

**What Would You Do?**, a sermon in response to Acts 8:26-40, John 15:1-8, and 1 John 4:7-21, by Rev. Scot McCachren for Hilltop Church, Mendham, NJ, April 28, 2024 (B Easter 5).

Imagine yourself, for a moment, at a coffee shop. You overhear a young woman interviewing with the manager about a job. She's explaining that she didn't list a permanent address on the application because she's in foster care and will age out when she turns 18 in two weeks. She's looking for a job because she'll be moving out and needs to support herself. The manager says that makes her unreliable. He doesn't want to risk hiring someone that's just coming out of foster care... ***What Would You Do?*** +++ You're at the local batting cages. Next to you there's a girl who wants a turn at bat, but her dad is saying that baseball is just for her brother, not for her, even though she's begging to give it a try. He says dance class is for girls, not sports. Then the dad leaves to go wait for them in the car... ***What Would You Do?*** +++ You're in a convenience store. You see a man pour water on the floor, then lay down on the water and begin crying out like he slipped, fell, and was injured. You know it's a lie... ***What Would You Do?*** +++ These, and many more, are situations created by John Quiñones on the ABC show called "What Would You Do?" He's throws people into situations they don't expect – situations loaded with moral implications – situations that cry out for people of conviction and courage to step up and intervene... Each segment leaves us wondering, "What **would** I do..., ***really?***" Would ***I*** have the courage to do the right thing?  
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Today's reading from Acts could easily be featured by Quiñones on his show. Philip has been traveling to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ in these very early days of the fledgling church. He has just finished his work in Samaria, converting a lot of believers among those traditional enemies of the Jews. Now, an angel unexpectedly sends Philip, literally, to the middle of nowhere: "the *wilderness* road that connects Jerusalem with Gaza." There, of all things, he runs into a **eunuch**... on his way home to **Ethiopia** from Jerusalem. The eunuch is wealthy and has great power back in his kingdom. He oversees the Queen's entire treasury. – Therefore, he is riding in a chariot driven for him by others. When Philip encounters him, the eunuch is reading the prophet Isaiah but he cannot understand what it means without Philip's help. Once he understands that Isaiah is pointing through the ages at Jesus Christ – who left the earth just weeks ago – the eunuch wants to be baptized into the Christian faith. +++ It **seems** like an easy call, doesn't it? Philip is a looking for ***converts***. The eunuch wants to **be** a convert. +++ But there's more to it than that. – There's a lot going on just below the surface; things that meant something then... +++ ... And, after two thousand years, they still mean something now. >> So, before we end the segment and hit you with the question, "What Would ***You*** Do?," we need to look more closely at the questions this Eunuch from Ethiopia raises about who should or shouldn't be accepted into, ***and affirmed by***, the church.

First of all, he's a foreigner. Not just a foreigner from outside ***Palestine*** – he's not from the Mediterranean area ***at all***. Ethiopia is deep into Africa – over by the *Arabian Sea*. And, being from that area, he looks very different. Was the promised Hebrew messiah even **for** people like that? Is the new Christian *Church* even **meant** for them? That's a serious question. I mean, at this point even the Apostles don't all agree that Gentiles **of the Empire** should be baptized into the faith, – non-Jews from places like Corinth, Galatia, and Rome. Many thought that the new Church should be ***only for Jewish*** converts. So, would it be **right** for Philip to decide, all on his own, that this exotic-looking foreigner will be baptized? +++ Then there's the question about his being a ***eunuch*** – castrated since childhood. Is he really even a **man**? He certainly isn't a woman. Is there a place among us for someone **like that: a person of ambiguous gender**? It was something to think about – something, in fact, that Christians still argue about **today**. +++ ||| +++ ***And here's another red flag:*** This African man had gone all the way to Jerusalem **to worship**. You'd only go to ***Jerusalem*** to worship if you want to worship the **God of Israel**. But if he **had** worshiped there, someone would have helped him understand Isaiah? Why hadn't they? >> It's because he **didn't** worship there, – not in the temple at least, and not with any priests. At that time, the Jews would have **rejected** him from the temple because he is not "one of them:" he has an uncertain faith background – perhaps even pagan. Rejected, even after coming all that way. He had found no one to worship with in Jerusalem – no one to guide his budding faith. The eunuch is disappointed and dejected. Philip knows that ***whatever*** he does next will be precedent-setting.

