

SERMON TITLE: "A Summer Road Trip: A Highway to Understanding"
SERMON TEXT: Acts: 8:26-40
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 23, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Every once in a while when I'm watching TV, I hear a quick little advertisement from Steadman's Recreation in Tooele. Speaking mostly to the Salt Lake City population, the pitch man says, "You may think it's 300 miles out here, but it's only 30 miles back."

That line elicits a chuckle out of me every time I hear it. For all of us who have ever lived outside of a big city, we can relate, right? Those who live and work inside the city almost always think the road is shorter going toward them than it is coming toward us. So it helps every once in a while for someone to point out the reality. The road really does go both ways, and the road really is the same length, whichever direction you're headed. Hopefully, the Steadman advertisement's humor helps with the understanding.

During this month of August, we've been taking some summer road trips through the Bible. Since the pandemic has limited our actual travel, we've been checking out the scenery along some scriptural roadways. So far, the prophet Isaiah guided us along a highway to hope, Ruth and Naomi led us on a highway to home, and the Good Samaritan showed us a highway to service. Today, I invite you to join me on a journey along "A Highway to Understanding."

1—A HIGHWAY TO UNDERSTANDING IS A SPIRITUAL ROAD

The first thing we see in this story in Acts 8:26-40 is that a highway to understanding is a spiritual road. Through and through, this story is characterized by divine activity and supernatural influence. In verse 26, an angel of the Lord speaks to Philip, directing him to go down to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Verse 27 tells us about the Ethiopian eunuch who had been to Jerusalem to worship. In verse 28, we learn that the Ethiopian official, seated in his chariot, was reading scripture from the

Jewish prophet Isaiah. In verse 29, the Holy Spirit tells Philip to go over and join up with the chariot. In verses 30-35, Philip explains to the Ethiopian the good news about Jesus. In verses 36-38, the eunuch requests and Philip baptizes him. In verse 39, the Spirit of the Lord puts joy in the Ethiopian's heart and snatches Philip away to another place where he can further proclaim the gospel.

Do you hear all that God activity? Do you hear the deeply spiritual journey the Ethiopian eunuch was on? Do you hear the divine purpose, leading, and guidance in Philip's proclamation of the gospel? This was no secular route. This highway to understanding was a very spiritual experience.

There are some people who think that faith and spirit are the opposite of learning, reason, and understanding. They think that, if you sink yourself into the Bible and Christian faith, you have to deny science and logic, common sense and practical experience. Or, conversely, they think that, if you get too educated, you will have to give up your faith. But we Christians don't have to choose between God and understanding. We can believe in both the big bang *and* God as the creator of the universe. We can know that the earth and its flora and fauna have evolved over billions of years *and still* trust in God as the one who gave birth to all life. In fact, the more we learn about the mysteries of the world around us, the more we can appreciate and praise the God who created heaven and earth. And the more we believe that God's Spirit weaves us all together in one divine tapestry, the more we are able to observe with data and science the intricate connections of cause and effect between everyone and everything. A highway to understanding is absolutely a spiritual road.

2—A HIGHWAY TO UNDERSTANDING IS A WILLING ROAD

We also see in this story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch that a highway to understanding is a willing road. By that, I mean that God's spiritual plans include us, and ask for our cooperation. The Ethiopian eunuch certainly didn't have to travel all the way to Jerusalem to worship God. But he chose to make that very long trip. Just to help us understand, a road trip today between ancient Ethiopia's capital of Meroe and Jerusalem is about 1600 miles. I don't think anyone would make that kind of

journey without a profound motivation. The Ethiopian must have deeply desired to know more about the God of the Jews and their faith. Apparently he chose to purchase what would have been a very expensive handwritten scroll of Isaiah because he wanted to read that scripture. The eunuch eagerly inquired about the meaning of the text he was reading, and he initiated the request to be baptized.

Likewise, Philip didn't have to be a traveling evangelist. He had freedom to choose. But when God's angel and Spirit called him and directed him, Philip went along willingly. In this story, we are able to see the many times when things could have gone another way. What if Philip had not traveled south to the road between Jerusalem and Gaza? What if he had not hustled to walk alongside the Ethiopian's chariot? What if Philip had not engaged in the conversation and taught the official about Jesus? What if he had not agreed to baptize this new believer? Obviously, the result would not have been the same. The Ethiopian wouldn't have gone on his way rejoicing in his newly-discovered Christian faith. And he wouldn't have been able to take Christianity back to his country to teach it to others.

