

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 5, May 6, 2012, dedicated to Marie Pfeiffer for her 92nd birthday, to Gerry Worth on this first meeting of the congregation during his moderator leadership term, to all United Methodist pastors and congregations effected by the church's vote against LGBT persons this past week, and always to the glory of God!

“Fear Blossoming into Hope”

Acts 8:26-40; John 15:1-8

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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.

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Imagine this: You have been praying all your life. Each day you ask for God's guidance and direction. Mostly, silence surrounds your daily prayers. On this sweltering summer day, you hear a voice speak to you during your prayers. You thought you were all alone. And since you have no I-Pad, no iphone4, not even an answering machine or no voicemail, it can't be one of them. So, fearfully (and joyfully) you listen. This voice is clear and calm. It is (none other than) the voice of an angel of the Lord: *“Get up and get going. Walk south of town and out into the desert at noon today.”*

What would your reaction be? Would it be: *“Let me get this right . . . you want me to walk south of town on this hot day alone at noon? . . . right!”* Or would it be: *“Consider it done, Lord.”*

Now, imagine you were Philip and you were truly led by the Holy Spirit. You would be obedient and be in the desert at noon, waiting for your next command. By placing yourself in the desert alone at high noon, you are ready to meet an Ethiopian eunuch.

Down the desolate road comes the only other man willing to travel through a desert at noontime. He is Ethiopia's treasurer and he is in charge of the queen's money - the Timothy Geithner of Ethiopia. He is returning home from a spiritual pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Riding in a chariot, he has been reading from the prophet Isaiah (and you thought texting and driving was dangerous!). He stops to pick you up - a lone walker melting in the desert sun.

What are the odds of a powerful Ethiopian eunuch riding through the desert at noon reading the Hebrew prophet Isaiah and meeting one of Christianity's first evangelists? I think even I'll Have Another had better odds yesterday running out of post Number 19 yesterday at the Kentucky Derby!

Philip is led to the right place at the right time. The Spirit leads Philip into a conversation in which he asks if the eunuch understands Isaiah. "*Without help,*" says the eunuch, "*there is no way to understand what I am reading.*" Philip helps interpret the prophet Isaiah, which leads to the eunuch's conversion to Christ and baptism in a stream in the desert (also a rarity in my experience). A fear and uncertainty blossom into hope in the desert as the Ethiopian is converted by a conversation.

Now, consider your life. Although I can't imagine too many of you in this particular situation, my guess is all of you have had similar conversations. Do you remember when you were wandering and wondering what you would do with your life? You were struggling with the ideas in a new book, or perhaps an old one like Isaiah. Someone, maybe a mentor, or perhaps like Philip a wayfaring stranger led by the Spirit of the Lord, found their way into your life. You were trying to put together the puzzling pieces of your life story. Some pieces made sense. Other pieces didn't seem to fit. You had tried the usual route of counselors - psychological, spiritual, school, pastoral, career. None of them seemed to be able to fit together the pieces either.

Then, in a passing conversation on a street corner, in the school cafeteria, walking across campus, working with children, working with numbers, you found your bliss and your purpose. You

opened yourself to the power of the Spirit of God to hear, to see, to touch, to taste, or to feel your way to your renewed purpose in life. It may have been gradual, but it may have come all at once, when you least expected it. The key was you were open to God's Spirit. You were open to conversion – which simply means “to turn around.”

We are turned around all the time by heartfelt conversations. Do you remember such a converting conversation in your life? Someone told me the other day of a moment in their life where an unknown person on a city bus helped them sort out the struggles they were having about the death of a loved one. She said, “*I began to feel like myself again. A cloud was lifted. As I turned to thank the woman, she was gone. Maybe she had left by the middle door on the bus. Do you think she was an angel of the Lord, Rev. Ahrens?*” I am not sure if it was an angel. It could have been. But I am sure she was converted by a conversation. All the feelings of despair she had been feeling were stripped away.

True conversations of conversion are never forced. They happen quite naturally when the time is right. When we are open, God is present. This truth of converting conversations is quite interesting because there are people in our lives who are anxious to convert us for their purposes. They want us to turn us to their way of seeing the world and experiencing faith or life. Ninety-nine percent of the time, those folks do not help us. There is too much of their ego and their will in the seemingly scripted presentations they place before us.

But, when we meet up with genuine people of God, genuine people who care about us, we know it. We know in our heart of hearts, they are listening and loving us and giving us an opportunity to be heard, to change, to turn around. These moments are never forced. They are as natural as the actual act of turning around itself. No one is trying to “save a soul.” No one is trying to make a buck. No one is attempting to move up the sales charts at church with a new convert in their hip pocket. They actually meet us where we are and they are listening to our stories and (in the

spirit of God) they are helping us come to new understandings of who we are and whose we are.

Think about the conversations you have had in your life which have led to your turning around, changing directions and finding your feet. Now, think about the conversations you have had which have done the same for others. That's right. Each of you has tremendous faith to share. You have insights into scripture, holy texts and daily life to share. You have amazing grace to share. You have an openness to God and to other human beings that needs to be shared. Each one of you has been filled with God's Holy Spirit in ways that others around you have not. This is a gift that God has given you.

So, when you have an urge or inkling, when you feel a nudge or impulse to get up, go and speak to someone, follow that impulse. More directly, when you are called by God or one of God's special angels to get up and go into the desert at noon, go. You never know what chariot will be passing by with an Ethiopian eunuch reading the prophet Isaiah. If nothing else, it certainly will lead to a great conversation.

Perhaps, just perhaps, even more will happen. Perhaps one of you, or God willing both of you, will be turned around. Fear blossoming into hope will be experienced in the spirit of the Lord our God. And that is Good News. Amen.