



## Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

“Nobody Goes It Alone”

The Rev. Melissa Anne Rogers

May 10, 2009 (Mother’s Day)

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 8:26-40

There is a Yiddish proverb that says, “God could not be everywhere, so God made mothers.” Today, on the 137th annual celebration of moms, I pray that statement resonates with you, that you can give thanks for the maternal presence in your life. Beyond remembering the moms in our lives, it’s a good day to be grateful for all those saints who helped raise us, those still shaping our lives, those who go about growing children and grandchildren. Think of the people who have given time, sweat, and tears, so that we might be what we are and hope for what we are becoming.

If Mothers’ Day calls to mind those who raise us in life, Baptism Day calls to mind those who raise us in faith. The Sacrament of Baptism is very much about community. We don’t “do” private baptisms. WE have to be here for those being baptized. WE have to be here to witness to them and their parents that this is not a journey they take alone.

The question will be asked, “Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, promise to guide and nurture David and Russell, by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging them to know and follow Christ and to be faithful members of his church?” You will answer in the affirmative, I suspect, without realizing everything that this means. This means - YOU become the guides ... the teachers, mentors, friends, companions, and more, to these children, and to their parents. How dare we say yes? Because so many have said yes to us. Embedded in our vow is a silent invitation to remember our own fellow travelers who have lent a hand and more along our own faith journey. If we have been nurtured in faith, if our beliefs have integrity, if our hope is genuine, if our love authentic, we’ve got a lot of people to thank. Whether they have given quite deliberately, or unintentionally, or even haphazardly, our spiritual lives are not ours alone. They never have been.

Who has raised you in the faith? Your old pastor, your patient Sunday School teacher, your grumpy neighbor, your devout aunt? I wonder. And I wonder something else. Who calls *your* face to mind on baptism day? In whose life of faith have you made a difference? Unless you live under a rock, someone here has been shaped by you. It is your faith practices that inspire others? Is your sense of certainty an encouragement? Or has your comfort with doubt released, or given someone full of doubt, some peace? Maybe your prayers have given voice to the needs others can’t yet speak. Maybe your battle with demons has been a testament to God’s faithful presence through your personal darkness. Or maybe your steadfast determination to keep church limited to Sunday worship has encouraged someone here to keep reaching out to bring you in. At the very least, your humanness has just served as a reminder that Christian people are not perfect people. Just what is your witness?

In the book, *Faith Matters*, theologian Sondra Higgins puts US on the hook, whether we want to be or not. Each of us, she argues, mentors others in the faith. “We participate in the possibility of becoming

faith mentors simply by opening our lives to God at work in us. With humility, we provide guidance to those seeking meaning in their lives. We realize others will experience us as faith mentors, knowing it is not a title we may claim for ourselves.”

As a parent, there comes a day when you realize your children have been listening when you thought they were mindlessly playing in the other room. They’ve heard your words, they’ve been exposed to your judgements. In the family of faith, we’re all exposed. No matter how mature our faith, how young, how confused or lopsided or fragile it may be, our lives bear witness to the faith we profess. And it may not always be the witness we’d like it to be. Despite the imperfections of our lives, sometimes even through them, God takes it all. The parts we think useless, God will use. The wise Reformer Martin Luther said, “God can carve the rotten wood and ride the lame horse.” God is revealed in you, and in the community, and you are doing the revealing.

As the Bantu peoples say, “a person is a person because of other persons.” In her autobiography, *Leaving Church*, Barbara Brown Taylor saw her little Georgia congregation this way. At a church member’s end of summer barbeque, after she engaged in the obligatory pastoral chit-chat and had her one beer, she wandered from the grown-up gathering inside the house down towards the pool where there were scads of swimming kids and splashing teens, shrieking, paddling around in one big pool. All these kids she’d baptized, all in there together. But then, like most pool parties, it went south. A fully clothed dad nearby was thrown in, a brazen act that incited mayhem. Kids went wild as potential victims were located and submerged. Even the coiffed moms with that “don’t you dare” look were getting dunked. The reverence for the pastor eventually gave way and she, too, was tossed in by some brave kid. “I never found out who my savior was,” she writes, “but when I broke the surface, I looked around at all of those shining people with makeup running down their cheeks, with hair plastered to their heads, and I was so happy to be one of them. Bobbing in that healing pool with all those other flawed beings of light, I looked around and saw them as I had never seen them before.” She belonged to those people, to the family of the faithful all struggling together to swim in the wonderful waters of the Christian faith. Although she was their pastor and mentor, they were also hers. The communion of the saints, the fellowship of the faithful, the priesthood of all believers - these words took on new meaning for her.

Today, (at the 9:30 service of worship), two new faithful jump into the pool - David Matthew and Russell Austin. Their parents, Mark and Sarah, have given them the gift of their own faith. The Holy Spirit gives them the gift of claiming and naming them. Our part is to welcome them in, to keep watch over them, and to help them swim. And if these families move away to a new community, members there will take up your promise where you left off.

What an outrageous act this is! In a world full of people who can figure it out themselves, in a church full of the high-achieving, we admit our need for help. We, a people who value autonomy, look for enough strength to stand alone, shun codependency. To receive the Sacrament of baptism, and to remember it when we gather for the baptism of others, is to confess that we cannot grow in faith alone - we will have to rely on the guidance of others. Where else but in church could we be so boldly vulnerable, so counter-cultural?

