

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

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# Pool Party

Dr. Jo Forrest



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At the beginning, God's spirit hovers over the waters.

That same water God creates in a time before time still rises as mist at daybreak, settles as fog into valleys, boils into steam or freezes into a solid mass at the artic. It falls from the heavens as rain or snow to flow in streams towards oceans. We only experience life because of water.

Our ingenuity gave us the idea to direct it to flows in pipes, to turn on and off at our desire. Shower us, sprinkle us, entertain us. We deceive ourselves into thinking how we can control water.

Some of us know too well that it trickles into cracks in the roof, staining ceilings in a room, not necessarily directly above, making repairs a mystery. It seeps into basements, overflows leaf-filled downspouts, and puddles in the floor from nowhere.

Anyone else spend a few sleepless nights wondering about how crafty water can be?

It is elusive as the spirit of God at creation. Water goes where it wills, usually surprising our faith ancestors. God's spirit and water compel our faith story forward.

We know that the writer of The Gospel of Luke also wrote The Acts of the Apostles. Think of these books as a two-volume biography of

the spirit's movement through the people of God, bringing us, today, a gospel of good news.

In Luke, the spirit descends upon Jesus at the Jordan River during his baptism. It remains with him in ministry. On the cross, Jesus breathes his last, giving up the spirit. At the opening of the Book of Acts, the risen Christ breathes the spirit upon the gathered crowd, "like the rush of a wind," when he tells them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

It's this restless, divine spirit that drives today's story.

When Roman powers kill all who claim faith in Christ, the disciples flee for their lives, taking the gospel with them. Exactly as Christ predicts.

*Dear God, your spirit blows where it wills, ruffling feathers,  
disrupting organized lives, even if those are stifling lives.*

*We ask you to send your spirit among us as we hear this story  
of adventure and encounter. Of change, and liberation.*

*Of new beginnings and grace.*

*May we hear with open minds and hearts so that  
your spirit may guide us in the risky,  
life-giving way of loving your son. Amen.*

Acts 8:26-39

<sup>26</sup> Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) <sup>27</sup> So he got up and went.

Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship <sup>28</sup> and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. <sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.”

<sup>30</sup> So he ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” <sup>31</sup> He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

<sup>32</sup> Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.

<sup>33</sup> In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

<sup>34</sup> The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” <sup>35</sup> Then

Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

<sup>36</sup> 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?" <sup>38</sup> He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. <sup>39</sup> When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing.

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On August 17 of every year I celebrate Carol Lynn Miller Day. This private holiday commemorates a gift Carol Lynn gave me.

August 17 was my first day of work at IBM, long ago.

I show up to the office, anxious to get to work, to learn, to do all of that achieving stuff.

In reality, I show up with nothing. I know nothing. I can do nothing. I know no one. Only two days before I had unpacked my moving boxes and would easily get lost if I ventured anyplace other than the office or my studio apartment.



Most of my new team was still on vacation, my manager ignored me, and the office was relatively empty. After a morning of appearing busy, the dreaded noon lunch hour came. I was hungry and had no idea where to even get a 'cuppa.

Earlier that day, CL said a quick "hi." Returning after her week of vacation, all sorts of crises demanded her attention. She ran all morning, back and forth from her desk into meetings. The phone conversations I overheard sounded so foreign. Technical terms. Products from IBM. Banking processes at the client. Delivery and pricing problems. I felt lost.

At noon, she looked over the 40" divider and I saw her face fall. She recognized I was all alone. Despite the demands on her time, she asked, "wanna go to lunch?"

To this day, it was the best tuna on wheat I'd ever eaten. What a gift, and not because she bought lunch for a stranger.

Coincidentally, we lived in the same town in NJ. Even though we were so different from one another we became friends. Her mom became my home-away-from-home mom who insisted I join them for meals.

CL taught me the inside scoop on how to get things done, gave me the backstory of office politics. She guided me. After a while, I got

my bearings and supported her as well. Regardless of where we were transferred or reassigned, we stayed close.

Anyone who met CL learned that meeting strangers was her spiritual practice. It's been decades since I left IBM and moved away, but I always celebrate Carol Lynn Miller Day on August 17, the day a complete stranger gave me a gift.

Each time we cross paths with someone, we choose; will we walk by them or take the risk?

From today's story, it must have been Philip's spiritual practice to talk with strangers. Let's focus on Philip, first.

Although part of Jesus' original twelve, after Pentecost the disciples call Philip to serve alongside them. They see his spiritual gifts to meet people, one-on-one, to feed them. Tend their needs. In these intimate encounters, we can imagine he listens to their stories. He prays with them and offers encouragement.

