

Called by Name: Philip and Finding Satisfaction

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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John 6:1-9; 14:8-12

Today our sermon series on Jesus' 12 Disciples continues with a look at Philip. Philip, you may remember from two weeks ago, was the one who introduced Nathanael to Jesus in the 1st chapter of John's Gospel. He is mentioned in three more scenes in John—at the feeding of the 5,000, then when some Greeks come to him asking to see Jesus, and finally in Jesus' farewell speech to the disciples in the upper room in Chapter 14. While Philip is only mentioned in the list of disciples in the other three gospels, he does show up in the book of Acts, when he tells a group of Samaritans about Jesus and then baptizes a eunuch from Ethiopia. Our first passage is from the story of the feeding of the 5,000 in John 6.

*After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?' Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were **satisfied**, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.*

Our second passage is from the 14th Chapter of John. To provide a little context, Jesus, who has earlier eaten a last meal with the disciples, washed their feet, and commanded them to love one another as he has loved them, has finished telling them that in his father's house there are many rooms, that where he is they will be also, that he's going to prepare a way for them, and that he himself is the Way, then says, *If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.*

Here is where we pick up with Philip's response:

Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

Out of all twelve disciples, I find it interesting that it is *Philip* whom Jesus asks, when he sees a large crowd coming towards him, “Where are we going to buy bread for all these people to eat?”

Now, he doesn't do it because Philip is the group's treasurer. John's gospel later says that role belongs to Judas. So that's not it.

I think Jesus picks Philip out for that trick question because he knows he's a logistics guy. Philip is one of those people who sees a situation and thinks, “Okay, now what next? We have to take care of this detail, and provide for that circumstance, and be ready to handle that eventuality.” Organizations and groups depend on people who think logistically. *Churches* need people like that. You don't pull off something like the hypothermia shelter or a Sunday school or a worship service or a forum or a ski trip without somebody handling the logistics.

“Where are we going to get the food to feed 5,000 people?” is a logistics question. And Philip answers it by coming out with, “There's no way we have enough money to make that happen.” It's Andrew who sees a glimmer of possibility, “there are five loaves and two fish, but what are they among so many?” But even he is skeptical.

Then together, Philip and Andrew and the rest of the twelve witness how what seems so little become enough to meet the need at hand. Does it happen because Jesus snaps his fingers and the food magically multiplies before their eyes? Or does it happen because somehow people are miraculously moved to share the sandwiches and fruit they've tucked away in their pockets? Readers of this text and its parallels in the other three gospels have different views on the miracle, but regardless of how you explain it, the bottom line in each of the gospel accounts is that all ate and were satisfied.

Somehow God provided. They were satisfied.

Now fast-forward to Philip a year or two later in the Upper Room with Jesus and the rest of the twelve on the night before the crucifixion. By this point in John's gospel, Jesus has not only fed the 5,000, he's turned water into wine, walked on water, healed a Roman officer's son, made a blind man see and a lame man walk, and raised Lazarus from the dead. So Philip has seen plenty of signs of God at work in Jesus.

But he's a logistics guy, remember, and things are unfolding so quickly. So when, with the threat of his arrest and crucifixion hanging in the air, Jesus kneels and washes their feet, and tells them to focus on loving each other, and that he's going to prepare a place for them to come join him, and that if they've seen him they've seen the Father, Philip can't help but interrupt.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay, Jesus. But that's not *enough*. Just show us this God you're talking about and we'll be **satisfied**, just like when the food didn't run out.

Now, bear in mind, Jesus has *just reiterated* to them, *if you know me, you'll know my father also. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.*

That's when Philip says, “Show us the Father and we'll be satisfied.”?

What makes that question seem witless, if you know John's gospel, is that this wasn't the first time Jesus had said something that. It wasn't Philip's first day with this guy. All along Jesus has been saying in different ways, “I and the Father are one. If you want to get a look at God's heart, God's priorities, God's character. Look at me. Look at the way I serve. Look at the way I love.”

The problem is, that's not enough for Philip. Not right then. He wants something else. Something more. Something more traditionally powerful, more practical, more spectacular. He wants something more than a God who is embodied in the action of breaking bread, washing feet, and loving and laying down one's life for one's friends. Philip doesn't want a vulnerable God, a God who goes to the cross, a God who will not manipulate every outcome. Right then, what Philip wants is a God who will ensure that he can avoid hardship and loss. He wants the plans laid out **beforehand**. Logistics guy that he is, Philip wants to know **ahead of time** exactly how all the details will be taken care of. He wants a face to face conference with God.

Show us the father and we will be satisfied.

