



THE SPIRIT OF DISCIPLEMAKING

BY MICHELLE SANCHEZ

🔥 TEXT:

Acts 8:4-39

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Brothers and sisters in Christ, let's begin today by reconsidering a critically important question together. That question, I would say, actually surpasses every other question in its immediate relevance and importance to our lives. And that question is, "What are we doing here?"

Typically people give answers to that question such as, "We're here to glorify God and enjoy God forever." "We're here to worship." "We're here to love God and to love others." These responses are not incorrect, but they are actually the answer to a different question—the question of why we were created. We were indeed created by a God of love, for the purpose of love, to love God, to glorify God, and to love others. Yet these are lists of things that we will do forever. And my question was slightly different. I want to know, why are we here on earth? Why are we here in this place?

That leads us to think there are certain things those of us who are in Christ can only do here on earth now, things we can't do forever. Have you really pondered that? What is it that we can do now that we cannot do forever? These things are the secret to our joy, the true answer to the question. They are the things we should be majoring on and they are the unshakable purpose of our life here on earth. So let's recall together what it is that we can do now that we can't do forever.

We can join God in God's mission to seek and to save the lost. We can say "yes" to God's invitation, to be his witnesses, to be his storytellers of the greatest Person who ever lived and the greatest story that was ever told. We can embrace our appointment by God as ambassadors of holistic reconciliation in an effort to see people reconciled to God, reconciled to one another, and reconciled to all creation. We can join God on his relentless quest to make things right in this broken world. So what is it that we can do now that we can't do forever? As we say together in the Evangelical Covenant Church, **we can make more disciples among more populations in a more caring and just world.**

I see my role as executive minister of Make and Deepen Disciples for the ECC is to remind every person in every ministry in our movement that making more disciples is at the very heart and soul of why we exist. It is the very purpose behind everything that we do. And this is not just my opinion (at least I hope not), but the opinion of Jesus Christ who shared his dream for his church in his final days in what we have come to call the Great Commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

This is Matthew 28, the Great Commission. Let's talk about this word "great" for a minute. The word "great" can be used in several different senses. I'm sure that many of us



regularly blurt out the phrase “That’s great” to mean, “That’s wonderful. That’s excellent. That’s exciting.” But I’m not so sure that’s what Jesus and his disciples were thinking that day when they heard the Great Commission. They were probably thinking something more along the lines of the first definition for “great” in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, which is “notably large in size, huge.” That’s a pretty good description of the true nature of this so-called Great Commission. I’m sure as the disciples heard it, they were dumbstruck by its magnitude. Most of these disciples had just let Jesus down. In other words, they were still having trouble being disciples. Were they really ready to now go and make disciples? And what about this craziness about making disciples of everybody? Now remember, this was before the days of planes and trains and automobiles, and Israel was going to be a challenge enough to reach.

Was Jesus serious? Well, he was indeed! We know he was serious because he sealed the Great Commission with a promise. It was the bow on top, the most important part of the Great Commission: “And surely I am with you. I am with you until the very end.” Without God, all things are pointless. With God, all things are possible. And the mystery of how Jesus can be with us, how he can be God with us, as we pursue his disciple-making mission, is soon revealed in the first chapter of the book of Acts. Jesus tells his disciples, “Actually don’t get started right away. I want you to wait. I want you to wait until I can be with you fully present in the form of the Holy Spirit.” And at Pentecost, Jesus gifted his church with his own spirit, the Holy Spirit, the only one who can empower us to fulfill our disciple-making mission.

Now, some have understood the Book of Acts to be the acts of the Apostles. I think we would do better to think of it as the “acts of the Holy Spirit.” Today we will learn from one such story in the Book of Acts about how the Holy Spirit acted to empower and encourage Phillip—not one of the early disciples, actually, but a deacon of the early church—to reach out and to make a disciple of a most unlikely

character, the Ethiopian eunuch. Our story today will cover a selection of verses from Acts 8:

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said (vv. 4-6).

So there was much joy in that city (v. 8).

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth.”

The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or



someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing (vv. 26-39).

Now, let’s take a closer look at the life of Philip the evangelist—the only one, by the way, whom the Bible calls by the title of “evangelist”—to understand three ways in which the Holy Spirit (Jesus with us) informs and empowers us as we make disciples:

1. The Holy Spirit guides our mission,
2. reaches the margins, and
3. illuminates the Messiah.

First, the Holy Spirit guides the mission after the disciples are scattered. In other words, basically persecuted and forced to leave Jerusalem due to persecution, Philip didn’t let that stop him. He continued to share Christ with all who would listen. And he even did that in Samaria, which was the very place that was typically quite hostile to anything Jewish and to Jewish people like Philip. But the people in Samaria, surprisingly, were not only listening, but were responding with great joy.