Philip shares the gospel of Jesus, perhaps not always with words, but through the same acts of compassion Jesus offered. He preaches grace-filled sermons for one person at a time.

Once driven from Jerusalem, like it or not, the spirit then carries him into the wilderness, a road far from civilization where he meets another traveler.

In two words, the text practically writes a biography of this man.

“Ethiopian” means Black to Greco-Roman readers. It implies he comes from Timbuktu with dark skin to make him an object of wonder.

To be labeled eunuch means someone his mutilated his body. Although his body bears the scars of something done to him by another, he is forced to carry the stigma of being different and some would say immoral because he is different. It also sentenced him to a solitary life so that he could be entrusted with a royal’s wealth.

Rather than let those pejorative words label him in our meditation, instead, let’s imagine a name for this human being. One of the most popular names in Ethiopia is Ahmed. It means “someone who worships God.”

The spirit drops Philip on a wilderness road, far from civilization, and tells Philip to hurry up, run up to Ahmed’s chariot.

He hears Ahmed reading from Isaiah. Since the time of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, people from Ethiopia read the scriptures and worshiped as Jews.

Ahmed stops. He offers hospitality to Philip, “please join me,” and invites the talkative pedestrian to climb alongside of him. At this point, we know Ahmed is wealthy enough to ride in a chariot,

faithful enough to travel deserted roads to worship in Jerusalem, educated enough to read scriptures, and humble enough to know he cannot understand on his own.

For a modern parallel, picture a diplomat outside Washington DC, cruising along in a late model, black, luxury SUV, who engages a dusty, street preacher for a little Bible study. Inclusion runs both ways in this story.

Ahmed asks the right question – how do we understand God’s word? We all need guides when we read scripture. It contains so many conflicts. His question shadows every text and fledgling interpreter. Do we let the text prescribe what God’s love means? Or do we rely upon the spirit and a lens of love to interpret?

Our Presbyterian tradition prescribes reading in community with a heart open to the spirit.

The laws from Deuteronomy prescribe a man such as Ahmed should not be allowed in the temple to worship. A man such as Ahmed cannot be included. And yet, the passage Ahmed just read spoke long ago “of a lamb shorn.” This particular passage from Isaiah offers hope to the captives, the sick, the poor, the lame.

Considered one of the saddest of the servant songs, it promises freedom for those long marginalized by archaic laws. Jesus

preached from Isaiah. Jesus proclaimed that he would fulfil this prophecy.

Ahmed asks, “does the prophet say this about himself or someone else?”

All of Philip’s care for others brought him to this point, to preach this sermon to one man about Jesus, God’s son, who accepts everyone with love. He tells the story of Jesus being the long-awaited messiah. He tells of baptism in the water, letting go of old ways, and receiving the promise of life eternal

Ahmed belongs to the wrong nation, holds the wrong job, and possesses the wrong sexuality. And yet when he asked, “what prevents me from being baptized?” the spirit whispered “absolutely nothing” for we know the chariot stops on a dime and he is joined into Christ’s body through that pool of water.

Walls of prejudice and prohibition that stood for generations came tumbling down. The water of God’s original creation never discriminates. God’s spirit, like it, never discriminates. It washes into everyone’s life. It wants to be shared. It wants to bring new life.

Too often, those who feel responsible for protecting the gospel will want to sequester off the spirit in the same way we put water into private pools. Too often, we shy away from following where the

spirit guides, and shut ourselves off from the vastness of God's good creation. Too often we seek to control Jesus' gift of grace in some false notion that the limits make us safer, or feel safer, when such barriers only confine us.

Imagine the joy of sharing in this pool of water. Bodies drawn together by the spirit in travel, go down into the water, and now rise from the water as new creations. Not just Ahmed, also Philip. *They* both rise from the water.

In baptism, God claims each child and at the same time, God renews us when we promise to live as faithful disciples. As much as Ahmed needs Philip, to learn the ways of being a faithful follower of Christ, Philip needs Ahmed to remember what it means to be claimed by God and washed with grace.

This story invites us to encounter the other person with the curiosity of Philip. Imagine the spirit's presence as you see them, not as an "other," but as a person. Imagine trusting the spirit to guide you in how to listen and what to say. Think of meeting a stranger as a spiritual practice.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Thomas Long and Barbara Brown Taylor for their essays in *Feasting on the Word*, published by Westminster John Knox and Willie James Jennings's commentary, *Acts*, also published by Westminster John Knox. Their scholarship sparked my imagination and I felt led by the spirit.





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