

- And finally, in year 2008, *The Atlantic* magazine asked the question, “Is Google making us stupid?” The jury is still out on that one.

Resistance to change is a constant in human life, even around innovations that have proved to be beneficial: Reading, telegraphs, phonographs, telephones, cars and the Internet. Yes, there are problems associated with each, but, on the whole, they've been a huge help to people all around the world.

In the eighth chapter of Acts, an angel of the Lord challenges Philip to innovate. *Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza* (v. 26). The angel orders Philip to leave the city of Jerusalem and to go out into the wilderness. The angel points Philip in a new direction, off the beaten path, onto the road less traveled.

As he begins his journey, Philip meets *an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians* (v. 27). For a religious Jew like Phillip, this man has two strikes against him: first, he is a foreigner, and admittance to the assembly of the Lord is generally reserved for the Israelite community; and second, he is a eunuch, and the Hebrew Scripture is explicit that those who have his particular physical abnormality are not to be admitted to the assembly of the LORD (Deut. 23:1). But the Ethiopian eunuch believes in the God of Israel, and he has just made a long and difficult journey to worship in Jerusalem. He is now on his way home, and he is reading Isaiah.

Why Isaiah? Perhaps because Isaiah gives him some hope as a foreigner and a eunuch. In chapter 56, the prophet gives encouragement to *the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths and the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD* (vv. 4, 6). At this point, the Holy Spirit gives Philip another innovative order: *Go over to this chariot and join it* (v. 29). This is a change from Philip's regular routine in Jerusalem and in Samaria, where he's been leading huge revival meetings, performing many miracles, and bringing many to Christ. The angel sends Phillip out to a desert to talk to one man, a eunuch and a foreigner at that! The Bible says, *[Phillip] got up and went* (v. 27).

Philip runs up to the chariot and hears the man reading the prophet Isaiah. *Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth* (vv. 32-33).

Fortunately, Philip doesn't share Heinzmann's concern about reading, or Thoreau's assumption that the residents of Israel and Ethiopia will have nothing to talk about, or the car-hating Princeton dean's condemnation about moving vehicles. Nope! Philip is willing to innovate. *Do you understand what you are reading?* Philip asks the Ethiopian eunuch. *How can I, unless someone guides me?*, the eunuch replies; and he invites Philip to get in and sit beside him (vv. 30-31).

Philip moves in a new direction by joining the Ethiopian eunuch and helping him to understand Scripture. That's precisely what we are called to do today: to sit beside and to guide. Call it the Ethiopian Innovation. When we sit beside and guide someone we give straight answers to tough questions. The Ethiopian eunuch asks, *About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?* (v. 34).

Philip gives a clear and straightforward answer: the prophet is talking about Jesus. He proclaims to the Ethiopian *the good news about Jesus* (v. 35). Phillip tells how Jesus died on the cross, like a sheep led to slaughter, to demonstrate just how far God will go to show God's love for us. He explained that Christ's sacrifice brings us forgiveness of sin and the restoration of a right relationship with God, whether we are American, Ethiopian, man, woman or eunuch. And then, to prove that death is not the end, God raised Jesus from the dead and raises us as well.

That's the Jesus story, as simple as can be. It's what the Ethiopian eunuch needed to hear, and what the outsiders of our society need to hear as well. It's a story we can tell if we are willing to sit beside and to guide. Paul's willingness to sit beside and to guide resulted in the Ethiopian man coming to faith in Jesus. And this can be the result of our giving straight answers and telling people the good news about Jesus, too.

As Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch are going along the road, they come to some water, and the eunuch says: *What is to prevent me from being baptized?* (v. 36). Philip cannot think of a single thing, so he joins the eunuch in the water and baptizes him. Then the Spirit of the Lord snatches Philip away, and the eunuch goes on his way rejoicing (vv. 38-39). The Ethiopian eunuch who had struggled as an outsider is now an insider, part of the fellowship of believers in Jesus Christ.

When we "sit beside and guide," we give straight answers to tough questions. But what else can we do when we "sit beside and guide"? The answer might depend on our local situation.

Telling the good news of Jesus is always at the top of the list. But perhaps there are other things we can do as well. For example:

English classes can help immigrants become proficient in English and make a connection with the community of faith. Riverchase United Methodist Church in Hoover, Alabama, is preparing to expand its facility to include a computer lab for ESL classes. Senior pastor Jim Savage links much of Riverchase's growth to the church's three Hispanic worship services on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.

Sunday school for the intellectually disabled can reach a portion of the community that is often ignored. At Vienna Presbyterian Church in Vienna, Virginia, church member Emelie Parker offers a class to 28 students. The format of the class always includes the sharing of good news and bad news, a Bible study based on the Sunday sermon, and a closing prayer. The class has grown because students bring their friends, and because the group has done its own outreach to the community by participating in walks to fight world hunger.

"Theology on Tap" is a program of the Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, offering talks for young adults on Tuesday evenings at Buffalo Billiards in Dupont Circle. The weekly Happy Hour is followed by a talk and then questions and answers on topics such as "How to talk about religion without losing your friends."

In our own community, we're starting up the Timothy Fellowship: an internship modeled on the relationship between the Apostle Paul and his apprentice Timothy, designed to give young men and women practical experience as they consider careers in the church.

English classes for immigrants. Sunday school for the intellectually disabled. "Theology on Tap" for young adults. A church internship for people considering the ministry. All are Ethiopian Innovations. All provide opportunities to sit beside and to guide. Changes, yes. But all very welcome, because they bring people to Christ.

Sources:

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The Ethiopian Innovation

Sunday, May 3, 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Acts 8:26-40

Change is difficult. Change can be a challenge in families, in businesses, in churches, and in communities. In fact, the only person who really likes change is a baby with a wet diaper. That's a welcome change. Throughout history, people have been afraid of innovation. The list includes:

- German writer Johann Georg Heinzmann, who warned people in 1795 about *reading*. He said that consuming words leads to a "weakening of the eyes, heat rashes, gout, arthritis, hemorrhoids, asthma, apoplexy, pulmonary disease, indigestion, blocking of the bowels, nervous disorder, migraines, epilepsy, hypochondria and melancholy." Kind of an odd concern for a writer to have.
- Then, in 1803, preacher Jedidiah Morse said, "Let us guard against the insidious encroachments of *innovation*, that evil and beguiling spirit which is now stalking to and fro through the earth seeking whom he may destroy." Safe to say that he wasn't open to new forms of praise music in his Sunday services.
- In 1854, author Henry David Thoreau criticized the construction of a *telegraph* line from Maine to Texas. He said, "But Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate."
- In 1906, composer John Philip Sousa lamented that *phonographs* were causing "deterioration in American music."
- In 1926, the Knights of Columbus warned that the *telephone* would "break up home life and the old practice of visiting friends."
- About the same time, a dean at Princeton observed that *cars* were becoming a threat to America's young people. "The general effect of the automobile," wrote Howard McClenahan, "was to make the present generation look lightly at the moral code." He worried that young people with cars would drive all over the place on Sundays... drive everywhere except to church. (He may have a point!)