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Easter 5B
Peace, Seattle
May 3, 2015
Acts 8:26-40, John 15:1-8

BY PATHS AS YET UNTRODDEN

During these weeks of Easter our readings from ACTS, in story after story, tell how the Spirit of God, unleashed in the world, transforms a frightened and bewildered group of would-be followers into potent witnesses for the gospel.

Before his ascension, Jesus tells his disciples:

YOU WILL RECEIVE POWER WHEN THE HOLY SPIRIT COMES UPON YOU;
AND YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES IN JERUSALEM, JUDEA, SAMARIA,
AND TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH.

What we get to see during these weeks of Easter is that promise coming true on the ground.

Three weeks back we heard how the Spirit was reshaping Jesus' disciples into a community so unified and bent on sharing that "There was not a needy person among them." (Acts 4:32-35)

And over the last two weeks, we've watched Peter and John—who once were deniers and deserters —reclaim their places as leaders by healing, preaching and engaging in peaceful acts of civil disobedience in Jesus' name. (Acts 3:1-4:22)

This week Philip gets into the act, and we begin to see how the centrifugal force of the gospel keeps pushing the fledging church OUTWARD, creating ever-widening circles of community.

Hold on to your hats, folks, 'cause you never know where the Spirit will lead you next!

Some of you have been following the surprising and delightful story of our brother in Christ JOEY DIJULIO in recent weeks.[1]

Thanks to an accidental spelling error, Joey got an email in his INBOX back in February about a bachelor party for a guy he'd never met.

After eavesdropping on the email exchanges for a couple weeks, he finally came clean to the party planners and the groom, Jeff Minetti. The result? Minetti invited him to join them in Philadelphia for the bachelor party—and he did!

The resulting bond with this group of newfound friends was such that Joey and his family were invited back to Philly for the wedding—and that's where they are this morning.

The twists and turns of this story are too incredible and fascinating to share here.
(E.g. when you see the photo of Joey and Jeff, it's hard to believe they are brothers!)

If you're interested in more, go online when you get home this afternoon, GOOGLE JOEY DIJULIO and you'll get plenty of hits. The story has gone VIRAL and Joey's been telling it on Good Morning America, and on other media outlets all over the country.[2]

[1] Follow Joey's story here: https://www.facebook.com/RandomBachelorParty
[2] Here's another link: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3002908/Man-errantly-invited-bachelor-party-told-Come-anyway.html

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Now I'm not ready to attribute this particular story to the work of Holy Spirit…at least not yet.

But I have to admit, it's the kind of thing we see happening in Acts over and over again—not the bachelor party, but…

- the way connections between people that once were thought impossible are now made possible;
- the way people who had no clue about one another's existence are now becoming friends;

The work of the Spirit goes ahead of us, leading us to places we didn't expect to go.
It's profound work, its transforming work, and it's also joyful work.

In today's story it's Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch who become connected…two strangers from different continents and cultures whose lives could hardly be more different, become bound together forever because of the Spirit of God brings them together.

Philip, fresh from a successful mission to Samaria, meets an Ethiopian executive—(Luke calls him the CFO: Chief Financial Officer)—on the Wilderness Road, and before you know it, God's word is drawing them deep into conversation.

The fact that this Ethiopian man is a sexual minority and that he's of a higher socio-economic class than Philip, and that he's of a different race makes no difference.

These identifiers–all of which are potential impediments—(and we've been seeing, unfortunately, how swiftly and deeply these differences continue to divide us in this nation)—these potential impediments all fall away in the wake of the message that the good news about Jesus is meant not for some select target group, but for all.

The result? Baptism on the spot.
The result? Another story that ends with transformed people on their way rejoicing.

> **"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth…"**

When we're open to the leading of the Spirit, the story says, we're going to end up in surprising places and unexpected relationships.

And not only that!—wherever we go in response to God's call, we find that God has already been there before us. So we can go boldly, knowing that we follow in God's footsteps.

Sometimes, this following leads us to places wrapped in joy; and sometimes it leads us into territory where danger lurks.

That's the part of the story we're hearing today from Dr. Patrick Henry—stories of rescuers in Le Chambon and France's Vivarais Plateau who put their own lives on the line in order to rescue, protect and shelter and save the lives of Jewish children, women, and men.[3]

There is no end to what being a witness to the love of God can look like.

