. We know that it can happen because you and I have been touched by that very same power at the unlikeliest of times by the unlikeliest of messengers.

I remember once, in one of the college philosophy courses that I taught a long time ago, having done what I thought was a spectacularly poor job that evening. I didn't think I had gotten the points across, I thought I had left the students confused, and that I had pretty much wasted their time. And yet, after class, one of the students came up to me and said that what I said had really helped her make some sense of out of things, really helped her in answering some of her questions. She thanked me for my guidance. To this day, though, I have no idea what it was that I said that could have so stimulated and intrigued and guided her that night, but apparently God took my little words that evening and blessed and multiplied them and she was fed, she was guided.

The Bible scholar Leander Keck also relates an incident similar to this. One day, Keck says, the chaplain at the hospital where Keck was doing his student ministry training called on one of the patients who had just been visited by one of the other student chaplains in training. The patient told the chaplain this about the student's visit to him: It *"was almost as if God himself had entered the room."* Now, the chaplain was eager to find out which of the student chaplains had made this tremendous hospital call and to read the student's report of it. He found out that the student chaplain who made the call hadn't even bothered to write it up because the encounter had seemed so utterly ordinary and un-remarkable to him. He had no idea that he had been the vehicle

for the Divine Presence, he had no idea that his little loaf had been blessed by God, blessed so much that a hungry patient was fed, a perplexed patient was guided.

So, my friends, when we are tempted to say *"Lord, my words aren't enough,"* when we are tempted to say *"There's no point, what could I possibly do,"* when we are unsure of our ability to guide anyone, let us remember that God goes with us. Let us remember that whatever we do in the face of human mental, or physical or spiritual need, however little we may think it is, can have tremendous power when it is put at God's disposal with the trust that God will seek to use what we say and do far beyond our meager imaginings. Let us remember that our strength and power as Christians is not the same as the power of the grace of God.

Let me leave us with a challenge for this week. Is there some situation in your life, among your friends, in your family, among your co-workers that you have wanted to speak a word to, that you have wanted to offer guidance for? Are there people in your lives who are in one of those wilderness places, one of those "lonely places"? I would invite you to gently offer your words, gently offer your guidance. First, pray to God that God would use your words well, that God would bless them, that God would enable your words to be the words that were needed. And then offer them. Offer them not with an attitude of any sort of superiority, not with an attitude of any sort of pity, but humbly and yet confidently. Now, let's face it, there are times that for whatever reason, those words won't work. There are times when they will be resented. But those are not the times to focus on and surely not the times to let stop us from continuing to try. Because sometimes the situation, the opportunity is just right and God's power, working through your words, can transform a life. If you don't believe me, think of those times in your life when someone has said to you just the right words, words that startled you, maybe, words that were what you needed, words that the speaker may have had no

idea were so important, so fitting, so powerful. We have all had times like that. And so our opportunity this and every week is to believe and trust in God's power, to believe and trust in God's promise that we can be vessels and vehicles of the divine grace, to believe and trust that God will indeed use us to change lives. May it be so. Amen.