“Justice Born of Water and Spirit”
Acts 8:26-40; John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

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From the Pulpit
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A communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 5, May 3, 2015, dedicated to Bev Orazen, Cathy Levine and Goldie Fisher and all the BREAD men and women who have worked tirelessly for justice in Columbus, to Jennifer Ruglio and Jon Lucas our BREAD organizers for the past two years and to the nine members of the Confirmation class of 2015 as they discern God’s call in their lives to serve Christ and always to the glory of God!

“Justice Born of Water and Spirit”

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Inquiring minds ask difficult and penetrating questions. If you don’t believe me, come to Confirmation Class today or anytime. Through 30 years of teaching confirmation to hundreds of teenagers, some of the best questions about our faith have come from these curious and inquiring minds.
For example, “Why was John the Baptist crazy?” My answer, “He was more wild for God than crazy. All he wanted was for people to repent, be baptized and follow Jesus!” Muttering response... “I bet his mother called him crazy.”

Another time after going through the story of the Passion of Jesus Christ, one confirmand with tears rolling down her cheeks, with a mix of true sadness mingled with anger asked, “Why didn’t anyone ever tell me he was murdered? I have been coming to church since I was born and no one ever told me Jesus was murdered. How could anyone want to kill Jesus?” My answer after silence and offering a tissue was, “The people who killed Jesus feared him and didn’t know him and love him like you do. It was terrible. It was unjust. They must been haunted by killing such an innocence man.”

And of course, “If Adam and Eve were the first two people, who did their kids marry, their brothers and sisters?” (There was a collective grossed-out “yuck...”). My answer, “Well that story is more of a metaphor than a fact. The Bible is true but isn’t always factual....” Response: “What does that mean? What are you talking about Rev. Tim?”
They asked for it. A long answer followed... Soft landings are not always part of Confirmation Q and A.

Today, in the Acts of the Apostles, one Apostle acts kind of crazy – because he is following God. Philip wakes and walks out of Jerusalem into the Gaza Strip on a deserted road in the heat of the midday. He does this because an Angel of the Lord told him to go. The Act of this Apostle to wake and walk into the middle of the Desert in the middle of the day is borderline madness (What would John the Baptist’s mother call Philip?). But, Philip is compliant, obedient and faithful. He goes. When we simply get up and go after listening to the still small voice of God talking to us – good things happen!

Philip discovers the deserted desert highway is not deserted after all. He meets a foreigner on the road. This man is an important man, a powerful man, a man who has much authority as a Foreign Minister for the Queen of Ethiopia. He is lacking one power – the power to understand the word of God. Nevertheless, he is willing to be instructed by Philip in the good news of Jesus.

We should note that the name “Ethiopian” in the Greco-Roman World of the First Century was often applied
to “Black people.” In other words, here is a powerful Black Man from an exotic land – the edge of the world as Philip knows it – lost and curious about God and Jesus and how to be baptized and saved. And Philip – sent by an Angel of the Lord into the desert is happy to help!

Like a Confrimand of the Early Church, the Ethiopian (who is given no name in the story) asks Philip to explain the meaning of Isaiah 53:7ff, “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and a lamb before his shearer is dumb… and in his humiliation he received no justice…” Philip points to our Crucified and Risen Lord as the One of whom Isaiah foretold greatness, the one who received no justice but rose in spite of this egregious injustice unto death to become the greatest leader of any faith in all of time. He is savior worth following!

This earnest inquirer who meets and responds gracefully to Philip from the edge of his chariot on a desert road seeks baptism in a desert pool of water and thus becomes the first witness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Queen of Ethiopia and the people of East Africa. With his baptism, Psalm 68:31 is fulfilled, “…Let Ethiopia hasten to stretch out her hands to God.”
How many times have you been in the place of the Ethiopian – lost and confused on a road far from home and a stranger has met you there, ministered to you there and showed you the way to God? He or she has stopped by unexpectedly and gently, kindly opened your eyes to hope and understanding and justice.

How many times have you been in the place of Philip – heading out into the day not knowing where you were going but feeling compelled by something or some presence of God to step out and follow God’s call to serve and to witness?

My guess is all of us at some time have been in one of these two places. But, if we “Claim” we have never been in either place, perhaps it is because we have not been listening or paying any attention to the Spirit of God or the Angels of God Still Speaking in this World. We have a banner facing the north parking lot and near the 9th Street Entrance. It is says, “God is Still Speaking.” My question is, “Am I Still Listening to God?” I hope you are asking this too.

Thursday morning, I was blessed to wake early and go to a breakfast which honored remarkable men and women of faith in Columbus. We called these awards “Living Faith
Awards.” One woman who I have come to know through BREAD is Bev Orazen. Bev is a member of St. Thomas More Newman Center on the Campus of The Ohio State University. She has been BREAD’s leading spokeswoman on the Mental Health initiative. In her professional career Bev was an Oncology Nurse at OSU. Now retired, she serves others through her faith in action. While speaking to her faith Bev quoted Catholic theologian, Richard Rohr with these words:

_We eventually know that Someone Else is working through us, in us, for us, and in spite of us. After enlightenment, our life is not our own. Our yes deeply matters. The word for that yes is, quite simply, love. If we love our neighbor, there would be no wars, no hunger, and no poverty because there is nothing we wouldn’t do for those we love._

But she went on to say this, “_My faith teaches that my life of faith has two feet - one foot is charity, the other is justice. To be able to stand, to move forward in faith, you must use both feet._”

You and I are being called with our two feet to the road tomorrow night. It is not a deserted highway on the Gaza Strip. It is just off US 71 at the Ohio State Fairgrounds. We
are being called to use our feet for justice action. Remember, we have two feet – charity and justice.

Rob Harvey says about charity and justice: “Justice is harder than charity. Justice requires skin in the game. Justice means we have to get our hands dirty, our knees skinned, our egos humbled and our comfort shaken. Justice is harder than charity, but it is exactly in these hard places that we see and experience the heart of God. Charity is a very American type of thing. Justice is a very God type of thing.”

Justice makes us uncomfortable at times. But, we are people who follow in the footsteps of a Savior who laid down his life for those he loved. Talk about uncomfortable! I hope I wake up tomorrow, and I hope you wake up, too! And like Philip so many years ago, I hope you hear the still small voice of God saying “get up and go.” I will be there as I listen to God speaking through folks like Bev calling me to deeper faith and walk with both feet – in solidarity and love for our sisters and brothers who have been knocked off their feet. They have suffered much in this community because of violent crime, mental health issues, housing, being left out as new Americans, and suffering injustice and indignity in our community. They need us to help them stand up again.
Tomorrow night, I will take my chariot (such as it is - a 2008 Hyundai Tucson) and park it outside the Celeste Center and enter on my feet of Charity and Justice to serve God. I hope you come and join me for a few hours of BREAD Rising.

Before we do justice on Monday night, I invite you to join me now at the table of our Lord – who seeks to fill us with hope and bread for the journey. Amen.

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