The moment in Acts that we hear about today is the epitome of counter-cultural. It is a baptism scene that hinges entirely on the promise that nobody goes it alone. Jesus had died, the church was born, and it was growing wildly. Faith was exploding everything, and the disciples were spread way too thin. They picked out seven deacons - men like Stephen, and Phillip - to help them carry the load. But Saul’s persecution of the church was getting worse, and when the stoning of Stephen occurred, the remaining got out of there fast. Philip was taken by an angel of the Lord to an abandoned road near Gaza, where along came an Ethiopian eunuch, an outsider, an outcast by Jewish standards. He was suitable to be the Queen’s treasurer, but because he was “blemished” and unclean, he was unsuitable to belong to the family of God. Coming back from Jerusalem, he’d picked up some reading material, and for the long,

bumpy ride out of the city, he'd read about a new faith, grounded in the Old Testament. The scroll of Isaiah told him of the Savior to come, the Jesus who had recently been killed and was rumored to be resurrected. He wanted to believe, and he wanted to belong. And that's where he needed a guide, a holy conversation with Philip to make it clear just WHO is welcome in Jesus. "Do you understand what you are reading?" And with his answer, Philip interpreted the faith, and gave him a vision of a whole new life, a new understanding of himself, an invitation to belong. For there was nothing to keep a black, mutilated, royal gentile from jumping headfirst into the pool of the Christian faith. And in that moment, Philip interpreted for you and me a Gospel unbounded by race, continent, gender, or surgical enhancement. He guided us to a Gospel that welcomes us all. "Do you know what you are reading?" Philip asked the eunuch. "How can I, unless someone guides me?" How indeed.

On this day, perhaps we remember the Philips in our own lives, those who have appeared on our own journeys of faith. Like Philip, we've had people show up, almost out of nowhere, at just the right time. There have been people who have spoken to us of holy things, whose lives have inspired, who have stood as a mirror before us that we might see ourself in a new way. Philip's model is a pretty good one as we give pause today to consider our own contributions to one another. He was the best kind of guide. He talked with the eunuch, not at him. He didn't compel him, he came alongside; he didn't direct, but invite; he didn't command; but encourage. His question to the eunuch was "Do you know what you are reading?" He did not say "do you know where you are going?" In his presence with the eunuch, he left room for the story to unfold. He left space for him to explore, and for the Holy Spirit to do the work. The best guides always leave room for others.

We learn something important from those who teach faith, too. In an essay called "Hard Truths," William Willimon, former dean of the Duke Divinity School, introduces a cold and arrogant professor as a rich spiritual resource. Professor Paul Holmer had been very central to his journey at Yale, and so years later, when he saw him again, Willimon was eager to tell him thank you for shaping his career, for being the inspiration that led him to Duke. He rushed up to Holmer and gushed out his thanks. He writes, "Holmer looked at me blankly and simply said, "I don't remember you." Holmer's forgetting was a part of his mentoring. This grumpy, condescending man loved the subject more than his students. Willimon writes that, "Holmer taught me about great teaching. It requires that professors engage students, reach out to them, and get close. But it also demands that professors put some distance between themselves and their students. Teachers have to make room for students to step back from their preconceptions and prejudices and wander in unknown territory. This space is the prerequisite for transformation."

We don't know if Philip remembered his baptism of the eunuch by the time he got to the end of a long ministry, but we know Luke did, and thought to make it central to Acts 8. Philip opened the bible, told the story, and left room for the eunuch to find himself in it. "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" the man asks. Philip didn't guide him to the water, he simply opened his eyes that he could see it for himself. And then, he got out of the way. Coming out of the water, he disappeared. Which confirmed that guides and mentors along our faith journey not only leave room, they also, eventually, leave. Just as his faith was beginning, with so much more to do and say, the Spirit took Philip away. That's appropriate - after all, our own spiritual guides and mentors come and go. Those who nurture us along our faith journeys rarely get to stay and see how our faith will play out. They move away, retire, and, they die. More often than we'd like, they let us down. They take new calls to new congregations. They help us get farther down the road, but they don't arrive with us where we shall be. We know this. We've just lost a pastor. He was a mentor in faith to some of you, a guide to others, and a personal friend to many. Like Philip in the eunuch's life, Doug Brouwer was here for a particular time and a particular season.

In this early interim time, it is fine to wonder about Doug's leaving, and his leave-taking. It is natural to grieve. But watch this eunuch. He didn't search for Philip. He didn't blame himself. He didn't

question whether he had done enough. He didn't get mad, or fall apart, or fall away. He came up out of the water, saw Philip no more, and went on his way, rejoicing.

And here is where the eunuch becomes my guide, my mentor. He clung to God and not God's servant. He didn't linger over what was lost, but moved forward in what had been found. His identity was in Jesus Christ, not in Jesus' people. The best companions point beyond themselves to the one they serve, so when they come, and when they go, when they enter our lives, and when they exit, they do not take our God with them.

Today we give thanks for our mentors, our guides, our pastors - all those who have shaped our faith. And we give our most generous thanks for the ones who have pointed beyond themselves to the One who calls us to be a community, to swim in grace, to splash in love, to deeply share in the love of Jesus.