

Unless someone guides me: Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:7-21

by [William Brosend](#) in the [May 10, 2000](#) issue

The First Church of St. John, or “the community of the beloved disciple,” as the late Raymond Brown called it, seems a lot like the church around the corner when you read between the lines. Some of the faithful sound a little too sure of themselves. Others confuse the talk with the walk. Some members get mad and leave the church.

Above all they seemed to have a hard time getting along with each other. Again and again the author included a variation on “Those who say, ‘I love God’ and hate their brothers or sisters are liars.” Love must have been hard to come by in this beloved community; 29 times in the space of 15 verses the author uses one form or another of *agape*: Beloved, let us love one another, for crying out loud! If they had this much trouble mustering love within the church, how did they deal with outsiders?

Dealing with outsiders was not a problem for Philip. He was an outsider. Not to be confused with Philip of Bethsaida (one of the Twelve), this Philip was a Greek in Jerusalem, one of the Seven appointed to run the food pantry, clinic and hospice program there, so the Twelve did not need to tend to such petty concerns as food and drink. After Stephen was martyred, the Jerusalem community scattered.

Luke pursues only one story: Philip’s. Philip moved from waiting on tables in Jerusalem to serving in Samaria as evangelistic front man for Peter and John, proclaiming the Messiah, performing signs, amazing the people and cutting into Simon the Magician’s business. When the two apostles arrived, Philip’s work was done. So the angel of the Lord sent him on the road to Gaza, as rough a road then as now, for an adventure in evangelism that is without precedent in the New Testament.

If Philip was an outsider, the one he was sent to meet was the quintessential outsider: a person of color, of, uh, complicated gender, official to the ruler of a foreign power. He had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and was reading the prophet Isaiah while riding home in his chariot. As the chariot passed him, Philip called to the Ethiopian. (Did the Ethiopian have the slowest chariot in antiquity or was Philip

training for a marathon?)

“Do you understand what you are reading?” asked Philip. No more than Cleopas and companion knew what they were talking about on the Emmaus road. No more than Saul understood what happened on the road to Damascus. No more than we understand the twists and turns on the roads—well or less traveled—on which we find ourselves. We all need an interpreter, a guide, a mentor. The Ethiopian had the wisdom to ask for help. “How can I, unless someone guides me?” he asked. How indeed.

Somewhere along the way, at least in my Baptist tradition with its emphasis on “soul competency” and “soul freedom” (“I’ll figure it out for myself” and “I certainly don’t need the likes of you to explain it to me”), we became convinced that the Bible should be as easy to understand as it is to buy. It has been translated, paraphrased, life-amplified, annotated and illustrated. That does not make it easily accessible. An ongoing challenge for church and clergy is to sufficiently establish the significance of scripture in the hearts and minds of believers so that they will attempt the hard work, the life’s work, of seeking to understand the Word made Book. The Ethiopian knew this, for he was motivated to acquire an Isaiah scroll. He was seeking faith and understanding, and Philip was privileged to be his guide—literally to show him the way.

There is something here for church and clergy—the use of the word “guide” in translation. The Ethiopian did not ask for a teacher, he asked for a guide. There is a big difference. Teachers point and say, “Go there, do that.” Guides reach out and say, “This is the road I traveled. You might want to try it, but whatever road you choose, I’d like to walk it with you.” Philip got in the chariot with the Ethiopian. Luke went out of his way to say that both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water for the baptism. Teachers say, “I told you so.” Guides come after you if you lose your way. The church, I am convinced, needs fewer teachers and more guides.

The elder (assuming continuity of authorship in the Johannine Epistles) writes to his cantankerous community as a guide, not a teacher. He reminds, cajoles, warns, exhorts and invites, and consistently uses the first person plural in verbal and pronominal constructions: “Let us love one another,” not “You should love each other.” “We deceive ourselves,” not “You’re fooling yourselves.” More than that, the tone of the letter is of one whose heart aches for the apparent lack of love and for

the struggles roiling his community, and who writes tenderly to his beloved ones, his little children.

The trouble with being a guide or mentor, of course, is the likelihood that the one being guided will look upon the mentor as an example and model. Forever. Who needs that kind of pressure? Chariot rides are notoriously bumpy as it is, and baptismal waters are wet and cold. After that the baptized ones are on their own. Let them look to God for their example. You know, WWJD and all that. Not so for the elder, or for Philip.

“Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” That will take a while.