Now, all of this abundant fruit that Philip saw in Samaria would have been reason enough for him to stay right where he was and continue to harvest that fruit. But at the proper time God spoke and guided him to a new place and to a new person. And I’ve got to say the guidance really was a little strange. God said, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” And

the Scripture makes a note for us very specifically, this was a deserted place. This was like asking Philip to go from the center of everything to the middle of nowhere. Philip must have thought, “Now how could I possibly have any kind of impact here?” But he obeys. He took the step and, then when he did, God guided him again and nudged him to take yet another step through the Holy Spirit: “Go over there to that chariot.” And when he does, Philip has the unprecedented opportunity to make a disciple of an Ethiopian statesman whom the Spirit had already prepared to hear the good news.

It is so encouraging to know that it’s not up to us to figure out the mission of God. It is the Spirit of God who guides our mission. And this, by the way, is why prayer is so vitally important to mission. If you are familiar with the BLESS initiative, which is the Evangelical Covenant Church’s key evangelism research resource at this time, you know that if we truly want to bless the world, we must begin with prayer.

As you seek to make disciples, pray! Pray, not just so that you can talk to God about people, but so that God can talk about people to you. Pray so God can guide you. The Holy Spirit longs to guide you about who to speak to, where to go, how to love, and what the next step is—but he usually doesn’t shout. The Holy Spirit typically whispers and invites us to listen. He whispers so we’ll lean in and stay close to God on the journey. And as you pray, listening for the whispers and feeling the nudges of the Holy Spirit, realize that the Spirit typically does not reveal the entirety of God’s missional plan to us all at once. God’s style is to lead step-by-step-by-step just as he did with Phillip. The Holy Spirit yearns to speak God’s good news through you, through your unique voice. But before the Spirit can speak through us, we must first listen as he speaks to us. In his book *Whisper: How to Hear God’s Voice*, Mark Batterson asks the question, “Is God’s voice the loudest voice in your life?” That’s the question. If the answer is “No,” that’s the problem. Ultimately, all of us need to find our voice, the unique message God wants to speak through our lives. But



finding our voice starts with hearing God's voice, and as we do, the Holy Spirit will guide our disciple-making mission.

Second, the Holy Spirit longs to reach the margins.

No person is beyond the reach of God's embrace, no matter what it might look like to us. And the Spirit of God is the one who opens our eyes to see this. To see that the good news truly is great joy for all people even, and perhaps especially, for those impossible people at the margins—whether on the margins of society or on the very margins of the earth. The Ethiopian eunuch happened to be both. Earlier in Acts 1, Jesus gave the disciples the gift of the Spirit for a purpose—to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Now I'm sure the disciples thought that this list was really something! Jerusalem and Judea, daunting but doable. Samaria, doable but distasteful. And the ends of the earth, downright impossible. And yet making a disciple from the very end of the earth is exactly what the Spirit empowered Phillip to do.

Shortly thereafter, according to one commentator, the Ethiopians were regarded by the Greeks, and their neighbors from Homer's time onward, as living at the very edge of the world. So reaching an Ethiopian would in fact represent, for the Jewish people, that very thing—reaching the very ends of the earth. It was also a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. For example, Psalm 68:31 envisions a time when even the Ethiopians would reach out to God like the Holy Spirit did for Philip. The Spirit also awakens us to the reality that making disciples is synonymous with making every effort to reach every type of person—all ages, all races, all ethnicities, all abilities, all classes, all cultures, every type of person at the remotest reaches and the most distant margins of the world. But perhaps, even more significantly, there are certain key respects in which the Ethiopian eunuch draws our attention to how the Holy Spirit urges us to make disciples, not only at the margins of the earth but also at the margins of society.

One reason this story floors me, reading it 2,000 years later, is because it suggests the possibility that the first

fully non-Jewish convert to Christianity was a black man. Now, obviously our circumstances have changed quite a bit today. There is a world of difference between the Ethiopian official of Acts 8 and African American men today. Nevertheless, I know that largely due to the ongoing impact of slavery and societal discrimination, as well as the church's historic complicity in those things, many black men continue to feel disenfranchised in society. And in some cases, they even feel distant from God.

Take a look, for example, at a study that was published in the *New York Times* in March 2018, detailing extensive data that indicates the reach of racism for black boys. The solid research of the study reveals that, even when black and white children grow up next to each other with parents who earn similar incomes, black boys fare worse than the white boys in 99% of America. And the gaps only worsen in the kind of neighborhoods that promise low poverty and good schools. It's really a devastating and eye-opening piece that highlights the ongoing challenges that so many black boys and black men face in society today.