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And now you've come to the moment of choice. In this scenario, you've baptized before, but so far only within certain parameters. Now, you are face to face with someone who has already been rejected by religious leaders, someone barred from houses of worship, someone who came to these shores from a different land, someone who looks different, has different customs, has an unknown religious background, and who deviates from our binary sense of gender. ... It might seem easy, sitting here talking about it this morning – like it's easy from the other side of a TV to judge the folks on the TV show. But make sure to keep in mind your *own* religious background – the rules..., beliefs..., dogmas... What will your *friends* say about your choice? There's no *time* to talk to your pastor or a priest. ... >>> “As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’” >> **What Will You Do?**

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While you stew on that, let me point to the Good News of this text that's hiding in plain sight – and might help you answer the question: *your Good Shepherd will find you and bring you home when other sheep push you from the fold*. Why is *Philip* there, on this wilderness road in the middle of nowhere, for this chance meeting with someone he hadn't *expected*? Someone he couldn't have *imagined* and didn't really even *understand*? +++ **Philip is there because the Holy Spirit sent him there to meet the eunuch in his despair.** +++ Religious *institutions* may fail us. We may be turned away for who we are, or who we are *not*. We may be confused about where we're going, unable to find the way and unhappy that no one stops to help us. +++ But when we cannot find our way to God, the Good Shepherd tracks us down. Maybe not in Jerusalem. Maybe not between these walls, if we fail in our mission. God will meet you where you are – even on your road of despair if need be. +++ Jesus Christ and Philip deliver a powerful and affirming message that day to this ultimate outsider – this mysterious, exotic, man from the edge of the known world – this powerful man who *will* be listened to when he returns home – and the message is this: I see you. I recognize you. You are a child of God. And you are enough, just as you are. ||| +++ +++ The gospel of Christ **is open to everyone** – and it is *branching out further and faster* than anyone expected – *beyond* Palestine – *beyond* the reach of their persecutors – and now... even *beyond* the reach of Rome itself. +++

You know, I'd love to be able to say this morning that over the generations the Church has evolved beyond the issues that came into play in this choice: rules about who may be counted as one of, who can share in the sacraments, which is the *real* faith? I'd love to be able to say that – but I cannot. We can't seem to get past it. But these things are no stumbling block to Almighty God. +++ ||| +++ The eunuch asks Philip, “Look, here is water! **What is to prevent me** from being baptized?” Philip simply answers, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” +++ And, in response, this morning I'm asking, “**What's to keep us...?**”, knowing there's a community and world out there that's hurting and lonely, and doesn't know if our temples and churches can be trusted as a place of refuge... “**What's to keep us...?**” from leaving these walls and finding them on their journeys – joining them along whatever wilderness road they happen to be traveling? +++ **What's to keep us** from reaching beyond our safety zone to risk new encounters, new ways to engage and serve our community? +++ **What's to keep us** from taking up the mantle of Philip – of Dorcas and Priscilla – of Peter and John – of Lydia and Paul... – **what's to keep us** from taking up their mantles and offering the Church our world so deeply needs – at the moment it needs it the most?

My siblings, just as Jesus Christ is connected to the Father and to the Holy Spirit – so, too, are we connected to him. +++ Christ is the vine. +++ We are the branches. +++ Our nourishment – our strength – our connection to everything else in the world – comes from him. And so – our ministry is nothing more – *and nothing less* – than a continuation of the work Jesus began... the work the Apostles picked up in *their* time. +++ >>> And that brings us back to the question... Facing the ultimate outsider on the wilderness road – asking to be baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ... **What Will You Do?** ... I charge you to commit to your answer. Carry it with you. Don't forget it when the moment of truth comes... What implications will that choice mean for you? What explanations will you have to give? Make it a part of who you are and everything you do. **And, like John Quiñones, the Holy Spirit watches from the wings.** +++ “What Will You Do?” +++ Will you have the courage to share the extravagant, inclusive, love and grace of Jesus Christ? +++ Where – and Who – are those among us –

or maybe just beyond our reach – who are ready for a spiritual journey and need to hear your story – drawn somehow – like the Ethiopian had been drawn to Isaiah – drawn, to the inexplicable truth – the grace – and the love – of Jesus Christ? +++ Where are they? How will we find them? How will we serve them? **What... Will... WE... Do... Together?**

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.