

The Importance of Coming Alongside

1 John 4:7-21
Acts 8:26-40

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Faith Community

There was this guy, see, a real influential guy. The Bible tells us he'd gone all the way from Ethiopia to Jerusalem, which in that day was a big deal. He'd done it in order to worship, of all things. Remember, this was a heavy hitter. He was the queen's treasurer, which meant he was at the top of his game, earning the respect and confidence of a world leader and soaking up his own share of bling. Riding in a chariot and reading as he went; well, that just piled on the gravy.

While that was going on, there was Philip. He had hit the big time as well, speaking to hundreds of people in Samaria, and watching God work wonders through him.

Tradition says he was one of the first Deacons. He had a tremendous personal ministry going on, with people coming to faith, relationships strengthened and healings that led to great hope. The book of Acts tells us that **there was great joy in that city** (Acts 8:8, TNIV) thanks to how God worked through Philip.

The day comes, however, when he hears a command to leave all that glory and park his carcass along the side of a road and chill there awhile.

Philip had been working north of Jerusalem, and now was being told to go south of the city. It didn't seem a wise use of time or resources, let alone personal safety, but he was about to learn the importance of coming alongside.

So, God calls this guy away from what was probably the greatest success of his life, to sit by a road, a desert road, where the last chance gas station was several miles back. He didn't know why, but there he was anyway. He would learn that he'd been uprooted to reach one person. Just one.

So along comes the chariot. Philip runs up to it, and to describe what happens next, the passage uses the Greek word for 'glue.' Philip heard God say, 'that's how tenacious you're to be with this guy.' He may have even climbed right up on the running board of the thing, and just imagine what the poor guy must've thought when he suddenly had an extra passenger.

He comes alongside the man in his chariot, hears him read, and breaks the ice by asking him,

Do you understand what you are reading? (v. 30)

Right away we see an important lesson. Philip started where the man was in his own personal life. God met this Ethiopian where he was, and God will do the same with you.

Notice please that from this point on, the Ethiopian sets the agenda. He asks the questions. Philip asked if he understood, to which the man replied,

“How can I....unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. (v. 31)

The man was reading a passage from the Old Testament book of Isaiah, and wanted to know:

“Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about...?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. (v. 34)

Remember they're on the move while this conversation is going on. The more they talk, the more the man comes alive, the more his life makes sense, and so when they come upon a stream or pond he's ready to go:

“Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” (v. 36)

It began with a question. It resulted in a person's coming to faith. It also represented the Gospel's move into Africa.

Opportunities like this are endless:

Ananias wanted nothing to do with Saul, the guy who'd been breathing murderous threats on the church, but God told him to come alongside, and Saul began his transformation into the apostle Paul.

Barnabas picked up from there and came alongside, introducing him to the disciples who otherwise wouldn't have given him the time of day.

Years later it happened again in Paul's life. Near the end of it all, he was being taken to Rome as a prisoner. As far as we know, he would die there. When they finally made

land in Italy after a terrifying journey, church leaders surprised him by showing up to escort him all the way to Rome. In a deeply moving verse we're told that,

At the sight of these people Paul thanked God and was encouraged. (28:15) They came alongside.

Let me tell you how this happened in my life. Forty seven years ago my father died, suddenly and unexpectedly, much too young, and leaving five of us all bewildered and crushed.

Dad had done well in his career and personal life, and we knew there'd be a big response.

The visitation days were long and exhausting, and culminated in a funeral with an enormous crowd and a procession of cars a few miles long. What I didn't realize, however, until sometime later, was the presence of one particular young man. It was early in my youth ministry days, and this young man was on our college leadership team.

Looking back, I remember constantly seeing Mike somewhere in the funeral home. He'd be standing nearby or I'd see him sitting in the back of the room, by himself. Other times he'd be with different clusters of my kids who came to show their support. He'd run an errand every so often if we needed anything.

He hardly said a word all that time. He was just there. He came alongside.

A week later during one of our youth group meetings I saw him walking around with a baseball hat in his hand, and later that night the hat was filled with money to be given to our church in memory of Dad.

He hardly said a word during all that time. He was just there. He came alongside.

How about you? Is there someone with whom you need to come alongside? Is there someone who's done that in your life? Do you wish there were?

Success or failure is not the point. The point is giving glory to God. You keep your vision clear. You stay focused on the mission to which you've been called.

This turned out to be a pilgrimage for both of them.

The Ethiopian chariot rider found a brand new life as Philip explained what he'd been reading. He would also become the very first Gentile (person outside Israel) to be won to Christ, and in turn touch an entire new continent. Way back, in the first chapter of Acts, the risen Christ told his people they'd be witnesses all the way to the ends of the earth. Now it was happening. A new part of the world is being claimed, all because Philip came alongside someone.

Philip, for his part, crossed cultural and religious boundaries to communicate good news to someone who, in spite of his highly successful life, was in desperate need. Philip would never be the same when he learned what God would do through him.

What might God want to do in you and through you?