Oh how like Philip we followers of Jesus, particularly in the U.S., can be! We're not always satisfied with the Jesus we get and the window he provides into God. The Jesus of the Gospels and the God he exemplifies is not a mighty warrior who goes before us into military battle. The Jesus we meet in the Gospels is not interested in propping up American cultural Christianity or making America great. Nor is he interested in backing any of our political ideologies, co-signing our self-deception, or supporting our pet projects.

Like the prophets before him, the Jesus we meet in the gospels *is interested in* is doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly. He comes to us in the least of these, the hungry and thirsty, the homeless and the immigrant, the sick and imprisoned. He kneels at the feet of his friends. He's the good shepherd, the gate, the true vine, the light of the world, the bread of life, the resurrection and the life. He's the way. What that way is about, what he's interested in, is showing us how to humbly give of ourselves and serve others, that's the secret of being satisfied content in all circumstances.

The more we learn to be satisfied with that Jesus, with that vision of God's heart, the more we will be dissatisfied with injustice, and unkindness, and the way polarization can lead us to treat those with whom we disagree as somehow less than respectable. We will be dissatisfied with anything less than compassion and mercy, not just towards those who are in our in-groups but also those who we once regarded as outsiders. They'll nag at us until we take action. They'll cause us to speak up and reach out and make space. They'll keep us from sitting on our hands ruminating on grand schemes when there are small concrete actions that we can take, until we can say with Teresa of Avila that we won't rest satisfied with *wishing* to perform impossibilities. Instead we will get out there and do them.

I love what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said about this sort of holy dissatisfaction:

*"Let us be dissatisfied until America will no longer have high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds. Let us be dissatisfied until the tragic walls that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort from the inner city of poverty and despair shall be crushed by the battering rams of the fires of justice. Let us be dissatisfied until they who live on the outskirts of Hope are brought into the metropolis of daily security. Let us be dissatisfied until slums are cast into the junk heap of history and every family will live in a decent, sanitary home. Let us be dissatisfied until the dark yesterdays of segregated schools will be transformed into the bright tomorrows of quality integrated education."*¹

I like to think that when Jesus tells Philip and the rest of the twelve in the upper room, "*the one who trusts in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father*"--what Jesus is envisioning something bigger than Philip could ever imagine in that moment. He's seeing Philip sometime after the crucifixion and resurrection. He's looking ahead

¹ Dr. Martin Luther King, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Beacon Press, 2010)

to Philip speaking up boldly to Samaritans, for God's sake, in the middle of Samaritan territory. He's watching Philip encounter an Ethiopian eunuch—who for all intents and purposes would have been someone Philip would never rub shoulders with ever. The wrong color, the wrong race, the wrong religious background, the wrong sexuality. He's watching Philip encounter the Ethiopian on that wilderness road down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

"You won't believe this now, Philip," I hear Jesus saying, "But one day, you'll be reaching out to an African, a non-Jew, and baptizing him in my name."

The Ethiopian Church, of course, is one of the earliest Christian communities founded, and it continues to this day. They are proud to point back to that story of Philip and the eunuch as their origin story.

Yesterday at the Reformed Institute Convocation, I heard Paul Lim, a Korean American professor who teaches theology at Vanderbilt, speak about global Christianity. He reminded us that there are more Christians in the global south than in the northern hemisphere. He told us that when we pretend that Jesus is somehow on the side of the United States, we are doing a disservice to Christians across the world.

Dr. Lim talked about being in Ethiopia. He was sitting in Addis Ababa with another professor colleague, also from the U.S. and they were dining together on traditional Ethiopian food. You know, the spongy bread with the sauces and stews laid out on it, that you eat with your hands and dip in the sauce.

They were sitting there eating their food and they saw two homeless orphans, picking through garbage looking for scraps to eat. They decided to invite them over to share in the meal. Only when the orphans were heading over towards them did they think, "Should we ask them to wash their hands, or would that make them feel awkward? After all, they've been picking through garbage". Dr. Lim said they decided to take their chances and not worry about the hands.

As the four of them were eating together, the two orphans said to Dr. Lim and his colleague, "Your God is stronger than our God." Dr. Lim said his heart broke, because these two orphans were Christians, too.

The strength of the God we worship is exemplified in Jesus Christ, who didn't get caught up in handwashing rituals, and reached across borders and barriers to show God's love, and learned from a Canaanite woman. The strength of the God we meet in Jesus Christ is in vulnerability—a vulnerability that reaches out to us and calls us to serve others. How can we be satisfied with anything less?

In Jesus' name. Amen.