

May 2, 2021  
Open Doors with Christ's Love  
First Lutheran Church  
Pastor Joshua Graber

Grace and peace in the name of God our loving Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Welcome back to worship in the sanctuary and welcome to the brave tech novices that are joining us via zoom this morning to see what the live worship experience will be like through that format. We are grateful to be back in the sanctuary and to worship together in person.

Normally, when pastors talk about "opening up our doors" it is talking about inviting new people into our community and today it may feel strange that opening our doors is about inviting our members back into this space and into this in person indoors community, where we are invited to worship together once again.

The Book of Acts is the story of the early church being **opened up** by the Holy Spirit, who guides believers to **open up** their understanding of Jesus' message and in invitation to be part of the church to new people.

The early church starts with a scene where the disciples are huddled and insulated from the outside world. Thank God these people were invited to open up their lives and go outside. They followed God's lead to find new people as directed by Jesus first in Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria and now in this story of Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch we see them begin the

final journey of opening up their lives and the gospel to people that are from the ends of their known world...the ends of the earth.

Here with the Ethiopian Eunuch, Phillip is called to open up the gospel to someone who technically would not be allowed in traditional Jewish religious communities to practice their faith because as a eunuch they found defined as less than a man and between genders. Eunuchs often were in this position because they were part of a royal family and the royal figure in power did not want them to produce heirs or become a threat to the king or queen by having heirs or getting ideas about taking over the throne. It says that this person was in the Court of Queen Candace and in charge of her treasury. But even with that power, a eunuch could feel dehumanized and like they do not fit in. However, this Ethiopian may have already been a Jew because the texts says that they were worshipping in Jerusalem, which may mean that some Jewish religious groups allowed him in their midst.

It is dramatic and powerful that an angel sends Phillip to meet this person and invite them in to the church and there is an interesting historical connection with this region. There was a Jewish community in Ethiopia for 600 years before this exchange with Phillip, starting when the First Temple was destroyed and the Babylonians swept in and took some in exile and left others to flee or fend for themselves. The Jewish community in Ethiopia seemed to keep the faith and even today the Jewish community in Ethiopia still exists and they worship in the way of the First Temple 26 centuries ago.

As the early church contemplated who they were and how they were called to share the gospel, they may not have thought that they had the means to reach the ends of the earth, but the Spirit helps Phillip get to the right place at

the right time to reach someone that was ready to hear the gospel. This may be the richest and most powerful figure in the early church, and would have been a breakthrough convert for the apostles. This new Christian may have had resources to support the church growing and and they go back to a place where history has shown to be a fertile land for supporting a new faith, because of the Jewish Community's presence there for centuries.

It's a fascinating story! And maybe the line that sticks out the most to us is this Ethiopian asking, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" As we think of that question as a church, "What is to prevent us from [fill in the blank]?" The answer has often been, "Well... we've never done it that way before" Or "well..it needs to go through the proper committee" or "well that might upset [Fill in the blank]" And there are reasons for those responses. Recently we have had the response, "well...there is a pandemic". But as we begin to come together again, I hope we will begin to think about how we open up and who we invite in.

We are going to do our best to connect all of our members to a live worship experience in the coming weeks, through livestream of the service and hopefully through broadcasting the service on the radio in the neighborhood and maybe through that effort we will be able to invite new people in. Maybe the Spirit is at work around us, preparing people's hearts for the invitation to "come and see" here at First. Scripture and this story of the Ethiopian that is invited into the church are testaments that help us believe that this work of the Spirit can be happening around us too in preparation for an invitation!

And there is something miraculous that happens at the end of the story from Acts. Phillip is whisked away to preach to those from regions close to him, in

Greek and Samaritan territory, filled with people that Judeans had been dehumanized and not seen as fertile ground for the church. Having invited the Ethiopian Eunuch into the church, there must have been a freedom of seeing any person as a potential convert, as he was able to see other neighbors that he had overlooked.

And the way the Spirit transports him reminds us that Jesus and the church we experience today are not confined to space and time. God connects us all no matter where we are, as we worship and as we grow the church together, with neighbors and other disciples around the world.

As we learn about the vine and branches in our Gospel and that God is Love in John's Epistle, we are reminded that we are all connected in a loving community. And while some of us may have felt cut off from the vine in the last year because we have not been in this place, God is faithful and the church continues to bear fruit and grow as long as we are connected to the true vine of Jesus Christ. And from that relationship and that love of God feeding us, the love we share can also flow into a world that is in need of hearing this good news— that they too are invited into the Loving God we know through Jesus Christ! That's good news! While we are inside, let's not forget to bring that good news outside these doors! Amen.

May peace of Christ keep your hearts in the love of God! Amen.