

**New Beginnings: Spiritual Nurture**  
**Acts 8:26-40**  
**John 15:1-8**

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green  
May 3, 2015

The scripture readings for the Sundays after Easter typically focus on the growth of Christianity after the resurrection of Jesus. Before the church was an institution, it was a movement and a way of life. Now that the church is *very much* an institution, it's worth asking whether we still consider ourselves part of a *movement* and whether we still represent a distinctive *way of life*.

Stories from the Book of Acts depict the apostles and other early Christians caught up in a wave of evangelical enthusiasm to proclaim a suffering and risen Messiah. The people who responded with the most enthusiasm to this message were people who weren't even expecting a Messiah in the first place: Gentiles.

The early church soon found itself overrun with an unexpected demographic. Gentiles very quickly outnumbered Jews in the early church. It must have been both bewildering and disorienting. Today's reading from the Book of Acts addresses this bewilderment by telling the story of one person—the implication being that anyone concerned about the “new Israel” being overrun with Gentiles should get to know those Gentiles, learn their stories, and listen to their experiences, one person at a time.

Consider the high-ranking Ethiopian official in today's reading. An exotic, powerful visitor from faraway, this foreigner had earned his position of responsibility in the Ethiopian court in part by submitting to genital mutilation. Everything about him screamed “other,” “different,” “strange,” and “not-one-of-us.” In our story, however, he is reading *our* book—that is to say, *our* scroll—of *our* prophet, Isaiah. He is interested in *our* God. He is interested in *our* Messiah.

And what happens next? The Holy Spirit sends *our* guy, Philip, to meet this Ethiopian on the road to Gaza, and he does. Philip meets the Ethiopian, even climbs into the chariot with the Ethiopian and then they hang out. They talk about the scroll. They talk about the scriptures. They talk about whatever they talk about until they get to a patch of water.

“What is to prevent me from being baptized?” the Ethiopian asks Philip (Acts 8:36). And here's where the story gets really good. Philip could have hemmed and hawed and pointed to... this scripture passage over here and... this other one over here... to make a case that the Ethiopian should just leave well enough alone. Foreigners and eunuchs weren't even allowed beyond the outermost courtyard of the Jerusalem temple complex. So there was plenty “on the books” to exclude this mutilated foreigner, but Philip chooses on the spot to disregard all that and instead welcome this outsider into a new life in Christ through baptism.

The story of this individual is also the story of the movement. One by one came the outsiders.

One by one they heard the story. One by one they encountered God through the risen Christ. One by the one they asked, in so many words, “what is to prevent me from being baptized?” and the answer was always the same: Nothing. *There is nothing to prevent you from being baptized.*

There is nothing to prevent you from knowing God through Jesus Christ and binding yourself to him through the holy action of baptism. There is nothing to prevent you from having your life changed by this good news. There is nothing to prevent you or anybody from being joined to the Jesus movement and getting connected to the Jesus people and living—from now on—the Jesus way of life.

I mean, if they can't keep this odd character out of the Bible, they can't keep anybody out!! If the Ethiopian eunuch gets a starring role, a whole episode all his own, well then so should every other oddball outcast and misfit down through the ages all the way down to you and me all these thousands of years later.

Whoever we are, there is a place for us in God's story. We just might need someone else to sit down with us and guide us to figure out how it all fits together: God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Bible. We might need some *spiritual nurture*, some good old fashioned *religious education*.

Notice that Philip doesn't wait for the Ethiopian to show up at church and ask for an appointment. Philip goes to him. Philip meets him on the road to his next destination and they spend a long time together.

The church has evolved over the centuries into an institution and for many years in this country it was a prominent institution. The Church on the Green had a commanding presence in the Town of Bloomfield not just geographically but socially and politically. The church as an institution attracted people to membership, and through joining and participating, people grew spiritually. This doesn't happen—so much—any more, or not quite in the same way.

Churches like ours across the country are learning that this older, “membership model” of ministry is not working the way it used to. Churches like ours are discovering that *it is time to stop assuming that people will come to us seeking spiritual growth, and instead to realize God is sending us out to go to them.*

In your New Beginnings small groups you read an essay comparing the “membership model” of ministry to the “discipleship model” of ministry. You were asked to consider whether God intends the disciples who are already part of the church to go out and meet seekers, wherever they are, to find them and join them in conversations that begin and end with their questions.

What is to prevent anyone from knowing the love of God in Jesus Christ and allowing that love to turn their world upside down???

Perhaps we have come to a fork in the road in Christian history in this country. Perhaps we'll have to go out into the world and make disciples in a whole new way that resembles the oldest way. Just because people aren't attracted to the church *as an institution* doesn't mean they won't be attracted to *the person and work of Jesus Christ*. Just because they say they don't want *organized religion* doesn't mean they won't want to be part of *the Jesus movement* and live as Christians *with Christian companionship*.

As we ponder a bold New Beginning for our church, I invite us to focus on the role of spiritual nurture. Yes, we need to reach out beyond the Sunday morning crowd to other seekers, and if we're not good at that, we need to get better at it somehow, some way.

But here's an even more basic question. Are we nourishing ourselves spiritually? And I ask this especially of our church leaders, but really to all of us. Are we tending to our own spiritual growth? Are we aware of God's presence day by day, hour by hour? How is our prayer life? How often do we open our Bibles and how often do we feel our spirits soar in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ?

In John 15 we read that Christ is the vine and we are branches of the vine. We abide in him as he abides in us. This is a promise, contingent on nothing. It is the beginning and the end of what it means to belong to God in Christ Jesus: simply that we do belong. Simply that we are baptized. Simply that we do enjoy communion with God and each other through Christ. Simply that there is nothing to prevent us from glorifying and enjoying God forever, starting now.

The sacrament of Holy Communion is a visible sign of the invisible reality that we do belong to God through Jesus Christ, that God's life surges through our veins, that God's love pulses in our heartfelt passions, that God through Christ governs, guards, guides and upholds us and all things according to God's gracious purposes.

Let "spiritual nurture" be an essential ingredient of whatever bold New Beginning we come up with for the future of our church, to the glory of God. Amen.

~Ruth L. Boling