

It's good to be back with you this morning after a few days away, which included last Sunday. After having a committal service for my uncle Chuck who passed away over a year ago, Amy and I and my sisters and a couple of my cousins took in the sights of God's beautiful creation in western Wyoming. In addition to the breathtaking landscape of the mountains and surrounding foothills we drove through lots of wide-open spaces all across South Dakota and Wyoming to get there. If you have never been out that way, trust me, there is a lot of distance between towns and even in-between houses. It's not uncommon to go 25 miles or more in-between gas stations and other services. While it was very beautiful and very peaceful, it reminded me that in today's world, it really is easy for us to be isolated from one another. And it doesn't necessarily have to be by living out in the country. Think about our own neighborhoods. How many people do we really know? How connected are the people around us? What do we know about one another? It seems as if these days true relationships are harder and harder to come by.

When we live more isolated lives, we may miss some very special, even spiritual, opportunities. You never know what can happen when you're open to being available to another person. That's the idea behind our text, the First Reading for today in Acts 8.

4. It always starts with God. It starts with God and His desire to make His work of reconciliation and restoration known to people. He has a heart for all people.

In Acts 8:26, the Spirit of the Lord has a plan, and it includes Philip, who was one of the original seven deacons chosen to serve in the ministry of the Early Church. The Spirit prompts Philip to go and catch up with a chariot in which the rider is reading Scripture. Just being close to this person sparks a discussion that would lead to a man's salvation. That's where it happens—*alongside chariots*.

It's always amazing how God works through His Word and through people who are open to being used as His vessels. We never know as we leave our home how God may call us to go near to another person so that he or she might experience and receive the gift of God's mercy and grace.

Philip is directed by the Spirit to leave Samaria, with its many people, and go to a particular road—going through a "desert place." Philip was being sent to evangelize just *one* man, just *one* person. God had a plan.

Who is that *one* man? Turns out he's a court official, the treasurer of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. He is a Gentile convert to Judaism. He is returning from Jerusalem, where he had gone to worship.

While riding back in his chariot, he is reading from the Book of Isaiah the prophet.

Philip is told to go to the chariot and “stay near it.” Philip’s response is to run to the chariot—probably to catch up with it. He knows that God has something planned with this encounter.

3. So Philip gets close, and he hears the man reading (it was customary to read aloud back then). The Ethiopian was reading from Isaiah 53—written seven hundred years before Christ. By God’s gracious design, it happened that the portion he was reading was clearly about the Messiah: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth” (vv 32–33). Philip is familiar with what he hears being read, and he asks the man, “Do you understand what you are reading?” (v 30). The man shares his confusion about the Isaiah passage and wonders how he’ll ever know what it means unless someone “guides” him. The word **guide** is the word Jesus used when He said the Holy Spirit will “guide” us into all truth (Jn 16:13).

Isaiah 53:7–8 is such a rich passage, a prophecy that Jesus would be silent before His accusers, part of Isaiah’s whole message of Jesus as the suffering Messiah. Philip explains to the Ethiopian in simple language that the passage is about Jesus and the Good News of His death and resurrection. Jesus was the fulfillment of the person described in Isaiah. Philip shares what had been shared with him and what he had come to know personally about Jesus.

There’s a link between what we see Philip doing and the power behind it, as our Gospel and Epistle readings show. When we are connected to the source, the true vine, Christ, we “bear fruit”—John 15. And the connection we have to Christ is made visible through demonstrations of Christian love and service that John notes in his first epistle. Our love is evidence of God’s person and character, that is, His unconditional love, which gives His Son to suffer for our sins and reaches out to rescue sinners.

2. So the Ethiopian came to understand from Philip how the prophecy in Isaiah was fulfilled in Christ. And as the Holy Spirit guided him into that truth, faith was created in his heart. And he was baptized.

But God wasn’t finished with the Ethiopian; there was more to come. The Ethiopian took with him the message he had internalized; he would find others to tell by their chariots. Tradition holds that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was brought to the continent of Africa by this very man.

And God wasn’t finished with Philip; there was more to come. The Spirit of the Lord takes him many miles away to the town of Azotus, and then beyond. He would continue to evangelize by pointing other people to Jesus.

God isn't finished with **us** either; yes, there's more to come. As God works in us, we, too, learn to express love in our interaction with one another and our world. God's love is active in and through us, as followers of Christ Jesus. The love of God was unexpected and undeserved when it came to us. So God's undeserved love prompts us, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to give the same unexpected love in Jesus' name to others who are also undeserving.

The goal of God's love is people who learn to love in response to His love. Christ's love prompted Him to come alongside people who needed to know and experience God's love for them. It happened when He chose to come alongside people on His daily journeys. It's surprising how many "chariots" pass by with people who need a "guide" to be pointed to Jesus' death and resurrection for them.

That happens when we come across people who are passing by in their chariots, in other words, going about their business in everyday life. Just like the Ethiopian, many people have had spiritual experiences, and many may have questions. Many people have experienced times when false gods have let them down. God may call us to come alongside someone. God may prompt us to listen, to offer care, or maybe say something that would point them to Jesus.

1. After all, every one of us has experienced something similar to this story today. We have all had someone, maybe even many, who have taken the time to come alongside of us and help us to know Jesus' dying love for us. (Teachers, Sunday School teachers, parents, grandparents, or others.) There were things that we didn't know or fully understand. There were questions we had that were unanswered. The Holy Spirit prompted someone to come alongside of us.

Jesus, as the "true vine" (Jn 15:1), knows what can happen as we stay connected to Him. His life and love will flow and will produce fruit. Jesus was that Lamb led to the slaughter and was sacrificed for us and on our behalf. His life was surrendered so we could possess life—real, true, abundant spiritual life in Him. That day when the Ethiopian man came to faith and his eyes were opened to what Christ, the Messiah, had done for him, he went his way "rejoicing."

We are called to stay connected to the vine and draw from it so we, too, can share and guide. How will God use you and me? Through our various vocations, God's love can flow. As parents, workers, neighbors, citizens, spouses, and church members—as we do our things—be listening to the promptings to come alongside. Who knows how God will use you? It happens "out there."

The Holy Spirit is always having someone come alongside chariots with the saving news of Jesus. It all started because God came alongside ours. Amen.