A highway to understanding requires our cooperation, participation, and a desire to be involved. This truth about the highway to understanding makes me think of that chorus, "I have decided to follow Jesus . . . no turning back, no turning back"¹—and another song: "Where he leads me I will follow . . . I'll go with him, with him all the way."² A highway to understanding is a willing road.

3—A HIGHWAY TO UNDERSTANDING IS A CHALLENGING ROAD

If anyone thinks these spiritual choices were easy, let's pause here just a moment to acknowledge that a highway to understanding is also a challenging road. What God's Spirit was asking of Philip and the Ethiopian didn't come naturally for either one of them. Besides the great geographical distance they both traveled, there were also national, cultural, and religious differences between the Jewish-Christian Philip and the Ethiopian official. Other barriers included their primary language, educational level, and socio-economic class. We don't know much about Philip, but chances are pretty good that he was just an average guy who hadn't held any high offices and who did his low-budget

traveling on foot. In other words, the two were unlikely conversation partners, who were stretched beyond their comfort zones to allow this opportunity for understanding to occur.

There was another challenging factor on this particular highway to understanding. You can't help but notice that the Ethiopian is described as a eunuch. That detail is in this story for a reason. In some Middle Eastern societies, castration was required of those men who worked around a queen, in order to ensure that the royal blood line wouldn't be contaminated. Sometimes those servants of the crown were castrated at a young enough age that their gender identity may not have clearly developed.

In Jewish practice of that time, eunuchs were considered—like the lame and the blind—to have a physical defect that prevented them from worshiping in the holy part of the temple. That's one of the reasons why the Christian faith was embraced by so many. As Jesus, his disciples, and later Christian missionaries went around healing people and offering mercy to the misfits, they removed roadblocks to salvation for folks who had long been excluded. The Christian movement made it possible for all kinds of people who had been condemned as outcasts to participate in the blessings of God.

In fact, the purpose of the Isaiah quotation, as it's used here in Acts 8, is to help us readers connect the humiliated lamb described by Isaiah not only to the crucified Jesus, but also to the humiliated Ethiopian eunuch who had traveled 1600 miles to worship God at the Jewish temple, only to discover that he was prohibited from going into the inner courts. Now he could breathe a sigh of relief that he was in good company with Jesus, who had also been unjustly humiliated and condemned, and yet had been vindicated by God's resurrection power. The fact that Philip baptized the Ethiopian meant that Philip was willing to accept the challenge. He was willing to stretch the community of Christians to include this very different person and signal that all kinds of outsiders would now be welcomed in.

This past week has been the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage in the United States. One of the bits of news coverage noted that Susan B. Anthony cast a ballot even when it was still illegal for a woman to do so. The local polling authorities didn't stop her, but she was later arrested, convicted, and

fined for breaking the law. Now, 100 years later, we hail Susan B. Anthony's heroism and determination because of our widespread understanding of a woman's right to vote.

I guess the question for us is, how we can rise to the challenges of understanding we face today? Will we, like the Ethiopian official, be willing to humbly seek help in better understanding scripture and its affirmation of God's love and mercy for all people? I hope so! Will we, like Philip, be willing to engage with folks who are different from us in race, religion, language, socio-economic class, and sexual orientation--so that we can share our understanding of the good news of Jesus? I hope so! Like a song in our newest United Methodist hymnal suggests, the challenge is to "draw the circle wide [so that] no one stands alone."³ Whatever our need to stretch, the highway to understanding is a challenging road.

CONCLUSION

I want to conclude this sermon by talking about one of our church members. Linda and her husband Steve were recently in an accident on a highway in eastern Oregon. With the pickup and their brand new trailer totaled, with Linda's physical injuries, and with the emotional wear and tear to both of them—it wouldn't be unexpected to hear some complaining of "Why me, Lord?" Instead, from the moment the accident was over, Linda has only been on the highway to understanding. After calling 911 and their daughter, the next call was to me, seeking prayers and *spiritual* support. The second thing I heard from Linda was her gratitude to God that their daughter's family had just moved in with them and now would be more than *willing* to help with all kinds of chores. And Linda wanted others to know that their pets survived the accident because they were in kennels inside the trailer. Linda's *challenge* to all pet owners is to keep them safely restrained inside a vehicle. A spiritual road. A willing road. A challenging road. Those are good descriptions of a highway to understanding.

¹Anonymous, "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus," *The Faith We Sing* #2129. ²E.W. Blandy, 1890, "Where He Leads Me," *UMH* #338.

³Lyrics by Gordon Light, "Draw the Circle Wide," c. 2008 Common Cup Company, admin. by The Copyright Company, *W&S* #3154.