



June 7, 2015
Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

90 Day Challenge II: The Acts of the Holy Spirit
By the Spirit We Are Intentional
Acts 8

We continue our journey through the book of Acts as Luke tells us story after story about Holy Spirit-filled believers. Last week, we heard the powerful story of Stephen, the Spirit-filled table-waiter who spoke so boldly about Jesus that it ended up getting him stoned to death by an angry mob... the first Christian martyr.

After Stephen's murder, great persecution broke out in Jerusalem and believers had to run for their lives. But as they ran, they preached and spread the very message the Jews hoped to silence. The first "running preacher" we meet is Philip, another Spirit-filled waiter of tables. First, he is sent by the Holy Spirit to the Samaritans. Remember, Jews hated Samaritans, but Jesus reached out to them. He made a Samaritan the hero in one of his most famous parables. He met a Samaritan woman at a well, and she ended up leading her entire village to believe in Jesus.

Now, the Spirit of Jesus sends Philip into Samaria to preach the good news with remarkable results. Demon-possessed people are delivered, cripples and paralytics are healed. People believe and are baptized. Right out of the chute, we see the Holy Spirit intends to save more than just Jews in Jerusalem just as Jesus promised: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria... and to the ends of the earth."

Well, Philip had reached out to Samaria. Now, he was about to reach toward the ends of the earth to a place called Ethiopia. Listen:

²⁶Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." ²⁷So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet.

²⁹The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." ³⁰Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. ³¹"How can I," he said,

“unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

³²The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ³³In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.”

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” ³⁵Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” ³⁸And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

For the last year, we have been focused on the same theme: Jesus told his followers to make disciples. This is not a job reserved for us “paid Christians.” Every one of us who claims to be a Christian is called to make disciples for Jesus. And disciple-making does not happen by accident. It must be intentional. You only make disciples on purpose. Now “intentional” is not the same as pushy. That is the image that scares so many of us... the idea that, in order to be a disciple-maker, we must be in people’s faces shoving the Bible down their throat, forcing them to have conversations they don’t want to have.

But that was never how Jesus made disciples, and in today’s story Philip gives another great example of how you can be intentional without being obnoxious! Let’s learn from him.

First, Philip teaches us to Go. The story begins with an angel of the Lord telling Philip to “Go south to the desert road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza.” Philip listened, and he went. Then, when he sees a chariot passing by, the Spirit speaks again, “Go to that chariot...” Philip listened, and he went. The first step of intentional disciple-making is to **go**! This shouldn’t come as a surprise to anyone who has been listening to our sermons this year. Do you remember Jesus’ Great Commission to his disciples? “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations.”

And remember the literal translation of that word, “go”: “In your going” “As you go.” In other words, Jesus says, “As you are going along in life... wherever God takes you, make disciples. Pay attention to my Spirit, listen for my voice and when I tell you to Go, do it!” Isn’t that what happened with Philip? Philip is paying attention to the Spirit’s prompting, and he senses God’s “Go.”

But it wasn't very detailed, was it. "Go south to the desert road, the one that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza." This was a major highway; the primary route to Egypt. It was very busy and very long! It was like saying, "Go to I-5." Not exactly a pin-point location.

Two weeks ago when we were in Seattle for a family funeral, the cemetery was a long way from the church along roads which I had never traveled. So I told my phone where I wanted to go, and then I drove and listened. Honestly, it is not a very satisfying way for me to travel. I prefer to have the woman in the box give me the whole picture: "Go west on Lake City Way for .4 miles, turn left on 135th for 1 mile, right on Sand Point Way for 8 miles, left at the Mountlake bridge for 4.5 miles, then left on Wylie and meander for 1.5 miles and watch for the church." I like to know the whole picture. But all I get is, "In one-half mile, turn left; turn left now."

This is a lot like listening to the voice of the Spirit. Very rarely does God explain in detail his plan for us. More often, it's like what Philip experienced... "Okay, this is the next thing I want you to do. Go here." If we are not willing to do the next thing God asks, we will never do the ultimate thing God asks, because we will never get that far.

