

“What’s A Nice Person Like You Doing In A Place Like This?”

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Acts 8:26-40 = Evangelism

On July 20, 1969 the date of the first moon landing, as it happens my youth group was travelling on its way to San Antonio to attend the Synod Youth Workshop. Our youth leader Peggy Sue Felts was as anxious as any of us to hear the momentous event.



There we were, picture this, in two ‘65 Cadillacs, careening across the open prairie of West Texas, crammed to the gills with teenagers all listening intently to the radio. Yet just a few minutes before touchdown, we lost all semblance of a radio station.



Panic-stricken though we were, Mrs. Felts took charge and abruptly pulled us all off the dusty highway at a rundown Texas roadhouse, the only structure of any kind we had seen for miles. Now we were all underage to enter such a watering hole, but Mrs. Felts, a true force of nature, ordered us all out, marched us right into the roadhouse and up to the bar to watch the one TV in the establishment. The bartender, roused from a standing up nap, was speechless to resist.

Spellbound we couldn’t take our eyes off the television. Just as the landing was about to take place, a battered pickup pulled up. A Sunday drunk of a cowboy got out, oblivious to the historic event. He sauntered up to the bar, ordered a beer with a chaser to tide him over to Monday.

After taking a long draw on the beer, he finally looked up to discover the curiously full bar for a Sunday afternoon. Then it was he noticed the demure young ladies in our group. He sidled up to the nearest, one of the Wilson sisters as I recall, and with an expression the Wolf reserved for Little Red Riding Hood, he really did say that age-old, overused, crude pickup line:

“What’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?”

Now stick with me ~ evangelism is a lot like that, that is, evangelism in Christ's way. Much like my youth group in Texas, Phillip found himself in a similar place when he met the Ethiopian Eunuch, down a long, deserted, dusty road at a watering hole in the wilderness.



This Ethiopian Eunuch was a high government official in the court of Queen Candice, her treasurer in fact. He was a follower of the God of Israel, though as a eunuch excluded on ritual grounds from converting to Judaism or entering the temple.

His ethnic identity is left ambiguous in Acts. Not today's Ethiopia, but the Ethiopia in Biblical times referred to anything South or East of Palestine. Then the Ethiopian empire included parts of Africa, Arabia and even India ~ included black skin, light-skin, brown skin and olive.

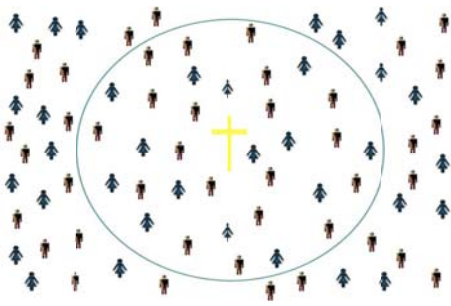
What Acts shows clearly is that this strange person representing every race, this follower of Yahweh, was nevertheless excluded from Judaism itself. Yet he was included fully into the community of Christ at a dusty watering hole on the Gaza road. The Eunuch changed from stranger to family ~ the outlander transformed into an insider.



This is the message of Acts pure and simple ~ successive barriers are broken down in Christ. The outsider, now 'in' God's covenant. Those previously excluded from God's community now engrafted.

Today it is a foreigner wishing to enter Judaism. Next just a little farther afield a true gentile, the Roman Cornelius. After that, Paul is transformed from a violent persecutor into a pacifist missionary for the Gospel and commissioned to carry it to the gentile world. Each stage in Acts, the Gospel advances a little further out, breaking down barrier after barrier.

In Acts Christ breaks down all our ideas of where God draws the line ~ whether barriers of race, gender, nation, social or economic status, culture, denomination, all barriers are broken down among followers of Jesus. God's love overflows all the artificial dikes we humans erect.



Whenever we restrict God's work, when we draw a circle excluding others, wherever we define 'them' and 'us,' God unbounded by our fallacies is there, drawing a box bigger than ours, a box so large strangers become friends, enemies become allies. No matter how much we think we do, we do not get to say who is 'in' and who is 'out' of God's realm ~ only God does. God is always working on the other side of our lines.

In Phillip's encounter with the high Ethiopian official, we see how to accomplish evangelism in God's way and in God's time. Phillip is driven out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. There he meets a strange traveler, one already familiar with the one true God ~ an individual craving guidance, asking:



"What's a nice person like you doing in a wilderness like this?
Can you help me understand this God business?"

Evangelism in God's way is to minister at the margins, across all borders, over the lines, breaking down barriers. God's time to speak is after the Holy Spirit has already opened the way ~ when someone looks up and asks the open question, the spiritual question: "Can you help me with this God stuff?"



That's real evangelism. Martin Luther, the spiritual ancestor to all Protestants, claimed that he led the Reformation by sitting in the tavern drinking good beer and minding his own business ~ the Holy Spirit did everything. God's way is to look to the margins. God's time is when the Holy Spirit has opened the way.

Wes Lackey, who preached my ordination, was pastor of Bethany Presbyterian in Dallas. After Tuesday evening choir practices, he and several members would adjourn around the corner to a bar on Cedar Springs Blvd. Legend has it that the world-famous Turtle Creek men's chorale was founded on those barstools by members during one of those afterglow sessions.



Wes was a weird bird in some ways. He was wont to wear a clergy collar all the time. Not surprisingly folks would see him with his collar in the bar, sit down and tell him their life stories. Prostitutes in particular seemed to have a real need to unburden themselves.

One Sunday morning, Wes began services and there in the front row were a whole row of prostitutes he had befriended. Living proof of evangelism as:

“What’s a nice person like you doing in a bar like this?”

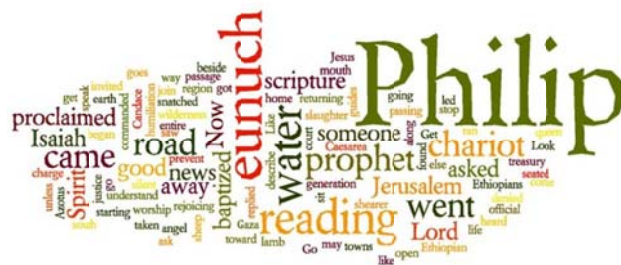
Evangalism has been twisted to mean a lot of things: imparting information, convincing people of certain beliefs, inviting people to church, twisted to mean mere recruitment of members. But evangelism in God’s way will have none of that. Our calling is not to lay on people four spiritual laws ~ not to ‘market’ the Gospel nor to ‘sell’ it.



Evangelism in Christ’s way is not even with words. It does not talk the talk, but instead walks the walk. It is ministries of compassion serving the physical and emotional needs of a broken world ~ helping rebuild New Orleans and Gatlinburg, Feeding the 5,000, Habitat for Humanity, cooking for the Men’s Shelter, National Rebuilding day, the Lord’s Table, building hospitals and schools and cooperatives in the far corners of the world, the list goes on and on. Everywhere the poor, the hurting, the weak gather, we should be there.



And when we have walked the walk, when we are shoulder to shoulder with the marginalized, when the Holy Spirit creates the open heart and when the open question is asked: “Why are you here?” Then and only then has the spiritual resonance been established. Then and only then do we gain permission to use our words. Then and only then is the time and the place to answer, like Phillip and the



Ethiopian Eunuch: "I'm here because Jesus led me here. I'd be glad to tell you about it."

That's evangelism in the Acts way, the Bible way, God's way.

"What's a nice person like you doing in a place like this?"