

DISCIPLE-MAKING 102

By Andrew Wilson
August 5, 2012

Matthew 5:14-16
Acts 8:26-40

The church's mission is to make disciples. The reason we're here, as a congregation, is to draw people to Christ and make them into people who resemble Christ. If we're not doing that, then everything else we're doing is a great big waste of time.

So why are we so timid about doing our most important job? Why are most Christians today so reluctant to tell people the Good News about Jesus?

In my first message in this series I talked about the misconceptions we have about disciple-making. I identified six lies that have poisoned the church and are keeping us from speaking out. We're told that Christ has become irrelevant. We're convinced that we're not equipped to represent Jesus. We're not smart enough – we don't know enough – and if we do try to introduce people to Jesus, we'll only drive them further away from him. So it's better for us to focus our energy on just being good people.

I hope God used my words to help some of you escape that web of deception. If we want to fulfill God's purpose for our lives, we have to unpack Satan's lies, and re-commit ourselves to the mission of disciple-making.

But something else is needed. The Lord wants us to put our lamps on a stand so that others can find their way to him. But, in our postmodern culture, it's not so obvious what it means to "let your light shine before others" (Matthew 5:16). We also need some basic training in disciple-making. And that's our focus today. We're going to look at the example of the church's very first missionary, Philip, and try to figure out what made him such an effective witness for Jesus. What we're going to discover is that the challenges Philip faced are amazingly similar to the ones we face today. What worked for Philip, as he reached out to the Ethiopian, can work for us as we reach out to people we know.

First, let's clarify who we're talking about. The Philip of the Gospels is one of Jesus' original twelve apostles. The Philip that we just read about in Acts, chapter eight, is a different guy. He's a new convert in the very first church in Jerusalem. We meet him for the first time in Acts, chapter six. The twelve apostles who were leading that church were having the kinds of problems that always arise in dynamic, start-up organizations. They were being stretched too thin. They were teaching and preaching and providing for the people's spiritual needs. But they were also handling the distribution of food to needy people in the congregation. They couldn't give the job the attention it deserved. Complaints arose. The Hellenistic Jews whined that the Hebraic Jews were getting more than their fair share in the distribution. People were ticked off.

The apostles addressed the problem by widening the circles of leadership. They asked the whole fellowship of believers to choose seven people to deal with the congregation's physical needs. "Pick people," they said, "who are wise and full of the Holy Spirit." The seven who were elected essentially

became the first Deacon board. They served tables and made sure the poorest church members were treated with dignity.

But that's not all they did. One of them, Stephen, became the church's first martyr. Immediately after being assigned to deal with the relatively mundane issue of food distribution, Stephen began to testify about Jesus to the spiritual leaders of Israel. They responded by stoning him, and then by systematically persecuting the Jerusalem church. Many of the Jerusalem believers were forced to flee from the city. People wondered if that would be the end of the church.

But of course God was just getting started. In the midst of this tumult, he sent our man, Philip, who was also one of the seven elected table servers, about twenty miles north to the city of Samaria to tell people about Jesus. And to the great surprise of the twelve apostles, Philip was a spectacular success. The Samaritans actually listened to him, and many became Jesus followers. Here's how Luke describes the scene:

When the crowds heard Philip [in Samaria] and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city.

- Acts 8:6-8

Philip's next big adventure is the one I want to focus on. You can turn now to Acts, chapter 8, beginning at verse 26, if you want to follow along.

An angel tells Philip to head down the desert road south of Jerusalem. I think if I'd been Philip I would have said, "Why in the world would I want to leave Samaria? This place is a gold mine! All the action's right here!" But Philip doesn't question God's logic. He obeys the angel even though he has no idea what God has prepared for him out in the desert.

So Philip is effective, first, because he's tuned into God's Spirit.

Few of us have ever been called into service by an angel. But all of us who love the Lord have been called out of the church and into the world. If we don't hear that call, it's not because the Spirit isn't speaking to us; it's because we choose not to listen to him.

Are you listening for the Spirit's call? Are you ready and willing to go wherever he sends you? Is there a desert road in your life that you've been avoiding?

Philip is effective, second, because he's willing to leave his comfort zone for the sake of a person in need. He knows the Lord is the kind of shepherd who leaves his 99 sheep safe and secure in their sheepfold to go in search of the one that's lost.

Many of us feel safe within the familiar confines of the church community. It's hard for us to believe that the work God has for us outside that community is more important than the work we do inside it. As a result, many of us allow church work to get in the way of kingdom work.

Are you using church work to distract you from the more important work of disciple-making?

Philip travels many miles by himself before he overtakes another southbound traveler. Luke identifies him as an Ethiopian eunuch from the court of the queen. The unnamed official is traveling by chariot with an entourage of servants. He has responsibility over the queen's entire treasury. He's obviously a member of the one percent, and a pretty big deal.

Philip can see and hear that that man is reading from the Book of Isaiah as he rumbles down the road. The passage is from chapter 53, where the prophet speaks of the Suffering Servant as a sheep that was led to slaughter. (By the way, it was common in the ancient world to read aloud. Writing in those days didn't incorporate punctuation, and it was easier to work out the intended syntax if you read out loud.)

From all outward appearances, there's a huge cultural and socio-economic gap between Philip and the Ethiopian. Yet Philip doesn't assume, as most of us would, that it's someone else's job to talk to the man about Jesus. He doesn't try to summon James or John on his cell phone, as I would have done. Instead, he sees an opportunity and leaps on it. That's the third reason why he's an effective witness.

"Do you understand what you're reading?" Philip asks.

