

## **“Philip: Willing Servant of the Lord”**

Liturgical Date: Commemoration of Philip, Deacon and Evangelist (Oct. 11)

Primary Texts: Acts 6:1-7, Acts 8:26-40

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary texts for today, the Commemoration of Philip, are the two readings from Acts 6 and 8. The title of today’s sermon is “Philip: Willing Servant of the Lord”. PHILIP WAS A SPIRIT FILLED SERVANT OF JESUS WILLING TO FULFIL THE MINISTRIES HE WAS CALLED TO IN A VARIETY OF LOCATIONS.

Today we observe one of the optional commemoration days on the Church Calendar. On certain days we remember great men and women of God who answered the Lord’s call to serve Him. We don’t pray to them, venerate them in a mystical way, or see them as having any special powers to grant favors. However, we do look to them as great examples of the Christian faith and life that we can learn from. The ministry of Philip fits very well with our theme for today which is spreading the Word of God.

The first thing to know about the Philip that we remember today is that this is not the same Philip that was one of the 12 Disciples/Apostles who has a separate feast day (shared with St. James) on May 1. The Philip that you will hear about today was an early convert to Jesus Christ in Jerusalem. He served as a deacon in administering the Church as well as a powerful evangelist in several regions. He faithfully served in good times and tough times. God worked through him to touch many people and save many souls, even playing a role in bringing the Gospel to the continent of Africa.

We are introduced to Philip in Acts Chapter 6 during a time of great growth for the young Church of Jesus Christ. However, this growth also

came with some troubles. Verse 1 of Chapter 6 told us that “*the number of disciples was multiplied*”, but there “*arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews.*” When you read the New Testament you see many cases where there was tension between factions of the Church that were Hebrew (Jewish) in culture and those that were Hellenist (Greek). In this case the Greek Christians were upset that their widows were not being cared for as the Hebrew widow were. The Church was growing rapidly, and as often happens when something grows fast, there can be problems with administration-even if the intentions are good. The 12 Apostles did what any good church would do-they held a meeting!

The 12 Apostles knew their main mission was to pray and to preach and teach the Word of God. But the widows and other needy people needed care as well. So they choose 7 men of good reputation who were “*full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom*” to ensure that the Church operated more like a “well oiled machine” as God is a God of order, not disorder. In this way the Gospel would go forth and the needy would be cared for. This plan was pleasing to the congregation, and Philip was one of 7 men commissioned as deacons by prayer and the laying on of hands. It is interesting to note that after this issue is resolved, verse 7 tells us that, “*the number of disciples multiplied greatly.*” You see when the Church is united in mission, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, and ministry is taking place it will grow!

Our congregation has supported various ministries in this regard. We annually have the Gideons come and give a report and opportunities are given to support this important work. The Gideons are all about getting copies of God’s Word to as many people as possible. Both the Erbs and Hamburgs in our congregation are active in this ministry. We have also given to the Synod’s Wittenberg Project, which has established a Gospel-

centered Confessional Lutheran outpost in the city where Luther spent much of his life. Each year we have participated in Operation Christmas Child, which not only gives gifts to needy children around the world, but share the Gospel. Sandi Dutton is once again leading this effort in our congregation this year. Our Sermon Audio ministry regularly reaches dozens of states and countries each month with 160 sermons and teachings currently available 24/7. We have gone door to door, to laundry mats, festivals, parades, and other means to share the Gospel in our community. Kent Erb currently is over the area of missions, serving on our Church Council. There is still much more to be done as God's light and life are shared.

So back to Acts. Everything is going great for these early followers of Jesus. They have resolved their dispute and souls are being won for the Kingdom. But all this growth attracted the attention of the opponents of the Gospel-as it will today. The Bible then tells in the conclusion of Chapter 6 that one of the other 7 deacons, Stephen is arrested. He makes a bold defense and presentation of the Gospel, but ends up being stoned to death as the first martyr of the Church. Saul (later Paul) begins a vigorous persecution of the Church. The children of God were on the run for their very lives for the faith they boldly professed.

