

First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC  
September 18, 2005  
Open Road Sunday

GET UP AND GO  
Acts 8:26-40

*Open Road: Mission*

Imagine a church that cannot stay put, but takes God's welcome into the world. Imagine a church in conversation with other lives, other cultures, able to invite and to be invited, to sit at other people's tables, to share the inestimable riches of God, to build relationships outside its walls. Imagine a church where the hands, hearts and feet of every member, young and old, are shaped for service; and a church that does not lack imagination about ways to use them. Imagine a church compelled by the Spirit to travel with Jesus, healing, reconciling and doing justice, a church filled with the daring and delight of the children of God.

Imagine a church on the open road, agile and able, willing to follow Jesus into life's margins, a church that gives itself away and asks nothing in return, a church mobilized for mission: Imagine First Church in Cambridge!

We first spoke those words in this sanctuary in May, 2003, when we celebrated the culmination of the visioning process. On a festive Sunday morning, after a year of talking and listening, praying and dreaming, we welcomed God's vision for us, A Way of Hospitality, with its four challenging dimensions—open door, open spirit, open table, open road.

If you have been around since then, this is not the first time you've heard those "opens." And it won't be the last. The vision was given to guide and shape us. It is our North Star. If we don't keep it before us, we will lose the way. On the first four Sundays of the program year, then, we are stopping to take new sightings, and to realign our journey accordingly.

Last week we rolled out the red carpet of the open door. This week, we take to the open road. This phrase sums up our commitment to *tikkun olam*, as Jews say—the task of repairing the world. The vision calls us to follow Jesus into life's margins, to give *ourselves* away, not just our resources.

Not that we were not already doing this before we received the vision. First Church people have long been on the open road, volunteering in the Shelter, feeding the hungry at the Harvard Square Meals Program, accompanying immigrants and refugees in the Cambridge-Somerville cluster of RIM, becoming partners with Shared Interest, the South African micro-lending organization, and exploring ways to help incarcerated offenders make the transition back into society.

Even as the solidarity of 9/11 was being undermined by war and xenophobia, First Church women had formed a reading group with Jews and Muslims. Three years later, three groups, 60 women in all, are meeting monthly, sitting at each other's tables.

And each of you in your personal lives and professions, in your relationships and civic activities, have all along been making repairs in the breached wall of the world. You do not merely *go* to church. You *are* the church, the church on the open road.

The vision did not give us a new commandment when it urged us to leave our settled places, to meet the Stranger on the margins, to serve, and in serving to be served, and in offering God's welcome to be welcomed. Rather it commanded us not to rest on our laurels, past or present. It invited us to a holy and creative unrest.

We seem to have accepted that challenge. In November, a delegation from FC will get up and go to El Salvador, not as servers or saviors, but as learners welcomed into the gracious hospitality of the poor. And today we will gather for lunch with Ann Bookman and continue to explore ways of connecting to the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization—a movement that not only engages in effective political action for social change, but does so by building deep relationships among people who are different from each other in every conceivable way, negotiating the difficulties of unlikely alliances by keeping all eyes on the prize of a common good discerned through persistent, honest conversation.

And on it goes. There is a lot happening among us, as First Church travels on the open road.

But there is one dimension of the call to travel the open road that we have left relatively unexplored. Hear these lines of the vision again. "...Imagine a church able *to share the inestimable riches of God...*" To share the inestimable riches of God. Now there are many ways to do that, but one of them is surely *testimony*—that is, the ability and willingness to speak to others candidly and open-heartedly about what God is doing for us. To commend our faith and our church to others, respectfully, with openness and freedom. To invite others to discover who we are, why we do what we do, why we give what we give, why we hope for what we hope for.

Researchers tell us that most young adults today are religious seekers. They are not hostile to faith, but neither are they interested in old patterns of religious belief and loyalty. They do not join anything, including church, quickly or easily. They explore first, and they keep on seeking until they find a sincere community that will embrace them in their seeking. As John Thomas\* observes, they are the Ethiopian in this morning's story, returning through Gaza to northern Africa after a visit to Jerusalem.

The Ethiopian is a eunuch. He was made so in order to serve in the court of

Ethiopia's queen. He is not a Jew, but he's drawn to Judaism—he's just visited Jerusalem to worship, and he's spending his trip home reading the Bible in his chariot. But had he tried to enter the Temple, he might have been barred. He remains at the edges of organized religion with only a limited understanding of what he is reading in that Book. And he's looking for someone to embrace him in his difference and help him take a journey of faithfulness.

