



Unless Someone ...

John 15:1-8 & Acts 8:26-40

Easter 5 - April 28, 2024

Rev. Dr. Martin R. Ankrum

Their names were David and Nancy and they were brother and sister. I met them over 35 years ago as members of a youth group I lead as an Associate Pastor in suburban Detroit. This brother and sister were truly close and very caring towards one another. It wasn't that unusual, but it was endearing enough for me to inquire about their closeness once I got to know them better.

They both, separately, told a story about when they were young, about kindergarten and first grade-aged children. They said that their favorite game back then was something they called: "Can I help you, Buddy?"

The game was simple, they took turns playing the parts; one would ride their big wheel and purposely crash it off the sidewalk and turn it over and then lay on the ground. The other would come along on their big wheel, stop and ask: "Can I help you, Buddy?" Then the one on the ground would say: "Yes, I need your help," and together they would right the over-turned big wheel and start the game over with roles reversed.

Those two teenagers both pointed to this as seminal in explaining why they had always been very close and concerned about each other since. They had learned that they needed to take care of each other and did so even during the more sibling-rivalry period of adolescence and beyond.

In the passage from the book of Acts, Philip, led by the Spirit, encounters this Ethiopian eunuch, one who is on the boundaries of society; not necessarily an outcast by any means, but a person far different than Philip. Despite any cultural or societal differences, Philip is convinced that he can be of help to the man and he helps him.

The eunuch, on his part, is reading scripture and in attempting to understand what he is reading, he realizes that he is need of some guidance, some assistance in order that he might understand. In fact, the exchange between the two went like this:

So Philip ran up to [the chariot] and heard [the Ethiopian eunuch] reading the prophet Isaiah. [Philip] asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, suggests something very important here about scripture: our need for each other in understanding the witness of scripture. In order to understand and comprehend God's Word, we need each other. It appears that simple to me; though we certainly should and do read the Bible for ourselves, we should never think that our comprehension in total isolation from others is the only appropriate interpretation. In order to more fully comprehend the grace of God and the purpose that God has for us, we need each other as guides and helpers along the way. In short, to better understand what we are called to in following Jesus Christ, we need Christ's church.

William Brosend, an American Baptist pastor, wrote about this in an article:

There is something here for church and clergy – the use of the word 'guide' in translation. The Ethiopian did not ask for a teacher, he asked for a guide. There is a big difference. Teachers point and say, 'Go there, do that.' Guides reach and say, 'This is the road I traveled. You might want to try it, but whatever road you choose, I'd like to walk it with you.'

Participation in the life to which God calls us is never, ever an isolating or private event; instead, it is the very thing that takes us from our sin-soaked isolation and throws us into a midst of a band of followers of the Christ. God places us amongst others for good reason in this world!

In an article from the LA Times, shared with me by one of our ruling elders, writer Paul Thornton offers an opinion piece entitled: ‘Grieving without God is one thing. Grieving without God’s people is another.’

Thornton immediately identifies himself as an atheist who has recently lost his beloved Christian mother. He asserts that an atheist can grieve just fine without a conception of God, but he laments that maybe those without a faith are really missing something key about life in a faith community. He discusses the reality of the diminishing role of church in the life of Americans and he offers many valid reasons for our decline, then he says this:

Even amid this secularization, with church attendance dropping about as fast as print newspaper circulation, I found one of the most eager comfort-givers as my mom lay dying to be the pastor of the Lutheran church I hadn’t attended in more than 15 years. In the scramble to plan my mom’s memorial service at the church, the most pleasant, reassuring voices belonged to the women who taught me Sunday school long ago and knew exactly what memories to bring up. It was as if I had never left.

Thornton, appreciative for the guidance and comfort offered by his former church, says all that ended following the memorial service. It ended, because he and his family didn’t live in that community nor did they, of course, attend that church. In effect, he removed himself and his family from the care and help that he had received briefly. It got him thinking about some of the deep issues of life and the place of a faith community’s help in his life.

He continued with this:

About 30 years ago, my grandfather, who put down roots in the church after emigrating from Norway in the 1950s, died in tragic circumstances. Then, it was as if someone had put up the grief bat signal, and a posse of humble Lutheran superheroes sprang into action.

This meant more than just the pastor delivering a service and parishioners politely giving condolences.

It meant being surrounded by people who didn’t have to be told what we were going through — they just knew and tried to make our lives a little easier.

It meant people offering to bring us dinner and help care for my brother and me.

It meant comforting scratches on the back of my neck from a few old ladies in the pews, rare moments of tenderness from people who would normally scowl at kids like me for fidgety behavior during church.

It meant being eased out of our sadness for as long as it took.

This is what the church is called to be about; helping one another, guiding one another and receiving such guidance from those who have traveled this journey of life with God a bit longer or deeper than we may have. I am convinced that this is what happens here at FPC as it does around the world in congregations large and small where people are committed to learn the lessons of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, the lessons of young children like David and Nancy, the lessons of even atheists returning briefly to what they have left behind.

We are not called to resolve each other’s problems completely and succinctly, but rather to be with the one in need for the moment of that need; to serve as guides and to receive guidance from another.

I leave you with a simple little story that I think might say it better than all the words I have expended on this topic this morning:

A little girl got home from visiting her friend later than her mother had expected. When her mother asked the reason for the delay, the child said, ‘I was helping Jane. Her doll broke.’

The mother asked, “Did you help her fix it?”

The child said, “No. I helped her cry.”

May it be the same for us all ...