

With so much change that has occurred in the last year—I want to raise a question that may shock some of you: If Ken Mawr United Presbyterian Church disappeared tomorrow, would we be missed? And I want to raise a related but even more fundamental question throughout the month of January: **Why church?** To answer that question, I want us to explore three things that are part of the story of Phillip as he traveled the Gaza road. The story begins with this description in v. 26: *“Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’”*

1st thing—The church is a place for all kinds of people. From the very beginning, the church has been a place for all kinds of people. The church was born in Jerusalem, when thousands of Jews from around the world gathered for one of the major yearly festivals (called Pentecost). That was the occasion God chose to send his Holy Spirit to fill Jesus’ first followers and enable them to speak to people from every corner of the earth in their own languages:

“Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues” (Acts 2:9-11). With one miraculous dramatic action God made it clear that this new thing we call “church” was intended to include *all kinds of people*. (*Why Church?* p. 18)

But that was only the beginning. A few years later, Philip, another of Jesus’ earliest followers, went to an area called Samaria to tell people the good news of Jesus. The people of that area were so despised by people of Jewish descent that a cultural separation existed between Jews and Samaritans. Yet, Philip reported to the rest of the church’s leadership in Jerusalem that the Samaritans had reacted warmly to his preaching. *“They sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit....and they received the Holy Spirit”* (Acts 8:14-17). Here God follows up the Jewish

Pentecost with a Samaritan Pentecost, which ought to show us how inviting God intends the church to be.

But that's still not all. Just a few years after the Samaritans received God's Holy Spirit, Peter—who had delivered the main sermon in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost and traveled with John to Samaria—was invited to the home of a Roman centurion in a town called Caesarea. In those days it was unacceptable for a Jew to enter the home of a Gentile, let alone the home of an officer in the hated armies of Caesar. But just the night before, God spoke to Peter in a vision and told him that he was no longer to consider any person “unclean.” So, he went to the home of that centurion, whose name was Cornelius, and began to tell him, his family, and his friends about Jesus. A third Pentecost took place, making it clear that even people with no Jewish blood or background were to be included in this new thing called “church.”

It was God's intention from the very beginning for **church** to be a place—a group or gathering—for all kinds of people. Although churches have often strayed from that ideal through the centuries, it remains God's intention today.

2nd thing—The church is a place to ask questions. The book of Acts, the fifth book of the New Testament, tells the story of the church's birth and development in the first three decades after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. We will revisit a few fascinating stories from this book of the Bible in the weeks to come.

If we were to survey every chapter in the story of the early church, we would discover more than 50 questions people asked. Some of those questions are investigative: “*How can this be?*” (Acts 2:7) and “*What can this mean?*” (Acts 2:12) Some are rhetorical: “*Why does it seem incredible to any of you that God can raise the dead?*” Some are probing: “*Do you want to know how he was healed?*” (Acts 4:9) and “*Do you understand what you are reading?*” (from today's Scripture). And others reflect sincere searching: “*What must I do to be saved?*” (16:30).

Too often, people in the church feel like they have to have all the answers. But that absolutely wasn't true in the early church. Pastors and teachers in the church may have some answers to some really important questions, but churches that are most like the early church are a good place for hearing the questions of people outside the church. Author David Kinnaman writes in his book, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving the Church*:

“God is not afraid of human doubts. ‘Doubting Thomas’ is remembered for his unbelief, yet in his mercy, Christ allowed Thomas to renew his faith when the risen Lord showed him the evidence of his crucifixion. King David is called a man after God’s heart, even though many of his Psalms questioned God’s intentions toward and provision for him—many times in raw, angry language that leaves very little emotion unexpressed. Job too voiced his doubts and disillusionment in very strong terms” (p. 193).

Every church community can provide a great opportunity to ask sincere, searching questions. It can be a safe place to voice our doubts, just like the early church. Good questions and hard questions, probing questions and open-ended questions. Such as, “How can this be?” and “What can this mean?” Or “How was he healed?” and even “Why are you doing this?”

3rd thing—The church is a place for people on a journey. Bob Hostetler writes: “The book of Acts relates a fascinating incident in the early days of the church. Philip, one of Jesus’ first followers, met an Ethiopian man on the desert road between Jerusalem and Gaza. The traveler, a high official in the court of the Ethiopian queen, had made a pilgrimage to worship at the temple in Jerusalem, and was on the return trip. Philip, under the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit, approached his regal chariot and saw a scroll open on the man’s lap. The Ethiopian may have had a puzzled expression or been shaking his head, which prompted Philip to ask, “*Do you understand what you are reading?*” The man wasn’t insulted or embarrassed. He answered, “*How can I, unless someone explains it to me.*” So, he invites Philip to climb into the chariot and travel with him.

Before long, Philip and the man were deep in conversation about the words on the scroll as the chariot and its entourage rolled southward. Philip explained how the words the man had been reading, about a sheep being led to slaughter and a man being mocked and put on trial, applied to Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified in the very city the man had just visited. With Philip's help, the Ethiopian soon acknowledged Jesus as Messiah, as a way of fulfilling the prophecy of the scroll. The Ethiopian was on a journey. He hadn't arrived at his destination. He was still *on the way* when Philip met him, and that was okay. Philip *joined* the man on his journey and traveled *with* him. Even after he was baptized, the Ethiopian had miles to go, but that was okay too."

You see, the church is a place for those who like to **explore**, for people on a journey. Participation in a church doesn't mean you've arrived. It does mean you have chosen to join others who are on a similar—but not identical—journey, and we have all agreed to travel together.

Those of us who have spent our entire lives in the church still have a lot to learn and a long way to go. Like the Ethiopian, we may have miles and miles to go, but that's okay, because church is a place for all kinds of people who have all kinds of questions. And it is a place for people like us who are on a journey, regardless of how far we've traveled or how far we have yet to go. The church is ideally a place where we can all do some **exploring**—together.

Since the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit has given people of faith the power to spread the message of Jesus around the world. When he arrived, the Holy Spirit changed the disciples' lives immediately and dramatically by providing power, understanding, comfort, guidance, and inspiration.

God, the Holy Spirit, can do the very same thing for us in 2025.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.