

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, May 10, 2009, Mother's Day, Easter 4, dedicated to Ruth Sitler and Lorene Ahrens for Mother's Day and their birthdays, to Luke Ahrens on his college graduation, to Angelina McLaughlin, Kenyatta Bosley, Caroleen Wilkes, our 2009 Schumacher Award winners, and Braden Andrew Neverman on his baptismal day, and always to the glory of God!

“Converted by a Conversation”

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. Then one day, you hear the voice of an angel of the Lord. You have no Blackberry. No Bluetooth. No iPhone. It is not a Twitter, a text or an email. The voice is clear and calm. It is (none other than) the voice of an angel of the Lord: "At noon today, get up and take a walk through the desert."

What would your reaction be? Would it be: "Let me get this right . . . you want me to go through the desert – walking on a deserted road at high noon . . . right!" Or would it be: "Consider it done, Lord."

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 the Timothy Geutner of Ethiopia. He is Ethiopia's treasurer and he is in charge of the queen's money.

He is returning home from a spiritual pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Riding in a chariot, he has been reading from the prophet Isaiah. 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 Old Testament prophet Isaiah meeting one of the evangelists of the early church? I think even Mine That Bird had better odds last week to win the Kentucky Derby at 50-1!

Philip was 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.

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? Someone, perhaps 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 subway, 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 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.”

People are turned around all the time by heartfelt conversations. I remember one with my mother when I was a sophomore in college. I was headed in the wrong direction. My mom gently asked, “Why?” Then, she offered just as gently that I didn't need to do what I was doing. I didn't need to hurt myself. She helped me turn around in the blink of an eye. The choices I began to make eventually led me to the life path I am on. I was converted by a conversation with my mom. Thank you, Mom!

I have found that conversations of conversion are not 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. They are not trying to sell us anything. They are not trying to make a buck. They are not trying to move up the sales charts at church with a new convert in their hip pocket. They actually meet us where we

are and hear us share our story and help 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 have 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 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. Amen.