But God was not done with His Church (as He will preserve it to the last day) nor was He done with Philip. Acts 8:4 says, *"Therefore they, that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word."* Verse 5 says that, *"Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ unto them."* So Philip the deacon is also now Philip the evangelist. Taking the Word of God that was living in Him to the place where God had sent him. His ministry in Samaria was very fruitful. Demons were cast out. The sick were healed. Souls were saved. Even a prominent sorcerer named Simon

believed the Gospel and was baptized. So Philip's ministry in Samaria was going very well. I would venture to say that just about any Pastor or Evangelist would believe this is where the Lord would have him stay for a while.

But something very interesting happens in Chapter 8, verse 26 where our next reading picks up. It says, "*Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, 'Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' This is a desert.*" Philip may have thought, "This doesn't make any sense. Good things are happening in Samaria, and you want me to go the desert, Lord?" If he did think these things he was obedient anyway. Verse 27 says, "*He arose and went*". And good thing that he did!

Philip is out in the desert and lo and behold, here comes a chariot! In this chariot was a very important individual, a eunuch of great authority under Queen Candace of Ethiopia who was in charge of her treasury. He was returning to his home country from Jerusalem, and guess what he is doing? He is reading the Old Testament Scripture from the book of Isaiah. He was reading out loud as Philip heard him. Philip asks him, "*Do you understand what you are reading?*" and from there he ends up in this eunuch's chariot. The Ethiopian was reading from Isaiah 53, which clearly points to Jesus, the Messiah. Philip preaches Jesus to him. The Ethiopian eunuch received Jesus that day as he confessed, "*I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God*" and was baptized when they came across some water in the desert. Water in a desert? Isn't that exactly what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is? Our rebellion against God's Law has exiled us to the desert of sin that only leads to death. But the Gospel is the life giving water-the oases of safety and life-that saves us from the wilderness of sin and brings us to the

promised land of heaven. The forgiveness won by Jesus Christ on the cross is delivered to us by the Holy Spirit-through His appointed means of grace-the Word and Baptism.

Philip preached the Gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch, but notice what a key aspect of this was. This man in the chariot was reading God's Word. This is a great example of why we need to get the Word of God into people's hands. So that they can read it! God works through His Word. This is the vital function of evangelism to get God's saving Word into the hands, ears, and hearts to all people. And the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch would have a huge impact on his home country. He would return with the Gospel. You may or may not be aware, but today Ethiopia has many Christians-including a vibrant Lutheran Church of several million members. Yes, God's Word is powerful! There are truly some amazing testimonies of what happens when people open up God's Word. Then we, like Philip, are there to guide them and speak the Gospel to them. As Christians, we should be about getting the Bible, the Word of God, into as many people's hands as possible. Then the Holy Spirit gets it into their hearts.

So Philip was a willing servant of the Lord and God used him mightily. And this dramatic encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch was not the end either. As soon as the eunuch's baptism took place, Philip was immediately carried by the Lord to his next assignment. Philip ended up in Azotus and preached at all the cities until he ended up in Caesarea (65 miles northwest of Jerusalem). It is likely that he settled there long term as in Acts 21 Philip makes another appearance and this is about 20 years after what we read about in Acts 8. Acts 21:9 tells us that Luke and Paul stayed in the home of Philip "*which was one of the seven*" in Caesarea right before Paul

would make his last trip to Jerusalem where Paul would be arrested and then would go to Rome where he would eventually die as a martyr. Philip had married as we are told that he had 4 unmarried daughters at the time of Paul and Luke's visit who had the gift of prophecy. We don't know exactly when or how Philip died, but we know he certainly was a faithful servant of the Lord who touched many with the Gospel.

We can learn much from the Christian life of faith lived by Philip. We serve. We witness. We go. We support those who go with prayer and finances. I pray that you will not let opportunities to serve and witness pass by that the Lord presents to you. It is a joyous opportunity to share the life-giving Gospel. To spread the seed of the Gospel is to speak the very living Word of God. The good news of Jesus Christ, crucified for the sins of the world and risen from the dead in victory is one that must be proclaimed.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.