The Ethiopian is the future of congregations like ours. He represents "who's out there" in a culture that no longer automatically coughs up a steady stream of cradle Christians to fill church pews, Congregationalist, Baptist, or Presbyterian. We can no longer assume that people who are *already* Christians will just keep coming through our doors, looking for a new church home. And we can't keep shuffling the dwindling supply of sheep from pen to pen and expect to be a healthy and growing concern. We need an angel to pluck us from our stasis and drop us down in the chariot of the Ethiopians.

The vision could be that angel for us. "Imagine a church," it invites us, "that goes to sit at other people's tables, that is able and willing there to share the riches of God." Which brings us to Philip. Philip is the disciple on the road, Philip is us. So pay attention to what he does. He does not sit in one place. He is moved, literally, to get up and go. Notice where he goes. Away from the religious center. From Jerusalem to Gaza, to the margins. The Ethiopian is not found at the center. He is not welcome there. If we want to meet him, we have to leave the center and go to where he is.

In the gospels Jesus sends his disciples out from Jerusalem to tell the world Good News. And we all know the great parable of the prodigal—"But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; *he ran out to him* and put his arms around him." God runs! God gets up and goes to the periphery. God has designated the periphery as the place of acceptance and joy. A sending from the center to the margins—this is always the trajectory of the Jesus. For the followers of Jesus, it must be too. The church needs to run out away from itself in order to welcome the broken world.

The eunuch is of a different race, different culture, different class. His sexuality leaves him outside the circle. But Philip not only accepts him; he gets into his chariot and makes himself the guest in this encounter, not the one in control. But embracing difference is not easy for the church. We don't know, for example, how to be the multi-racial, multi-cultural church we say we want to be. Maybe it's because we are unwilling to become guests in someone else's chariot, to let someone else chart the course.

Most Christian churches would rather flame out in acrimony than be open and affirming of sexual differences. We are still without ramps and elevators in our meeting houses, and maybe in our hearts as well. We are still unnerved by people with mental illnesses who act out in our pews. We are still more comfortable serving poor people than worshiping with them. We are easily put off by anything

that appears too “catholic,” and we never examine this prejudice. We enforce unwritten rules about taste and propriety that keep people from full participation in our common life just as surely as if we had put bouncers at the door. And we find anything approaching Pentecostal energy and joy in worship uncomfortable.

In the 18th century, when evangelical Anglicans first began to gather around the Wesley boys, they were known as "enthusiasts" for the fervor of their worship. Keeping enthusiasts out was the goal of many Anglican priests. In one church cemetery, there's an epitaph that admiringly proclaims, "Here lies the body of Father Jones, who served this parish faithfully for forty years without a trace of enthusiasm." The story of Philip and the eunuch asks us in whether we may be diminishing ourselves by our fear of differences that might bring gusto to our lives. Philip got up and went. Philip embraced difference.

Philip was also equipped for the task. "Do you understand what you're reading?" he asked the eunuch. "How can I, unless someone guides me?" How indeed? Our culture is no longer equipped, if it ever was, to guide people towards wisdom and understanding. It falls to the church—that's you and me—to speak to the religious seekers of our day. To invite them to explore with us the good news about the way of Jesus. To accompany them as they ask questions from hearts longing to make meaning and to fashion a life of spiritual integrity. To answer their questions according to our own experience of God and church.

We cannot excuse ourselves from this dimension of the open road. The religious seeker is, after all, seeking. She *wants* to know what we know. He *wants* to discover why we walk in this pathway and not some other. They *expect* us to give an account of our community and our convictions. As Philip guided the Ethiopian, taking seriously his request for insight, his need for guidance, we are called to do the same.

Finally, Philip welcomes him. "Look, here is water!" the Ethiopian says, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" And they went down into the water, where Philip baptized him." Philip thus introduces the Ethiopian into the community of Jesus, to the life of praise and sacraments, service and prayer, study and communion, fellowship and mutual care.

Friends, I want to be clear. We are not on the prowl for souls. We don't want to win them, bag them, collect them, count them. I'm not even sure that we are primarily in the business of saving them. We reject all coercion and imposition. We do not condone conversions efforts aimed at Jews, Muslims, or anyone else with a settled religious identity, although were any such person to come and inquire, we would welcome the inquiry. But we are not proselytizers.

If, however, we are out on the open road as Jesus calls us to be, we are bound to meet a thousand 'Ethiopians' for whom Jesus and the community that stems from him just might be the answer to their heart's desire. Why not get into their chariots? Why not offer what we have been given? Why not engage the conversation? Why

not share the inestimable riches of God? Why not welcome? What, I want to know, is to prevent us?

Nothing, our scripture says, for the water of grace, wisdom, reconciliation and hope is everywhere. And if *we* are out there everywhere too, we can make a gift of it in God's name to all who thirst for life.

---

\*What follows is based in part on a talk given by the Rev. John Thomas, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, which I have freely paraphrased.