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[3] Patrick Henry and his wife Mary Anne O'Neil joined us for conversation this Sunday on his books: *We Only Know Men: The Rescue of Jews in France during the Holocaust.* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007) and *Jewish Resistance Against the Nazis* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), and to see the 25th anniversary prototype of the Pierre Savage film, *Weapons of the Spirit*, which tells the story of how the people of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon and surrounding villages provided saved the lives of thousands of Jewish people during the World War 2. Dr. Henry and I met via email while I was preparing for a Lilly Foundation funded pastoral sabbatical in the spring of 2014. The sabbatical included a visit to Le Chambon. Through Dr. Henry I was also able to connect with Nellie Hewitt Trocmé, the daughter of Pastor André and Magda Trocmé, who lived with her parents in Le Chambon during the war years. Both her parents were active in supported and setting up the system by which Jewish children, women and men were provided safe haven during the Holocaust.

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In each generation, in every age, at every moment, the Spirit prompts us to stop, look and listen for opportunities—no matter how small or insignificant they may at first appear—to reach out with a word of hope, a gesture of kindness, an offer of prayer, a testimony to God's presence in our own lives.

Often, it's only with hindsight that we can look back and say –
AH! THAT'S WHAT THE SPIRIT WAS UP TO! THAT'S WHERE GOD WAS LEADING ME!

Friends, how's that journey going for you these days? What invitations is the Spirit sowing in your life? What stories of unlikely connection are unfolding for you…of barriers coming down and new relationships being built?

We see plenty of evidence today for how race, religion, sexual identity, class and ideology can get in the way of us seeing each other as fellow human beings and treating one another with respect. We know all too well how hatred and indifference can become deadly forces, disrupting the opportunity to create community.

Strategies that incite fear or cultivate violence can never be part of the arsenal of the gospel. Those ways of operating in the world were nailed to the cross with Jesus. At 2,000 years and running, we're still struggling to embody that truth.

God calls us to a higher standard. A way of witnessing to God's love and embodying justice that is accomplished, in the words of Pastor Trocmé of Le Chambon, "without fear, without pride, and without hatred."[4]

The goal is still the same.
BELOVED, SINCE GOD LOVED US SO MUCH, WE ALSO OUGHT TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER. NO ONE HAS EVER SEEN GOD; IF WE LOVE ONE ANOTHER, GOD LIVES IN US, AND GOD'S LOVE IS PERFECTED IN US. (1 Jn 4:11-12)

And the way of getting there? It's front and center in today's gospel.
I AM THE TRUE VINE, YOU ARE THE BRANCHES. THOSE WHO ABIDE IN ME AND I IN THEM BEAR MUCH FRUIT, BECAUSE APART FROM ME YOU CAN DO NOTHING.

The more rooted we are in Christ, the more solidly attached to the Vine, the better fruit our lives will produce. This abiding, connecting, and producing begins right here, at the Table.

For this is where Christ promises to meet us, and does, setting the Table and laying out a feast where each and all can be fed; where thirsts can be quenched, and broken lives mended once more; where we are nourished and then sent, bearing in ourselves and in our lives the kind of fruit which nurtures others, and brings life to the world.

The Spirit taught Philip the formula, and the Ethiopian eunuch caught his joy. Now it's our turn.

Let us pray:
O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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[4] On Sunday, June 23, 1940, the day after France signed the Armistice with Hitler's Germany, Pastors Andre Trocmé and Edouard Theis issued a joint declaration, delivered orally by Trocmé from the pulpit of the Protestant Church in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, France. Their statement culminated with these words:
"The duty of Christians is to resist the violence directed at our consciences with the weapons of the spirit. We appeal to all our brothers in Christ to refuse to agree with or cooperate in violence, especially in the coming days when that violence is directed against the English people. To love, to forgive, to show kindness to our enemies, that is our duty. But we must do our duty without conceding defeat. Without servility, without cowardice. We will resist when our enemies demand that we act in ways that go against the teachings of the Gospel. We will resist without fear, without pride, and without hatred."
The quote can be found in another excellent account of what happened on the Vivarais Plateau in France: Peter Grose. *The Greatest Escape: How One French Community Saved Thousands of Lives from the Nazis.* (Boston: Nicholas Brealey, 2014)