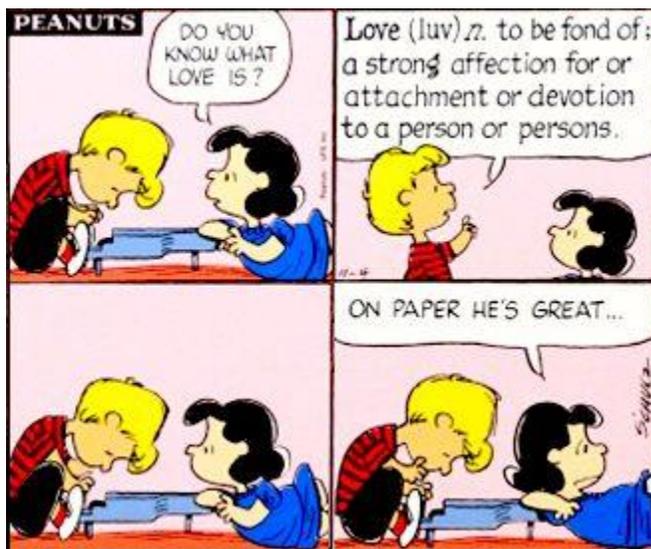


“The Difference Makers: Action”
Acts 8:26-38

This is our second week of the sermon series “The Difference Makers.” Last week we looked at the importance of being open to the light of God’s guidance. This week we will look at the importance of action. To start, I would like to share with you a Peanuts comic. In this one, Schroeder is playing the piano with great intensity. Lucy interrupts to ask, “Schroeder do you know what love is?” Schroeder stops playing and stands up, and recites: “Love: Noun, to be fond of, a strong affection for attachment to a person or persons.” Lucy says, more or less to herself, “On paper, he’s great.”



It is always much easier to love or to have faith in an intellectual kind of way than to actually practice it in daily life and with the people of our lives, especially that faith often requires us to leave our comfort zones to love beyond the regular limits of our culture and our clans. But in order to make a difference in the world, one has to trust the guidance of God to journey beyond one’s comfort.

Our Bible story today is about one of the difference makers who dared to break some major barriers for the sake of love. Philip is the difference maker we are focusing on for today. He is not one of the disciples. He is one of the new seven deacons elected by the church to serve the daily food. This was a result of a complaint that the Hellenist (Greek) widows were being neglected during the daily distribution of food. So, the seven deacons were elected and one of them was Philip. He was a Hellenist, a Greek. Yet, even though Philip was elected mainly to serve food and help the needy, he also had a passion for preaching the gospel. He went first to the city of Samaria and preached the gospel there to those who were considered outsiders to the Jewish faith. He also performed great deeds of healing and faith. Immediately after that he received a call from the Holy Spirit to go to the desert. All of this was taking place before the meeting of the church leadership in Jerusalem which sanctioned mission to the outsiders. You can

say that Philip was ahead of his time. He was on the cutting edge of mission, despite the fact that he knew that it was risky business to do that. And all of that was because of a message from an angel!

It is much easier for us to identify with Bilbo Baggins from *The Hobbit* than to identify with Philip. Baggins was reluctant to go on an adventure that involved risk and danger. He was a happy hobbit, living peacefully in his beloved home in the Shire, when suddenly his contentment was interrupted by an unexpected visit from a wise old wizard, Gandalf. He did not want to leave because of his fears of what might happen on the journey. Watch clip: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_cwRqXBR4Q. And indeed, the journey was tough and dangerous.

Philip's call to adventure was dangerous in its own way. Yet, because of faith, he was not reluctant. To appreciate how radical Philip's action was, we need to remember that the man he reached out to, was an outcast. He was a foreigner from Ethiopia and had a dubious sexual identity (way before sexual identity was something most people were aware of!). He was coming back from Jerusalem. Most likely the eunuch was not allowed in the temple to worship because of his sexual identity. He had travelled from Ethiopia to Jerusalem but was stuck outside. Then on the way back he was reading the scripture from Isaiah 53 about the suffering servant. He could identify so much with the suffering servant because that was his life. He was used by people to fulfill their needs and he was robbed of an important part of his humanity in order to be used in the palace of the queen. Yet, he struggled with understanding the scripture because it seemed that most of the world would have believed that God would come in forceful strength.

Into this scene of seeking and confusion, God called Philip to heal the heart of a broken man. Philip told the eunuch about Jesus, a man who was abused and violated by the systems of power in the world and yet remained faithful to the power of love. That changed everything for Philip! Philip was going against a very strong prejudice in his culture and religion. The people of his time struggled with accepting eunuchs into the assembly of faith. This was based on the teachings of Moses as recorded in Deuteronomy 23:1. Even though later on the prophets lifted that ban as we see in Isaiah 56:4-5, there was still a strong prejudice against eunuchs and men who were not deemed "properly" masculine. This is typical behavior even today where you find some people insisting on quoting some scriptures to support their position against a group of people while forgetting the rest of the scriptures that call for inclusion and love.

The Ethiopian eunuch most likely did not have a choice in being castrated because this was a common practice for kings and queens to surround themselves with people that would not be a threat to their rule. A eunuch would have been considered safe around women and safe against the temptation to rise up against the king or queen because he had no children to inherit his rule. To make things even more complicated, the eunuch was from Ethiopia which meant that he was black. That was another prejudice to overcome for the people of that time. Being black was not seen as an asset for that man.

But despite all of these cultural barriers, Philip responded to the call of the Spirit because he was a good listener to God's voice. Because of his witness to the Ethiopian

eunuch, a strong church movement was started and developed in Ethiopia in Africa. The Ethiopian church today has about 45 to 50 million Christians who all trace their heritage back to that special encounter in the desert. Not only that, but they have a wealth of manuscripts of biblical writings that are yet to be translated. What an incredible difference one man's action made for the whole world!

Philip was a difference maker who helped act on behalf of Jesus in his ways of radical love. We are called to the same kind of faith in action. It is not enough for us to say that we love all people and that God's circle of grace includes all. We have to reach out in love to others.

Imagine what our church would be like if we are willing to go into the wilderness to meet those who have been turned away from faith or who are seeking God but don't have anyone to guide them?

Who would you risk being with on your journey?

What good news of God's transforming love would you be able to share?

What would it mean to baptize those people into our community?

May we, like Philip, be always ready to go into the wilderness to share God's love!
Amen.