Acts teaches us that every believer has the same Holy Spirit living in us and directing us simply and clearly if we are willing to listen and obey. Do you sense that God wants you to go to a certain party even though you'd rather not? Go to the party. Do you sense that God wants you to reach out to someone you haven't talked to in a while? Go to the keyboard. Do you sense a co-worker is struggling? Go to her desk. When you do the first thing God tells you, then he will give you the next thing and almost always it will be one step at a time. The Spirit dispenses information on a "need to know basis." Intentional disciple-makers listen and go when they are told.

And then we loiter. "Go to that chariot and stay near it." You realize what was happening, right? The chariot was moving along the road. Not very quickly because the passenger was reading as they drove. If it was too bouncy, he wouldn't have been able to do this. So, obedient Philip looked like this. [*Running in place*] "Hi! How ya doing? Just out for a run... to Gaza." All Philip knew was that he was supposed to "stay near" the chariot. No more than that.

Part of disciple-making is loitering! Staying near the people God has called us to... waiting, listening, paying attention to what is going on in their lives, caring about it. Too often well-intended Christians feel like they need to crash in, pull out their Bibles, talk through the four spiritual laws and close the deal. What that means, of course, is that they are not paying attention at all to what is actually going on in that person's life. They are just a spiritual project to them, so they blunder their way in full of right answers and good intentions, and nothing happens... or worse, they turn them off to the gospel!

I love and respect my wife. She is one of the most Spirit-sensitive persons I know. I have been watching her process what she senses the Spirit telling her to do for her step-brother and his family who just lost a wife and a mom to cancer. Cyndi has scheduled a meal next week with them and has reached out to her niece. It hasn't been easy; they are private people. But Cyndi feels led to simply be near them and see what God wants us to do from there.

Disciple-making requires patient presence... earning the right to be heard because we demonstrate by the fact that we simply loiter in and around their lives, that we actually care for them as persons and not as projects.

Go, loiter, and one last thing I learn from Philip... question. Ask questions. Again, this is nothing new. It is exactly what Jesus taught his disciples. He was always asking great questions. So as Philip is running alongside the chariot he hears the guy reading out loud. And asks the simple question: "Do you understand what you are reading?" And the floodgates are opened. "How can I unless someone explains it to me?" Could you hop up in here and do that?" It was like saying "sic em" to a pit bull.

Provisionally, the Ethiopian was reading the most important prophetic chapter in Isaiah, 53, which predicts a suffering Messiah (which seemed crazy to Jews who were expecting a military conqueror). All Philip asked was, "Do you understand what you are reading?" and off they went.

[By the way, next year we are going to read the entire Bible in a year and preach each week on how the whole Bible points to Jesus. If you are faithful in that journey, a year from now, you'll be able to do exactly what Philip did!"]

This is the step that requires the most courage and intention. It's not that hard to hang around people especially those we care for, but listening for the Spirit-led opportunity to ask a question that is more than the surfacey, "How ya doing? (For you women who went on the retreat, what's the answer? "Fine!") Asking good, deep questions, that's the step that requires guts—taking a breath and saying, "Okay here we go!"—and it requires initiative. Notice, the Spirit didn't tell Philip what to ask. He put him there loitering, and then relied on his sensitivity to the moment.

Microsoft makes a computer called "Surface." I'm reminded about it every time I watch golf on CBS, because the announcers have those computers sitting obviously in front of them with the word "Surface" written on the surface. (Microsoft pays millions for that visual.) There is a sense in which every one of us has the same word written on us: Surface! I don't want to go deeper, I don't want to ask deeper questions. And yet if we don't have the guts to do so, we waste the opportunity the Spirit has provided, and we never take those relationships to a place that might make a real, eternal difference.

Friday, in my LifeGroup after studying this chapter, we asked: "What difference will this story make in the way you live today?" Often we ask this question: On a scale of 1-10, how is your marriage and why?" I know of someone that asked this question at a dinner party last week: "What one word describes what you aspire this season of your life to look like?" What is one great question you could ask the person the Holy Spirit has you loitering near?

The Holy Spirit wants to save your family and friends. And He wants to use you to do it. Go, loiter, question and you will discover the joy of being used by God to get below the surface with the good news of Jesus.

This meal reminds us of what that good news cost. "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."