

Sermon Hanover International Worship, July 15th, 6th Sunday after Trinity, Acts 8, vs. 26 – 39

Pastor Gerd Brockhaus

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Thank you very much for inviting me and allowing me to enter this pulpit just as the Apostle Philip was allowed to enter the minister's chariot. It is my hope and intention that at the end we may set out on our ways rejoicing. A mass baptism is not intended, at least not inside here.

So there has been that judgment in the inferior court of Cologne deciding circumcision of boys in their minor age an unlawful mutilation to be banned by law. Parent's will and religious tradition, so the court, are of minor value compared with the child's right to bodily invulnerability. Leaving out the devastating effects upon Jewish and Muslim life in our country I'd like to turn to the mental, ideological presuppositions of such a ruling. We so touch the subjects of autonomy and self-determination. Who is deciding my life? It's only me, when I've reached maturity. This shall be valid especially when religion is at stake. No decision shall be taken considering the religious orientation or character of children under age.

This is a rather doubtful concept of man. So Religion shall not be part of my origin? I have to remain religiously homeless in my first 10, 12, 14 years? And then I may freely decide – free from any influence?

I remembered the frequently mentioned gruesome experiment carried out by the Hohenstaufen king Frederick II. about 1200. In his scientific interest he took children away from their mothers and had them fed and cared for by nurses made dumb by the excision of their tongues. The king expected these children to speak Hebrew as he was convinced that Hebrew was the original language of mankind. Unfortunately the children gave no evidence at all. They merely died.

In the run of the debate following the Cologne judgment circumcision often has been compared with baptism. This is correct except for the slight bodily operation. I often spoke to parents who held that their children should decide for themselves in mature age on their religious orientation. I wonder whether these parents were ready to support their children with the aim to qualify them to make a decision concerning their religious orientation at the age of maturity.

Well, now, the biblical story we are dealing with is a baptism story. You will rightly argue that the person in question is looking quite mature of age, in full possession of his senses and thus should be fully entitled to decide for himself! Correct!

But look how carefully this decision is prepared!

The picture – or film – we are shown has got a frame. It is just like in old pictures or mosaics in which you can see a hand appearing top middle, apparently from heaven. This hand indicates that God is active in everything shown in the image below. In our story this hand appears three times: At the beginning, when we are told that the angel of the Lord commanded Philip to the hot and desert(ed) Gaza road. The second hint is the mentioning of the spirit pushing Philip towards the ministerial chariot. And thirdly the spirit takes Philip away abruptly.

There are meetings in our lives, experiences, and I'm thinking especially of those appearing on stage quite unexpected. Something fills you, moves you, overshadows you, overcomes you. Sometimes you can arrange it, interpret it on the spot. Sometimes an interpretation is possible only in the aftermath, perhaps long time later. Of course you may say: All that is happening just by chance. Meaningless. You say that

unless you accept principally that full autonomy is an impossibility and complete self-determination is an illusion.

For a positive turn let us now look at this excellent road movie. The conversion and baptism of a proselyte from Nubia may well have occurred. By the way: The country from which this African is coming was referred to as Kush in our O.T. first lesson. The incidence requires the existence of the Temple which was destroyed in 70 AD, while Luke's Vol. II is dated in the reign of Emperor Domitian, about 95 AD. During that period the tradition was passed on in the Christian communities and received its frame. It became part of bigger contexts and lastly of Luke's book in which he describes the way of the Good News to Jews, Gentiles, until the ends of the earth.

To introduce Philip here seemed not necessary, but I'd like to mention that in the process of tradition, redaction and composition of the Acts two Philips seem to be intermingled: the evangelist, one of the seven deacons mentioned in Chapter 6, and the evangelist, one of the Twelve. I think it is the Apostle whom God is sending in the direction of Gaza. He knows His Master's Voice.

