

**Sermon on Acts 8: 26-39, Memorial Service Pastor Schwantes, July 23, 2006**

*The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all.  
Amen.*

**Text:**

*26 Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' 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?' 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. 40 But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.*

Dear Congregation,

The growth of the early Christian Church has been compared to the way people grow up. Growing up is a difficult process. It produced pain, misunderstandings and controversies. Some of these struggles came about because Christianity was born in a Jewish home. We Christians sometimes forget that Christ was a Jew. Though the church began as a Jewish institution; it was not to stay that way. Old differences and distinctions were not to be perpetuated. The people of Pentecost, who became the people of the "Way", were called to move across national and racial boundaries. A church on the move is a church reaching out! The human-made barriers between people must come down.

A formidable barrier was crossed by this young growing church in the vivid story of our text. It tells us that the church is on the move. It has moved beyond Jerusalem to Samaria in the north. In our text we hear about the gospel traveling to Gaza in the south. On this well-traveled "highway" to Egypt, we meet a black man, of African descent. The church is not only reaching out geographically, but it is also moving across racial lines. Not only is this man black, but he is also a eunuch, which means a castrated person. He was only half a man, hence an outsider, who according to Jewish law could not become a member of the "assembly of the Lord." Even though he held the high social position as the Queen's treasurer, even though he was on a religious pilgrimage, even though he was a student of the Bible - yet he was a religious outsider in the "twilight zone between Judaism and paganism." Such is the blindness and senselessness of human-made walls.

However, this outsider is about to meet an insider. Our text tells us:

*Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He 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. (vv. 29-31)*

Here is one way in which outsiders become insiders. It comes via the "hospitable spirit." Philip is a hospitable insider. He is not afraid to talk to a stranger! He doesn't make the stranger come to him. Philip takes the initiative. He does it without any hesitation. He doesn't seem overly concerned about what kind of response he might receive. He doesn't wonder what kind of trouble this meeting may get him into. After all, this outsider, this unknown stranger, could become a nuisance, calling him at home, wanting a ride to church and who knows what else? But the hospitable spirit is not afraid of being used. Consequently, Philip doesn't make the outsider come to him. Willingly, graciously he accepts the invitation and begins to share the "good news about Jesus."

The outsider asks if he might be baptized. Then this wonderful climax to this beautiful story: "Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and Philip baptized him." With the Ethiopian's baptism, this young, struggling church reaches out and crosses a very important barrier. With his baptism, the church was saying that neither race nor mutilation can separate one from God or God's community. Like the Apostle Paul said (Romans 8, 38): "38For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." - With his baptism, the outsider becomes an insider.

Dear congregation, there is always a slight risk that barriers remain or are being built up again, sometimes unconsciously, because we follow a certain pattern of how we rate people. The years have taught me to be suspicious of any counsel or theology that wants to exclude. Our Lord and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, included. Our faith is inclusive. If I read the New Testament correctly, the only people who are in danger of being excluded from the company of Christ are those who make it their business to exclude others.

A congregation reaching out, a congregation whose purpose is to win over those who are searching for meaning and purpose, this is what Pastor Schwantes had in mind. There might have been a change in his own perception how important reaching out is. Over the 36 years of his leadership in this church, he has seen that numbers of people, especially young people attending this church, have constantly declined.

People moved, people, when they grew up, went to other churches, people lost their sense for belonging to this community and the necessity to be fed with spiritual nourishment, when they have been growing up.

In all I have read, the notes and the sermons I have been reading through, his library which I have had a chance to explore before many books were sold or taken away, I found proof of the concept that the only way to build a church is from the inside. But this concept can not be separated from the second step you have to take when you want to build a vibrant community: to reach out to the outsiders.

He also clearly understood that life is a process, a way on which we travel along together with others. In one of his sermons he wrote:

"We leave a certain time behind us, a year, a stage in our life, a part of our earthly life, we move forward to the new, the unknown of our own life, and this may cause us to be afraid...but the future for us is the future in Christ, he accompanies us through the proclaimed gospel, he is with us, living in us through bread and wine, and draws us to the place, where he already is."

There is no better fitting story than the one given to us today, to explain his understanding of being a Christian community than the story of Philipp and the Ethiopian.

It is never enough if we stay the way we are and if we just care about the community we have been. Pastor Schwantes church was a vision of people coming together and worship, confess their sinfulness and learn from past mistakes. It was a vision of a church where people from the old world and people from the new world could be together. He was very fond of young people and enjoyed greatly the conversations he had with them and the time he could spend with them at Camp, for instance. He knew that we have to leave things behind and loose people along the way, which we whatever we plan still travel our way to the unknown, but not without hope, and Christ right at our side.

He may have said this differently. He was less straight forward in preaching than I am. He was more a philosophical thinker than an easy approach favouring preacher. He was on both sides of the carriage, sitting inside, searching for God, and coming to the help of people who struggled with their faith and with the problems of their lives.

We owe a lot to Pastor Schwantes. He was in constant conversation with many people and was there when important things happened in the lived of singles, couples and families. He gave advice to people which they still recall, even after 30 and more years. He was sometimes struggling himself with the burdens people have placed on his shoulders, the burden of specific expectations, the hard-line, black and white views, which tortured his free thinking mind.

He was your pastor, but at the same time he was never completely yours, owned outright by anyone, although many tried. He sacrificed a lot for you, his family life, in order to wait at the roads and cross roads, waiting for people to be driving by with more questions than answers. He loved to be together with people, but felt lonely inside, because it is never possible to share too many personal concerns with the people you care for – at least that was the way he saw it.

Having said that, I think as every visionary with an open mind to the concerns of others, he was an insider and an outsider, a Philipp and an Ethiopian treasurer, white and black, German and Canadian, growing older, but yet still

being young in his heart, determined and tired, lost and found, believing and doubting, baptized and yet seeking his own redemption.

I personally admired him, because he had no problem to talk to everyone. He was brought up in generation which had specific views of how a Pastor should be like, dress like, lead his life and work to physical and mental exhaustion – all of those he suffered: He had a heart attack, was burned out at times, had multiple strokes and suffered of Parkinson's which took away his strength, his plans, his possibilities to express his thoughts. For the sharp mind he was, it was tough to experience that his intellectual capacity was chewed away by an incurable disease; with Ella's help he still found ways to write on the computer about what was going on with him. In Ella he found a companion and a loving, caring partner, he was thankful to have her and her family. He was also thankful that he remained to have his place in your hearts after he retired from being your pastor.

In our text, Philip asks the Ethiopian eunuch, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" - Eberhard was someone who wanted to guide you understanding the bible and applying it to your lives.

Education in the biblical truths, in the fundamentals of the faith is not an easy commitment. It means a commitment of time, and it means studying with people with whom we may not always agree. It is a process of growth and change and it is not easy to change. But it is through these kinds of changes that we become people reaching out who are, like it says in Ephesians 4: 13-16, "...no longer tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ ..."

That Word is now with us. The time is here for us to add our chapter to this the greatest love story of all time. We will remember not just to live it, but also to be able to tell it. Out of all the witnesses, out of all the glorious company of the apostles, martyrs, and missionaries of old, out of all the companionship and teaching and preaching of your former pastors and the hard work of congregational members before us, - only we are left. It is now our turn, to have the time of our life, reaching out to others, who have the same problem like the Ethiopian, reading something, hearing of the faith, without understanding what it means. To do that is hard work. I read: "I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was duty. I acted and behold, duty was joy." But with love in our hearts, we can manage and follow in the footsteps of Eberhard Schwantes. Amen.

*And the Peace of God which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*