"How can I," the Ethiopian replies, "unless someone explains it to me?"

The man invites Philip to board the chariot so they can talk. Pretty soon Philip is explaining that the sheep that Isaiah is talking about is actually Jesus of Nazareth. We have to imagine the rest of the conversation, but from that point on the Ethiopian is hanging on Philip's every word.

Is it possible that there's someone in your circle of influence, right now, that isn't going to hear the Good News about Jesus unless you tell it to her? Philip didn't assume that someone else – someone better qualified – would come to the rescue. And neither should we.

The fourth reason Philip is effective is because the Spirit leads him to a seeker. Jesus told his disciples that the harvest is ripe in the fields. Obviously he didn't mean that every person we meet is ready to repent. He meant, rather, that when we respond to his call to go out to the fields, the Spirit leads us to those people who are ripe and ready.

Most of the time, the place where God sends us doesn't look anything like a field of ripe grain. Instead it looks more like the lonely desert road where Philip met the Ethiopian. But God promises to make us fruitful. When we obey his call, and trust in his power, he leads us to people who are ripe and ready.

How does Philip manage to engage the Ethiopian and gain his trust? He's well-mannered, but he's also provocative. That's the fifth reason why Philip is effective. He's not envious of the Ethiopian's wealth, or judgmental of his position. But he's also not afraid to speak to him as an equal. His question – "Do you understand what you're reading?" – is an invitation to talk about God, but it's somewhat risky. What if the Ethiopian thinks Philip is insulting his intelligence, or that he's scornful of his beliefs?

If we want to be effective witnesses, have to strike that same difficult balance in our conversations about Christ. We have to be respectful, and show that we don't fit the stereotype of the judgmental, close-minded Christian that has been created by the media. But we also have to be gutsy enough to stir people up. We have to get them thinking about God, and the things that give meaning and purpose to life, and take the risk that they'll take offense at our words.

The sixth reason Philip is effective is because he isn't worried about his lack of expertise. He speaks with confidence about the things that are close to his heart. And he trusts the Holy Spirit, working through him, to draw the Ethiopian to the Lord.

What kind of training did Philip receive to train him for his missionary work? Academically speaking, it must have been modest. He didn't have a New Testament to guide him. He didn't have access to theology classes and books. Besides that, the training he did have under the apostles in Jerusalem didn't last very long. Compared to many of us, Philip is a neophyte disciple. Yet the Spirit gave Philip what he needed to awaken people's spirits and lead them to Jesus.

Most of us feel completely inadequate as disciple-makers. It doesn't matter how much training we've had – and many of us have been in training for decades – we never feel equipped to speak God's truth into people's lives. We're like wannabe fishermen who have a closet full of reels and poles, and know all about bait and tackle, but have never actually cast a line into the water.

Thank God there are still people in the church who are so excited about what Jesus has done for them, they can't keep quiet. Most of those people are young. Some of them just met the Lord at summer camp or VBS. Most of the rest of them are older people who are new to faith. They could all use more training. They can barely distinguish a bobber from a lure. But that doesn't stop them from throwing their lines in every body of water they come across. And God love them for it. He delights in using them, as he uses Philip, to hook people's hearts and reel them into the kingdom.

Philip doesn't argue with the Ethiopian. He doesn't try to attack the Ethiopian's personal beliefs; he doesn't try to score rhetorical points against him; and he doesn't drag him into an abstract, philosophical discussion. Instead, he points out to him how what was revealed by the prophet has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He speaks from personal experience, and he keeps his focus on the good news about Jesus for all people. That's the seventh reason why Philip is an effective witness.

We have to get over this fear of not having all the answers. The Lord hasn't called us to act as his attorney. He doesn't need us to prove that he's worthy, or that his gospel is true. Our job is simply to be his witnesses. That means telling our personal story of faith in the context of Jesus' story.

The eighth and last reason Philip is effective is because God multiplies what he sows. That's what God always does when we respond to him in faith. He uses our feeble, faltering efforts to start a good infection. In his time, and in his mysterious way, he causes the good we do to go viral.

Luke doesn't tell us what happened when the newly-baptized Ethiopian returned home. He probably talked about Jesus to the queen, and to anyone else who would listen to him. We can't quantify exactly how many people were saved because of Philip, and what effect he had on the future church. Nor can we know what kind of impact we're making in the world, and how many people will be in heaven because of our faithfulness. But Christ himself has promised to multiply our work thirty, sixty, even a hundredfold.

We could all use more training in disciple-making. We're hoping to make that a priority for the new school year for our church family. But what we must learn, above all, is to love people who don't know God the way God loves them. John says in one of his letters, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18). If you've been afraid to tell the Good News about Jesus to others, ask God to fill your heart with his love for them.

Rick Warren has blazed the trail for many Christians who want to be more effective witnesses. I want to close with a challenge that he issues in his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*.

Is anyone going to be in heaven because of you? Will anyone in heaven be able to say to you, "I want to thank you. I'm here because you cared enough to share the Good News with me"? Imagine the joy of greeting people in heaven whom you helped get there. The eternal salvation of a single soul is more important than anything else you will ever achieve in life.

Lord, give us a burden and concern for people who don't know you. Help us to see them as you do. Help us to care enough to share your gospel with them.

Lord, we admit that at times we're afraid to step out. Please give us new courage to do that. Remind us,, when we're timid, that your word, when spoken, will not return to you empty.

As we feast at your table today, strengthen our faith so we'll be able to fulfill your will in every area of our lives. We pray in Christ's holy name. Amen.