And then there is the African. In New Testament times Ethiopia meant Nubia or the kingdom of Meroe, its northern frontier being south of Assuan, at the first cataract of the river Nile. This old kingdom was ruled by queens who bore the title Candace and were in high esteem as incarnations of the goddess Isis. Her financial minister, however, seems to be a proselyte – or at least a man fearing Israel's God. If he really should have been a castrate, it would have been impossible for him to become a Jew or proselyte. But as many men in power were castrated in these times, especially when their duties led to frequent meetings or cooperation with women (never trust a man!), the term "eunuch" in course of time lost its literal meaning and was used just as a term for a man in power. For our story this is less important. What really matters is his origin from something like the end of the world. And he comes a long, long pilgrim journey to worship in Jerusalem, what, as we already have seen, at Luke's time was a possibility gone for decades, deeply deplored by Jewry.

Key words in this story are "way" or "road", then "walk" or "go". And everything is well organized, don't forget the framework!

What's happening within, then? There are four steps.

1. The African travels in his chariot, Philip is walking, as apostles do, on apostle's feet. Both move / are moved so that a meeting takes place. Pushed by the spirit and invited by the African Philip enters the Chariot.
2. The meeting opens a field for communication. There is a lesson from the scriptures – a very fitting passage indeed, the African is just busy with a key text, – followed by an explanation. The African's question whom the prophet is talking about proves to be an upright pass for Philip. By the way: The African's request for interpretation, literally translated, sounds: How could I if not someone leads me the way? The key word "way" is being used also here! On his way he is desperately anxious to be led the way of understanding and believing. On the way to Gaza, on the way of life, until now without a way to God.

Philip explains, and the Good News apparently is bringing fruit: enlightenment and understanding. The African wishes to be baptized. A few Greek manuscripts, however, add a short baptismal catechism, apparently in later times some people took offence in the easy way Philip baptizes the Ethiopian. According to these manuscripts Philip asks the minister: Do you believe? And he answers: I believe that Jesus the Christ is the Son of God. A bit of confession of the right faith was inevitable.

3. The African is baptized, thus a new creation, made himself a temple of God, put on the way after Jesus Christ as his follower and given full citizen's right in God's kingdom.
4. Still shorter as the baptism the separation of both is told: there is neither surprise nor grief nor pain. Both are continuing their ways in God's hands and under His blessing. Philip will receive further directions and the Chancellor of the Exchequer happily is returning home. Tradition says: as an apostle for Africa.

If you shouldn't have become suspicious until now, then I may tell you that we just took part in a full service on the way to Gaza. These four steps present the pattern of every service. In our liturgical books Step 1 is called Opening and Invocation: Liturgy, opening prayers, the communion between us and God is established.- Part 2 is called Proclamation and Confession, lessons, sermon, Creed. Part three is the Sacrament: Baptism or Holy Communion, part four is called "Dismissal, Sending, Blessing". By the way: The well known story in Luke's Gospel, ch. 24, in which the walk to Emmaus is told, follows the same liturgical structure. There is only one variation: Sacrament here is Holy Communion.

Now by using the metaphors "Way, road" and "walk, go" we can disclose more meaning, more content in this road movie. Perhaps we make use of an escalator.

On ground level – geographically – there is the way from Jerusalem down to Gaza. A way which becomes peak and success of a pilgrimage which seemed having ended as a failure.

On first floor – liturgically – we observed the way to meeting, understanding, believing, baptism, leading into a bright and blessed future under God's blessing.

On second floor – ecclesiastically – there is the way down from Jerusalem, which is no longer existing, to all nations, until the ends of the earth. Jews and Christians had to go that way after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, Jews and Christians built new systems of faith and religion, both centered around the scriptures. The Christians, however, confessed Jesus as Messiah and sought proof for their belief in Israel's holy books!

On third floor – spiritually – we observe – and may experience – the way down, down to the water, deep down into the water, and from there up into a new life, from darkness and lack of apprehension into the light of understanding and believing.

In and through everything there is the way from a concept of holiness of places to a concept of holiness of people. This holiness of people, however, is bestowing on us real maturity and freedom.

On his way the minister no longer needs a spiritual leader. He is made a temple, he is ordained a priest. He will be accompanied and guided by the one Philip spoke about, the one who silently and innocently suffered, was taken away from the living and raised to eternal glory. God's promise to Israel through Isaiah we heard in the first lesson (Isaiah 43, 1 – 7) remains valid for Israel – and is widened in Jesus Christ for all people in North and South, afar and at the ends of the earth. They – we! – are destined to see ourselves as precious, honored, chosen by eternal and passionate love.

Amen.