Another eye-opening read is the book *Rethinking Incarceration: Advocating for Justice that Restores*, by our own Dominique Gillard, who is the ECC's director of racial righteousness. He urges us to question how it is that the U.S. holds more black adults in correctional control—that is in prison, jail, probation, or parole—than the total number of slaves that existed before the abolition of slavery. No wonder there are black men who continue to feel disenfranchised by society and, in some cases, distant from the God who allowed that to happen.

I used to work on Wall Street as an investment banker and, while I was there, I had an African American male friend who gave me a hard time for being a Christian. "How can you be a Christian?" he asked me, incredulously, "Don't you know that's the white man's religion?" I could tell that the Spirit was beginning to break through when I gently responded by reminding him that Jesus was also a man with brown skin who experienced discrimination and



disfranchisement in his society. Looking back now, I also wish I had pointed out that the Holy Spirit made a special effort to reach this black man in Acts 8. And not only to reach him, but also to bestow upon him the honor of being among the first Gentile converts to Christianity. In fact, many argue he was the first—prior even to Cornelius. Which is why this story's placement in the narrative suggests the gospel is good news of great joy for all people.

The Ethiopian eunuch also draws our attention to yet another important aspect of disciple-making at the margins. It's true that in his own country, the Ethiopian eunuch had elite status. He was a royal official. He was in charge of the entire royal treasury. Plus the fact that he was reading and traveling by horse and chariot meant he was very wealthy and highly educated. Still, we should note that at this time in Israel—which was the place where he wanted to worship God—this man would have existed at the religious margins. This was true, not primarily because of race, but because of his marginalized sexual status. Even though this eunuch was visiting Israel to worship, and presumably was seeking to live as a God-fearer at that time, there nevertheless were strict biblical rules spoken plainly. Leviticus 21 and Deuteronomy 23 clearly barred eunuchs from the Temple for life because of their sexual status.

This man was quite literally doomed to a life of distance from God. Yet quite interestingly, one commentator points out that Isaiah 56:4-5 foresees a time when even eunuchs would be included among the people of God.

For this is what the Lord says:
 “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
 who choose what pleases me
 and hold fast to my covenant—
 to them I will give within my temple and its walls
 a memorial and a name
 better than sons and daughters;
 I will give them an everlasting name
 that will endure forever.”

Perhaps this encouraging text is precisely why the eunuch was drawn to reading the scroll of Isaiah in the first place. As one commentator points out, the whole point of this scene is what was promised to the prophet Isaiah is now coming to pass in the life of the church.

A Gentile eunuch is welcomed among God's people. Because of his sexual status, this man was doomed to distance from God. So imagine the jubilation he must have experienced as Phillip shared the good news, that through Jesus Christ, for the first time in his life, he could finally come near to God. Actually, even better still, God had come near to him for his whole life. The Ethiopian would have been prevented from truly worshiping God. Prevented from fully becoming a part of God's community. Prevented from coming near to God. And this is why it was so poignant, and so poetic, when after hearing the good news of Jesus, the eunuch asked, “What is there to prevent me from being baptized?” Clearly, nothing at all, not anymore. And so he is baptized on that very day with joy. We learned from his story that the Holy Spirit breaks through boundaries. The Holy Spirit empowers and challenges us to make disciples at the margins.

So, we've seen that the Holy Spirit guides the mission, and we've seen that **the Holy spirit reaches the margins**. Finally, we see that the Holy Spirit illuminates the Messiah. At the end of the day, we've got to realize that disciple-making isn't a thing. God doesn't want our lives to be all about discipleship and disciple-making. God wants our lives to be all about Jesus. The difference is subtle, but it's significant.

Discipleship only has value to the extent that it centers us in Jesus and deepens our devotion to a person, to the Messiah Jesus Christ. This emphasis on Jesus is vital, not only when it comes to deepening disciples, but also when it comes to making disciples. If you want to see the power of the Holy Spirit break through in someone's life, don't focus on things like theology or ethics or the church and, for heaven sake, definitely don't focus on politics! Focus on Jesus Christ.



In *The Art of Non-Evangelism*, Carl Madeiras writes, “The gospel is not a ‘what?’ It is, not a ‘how.’ The gospel is a ‘who.’” The gospel is literally the good news of Jesus. Jesus is the gospel. So if you want to share the gospel, share Jesus. This is precisely the pivot point in our journey with the Ethiopian eunuch. As the man reads from Isaiah 53, the Spirit sends Philip to reveal to him that the very person he’s reading about is none other than the long awaited Messiah, Jesus Christ. This sheep who was led to the slaughter and whose life was taken away from the earth, was none other than the very Son of God, who loved us so much that he died and rose again to set us free and make a way for us back to God.

As we consider our call as disciple-makers, we must be very clear about our role and about God’s role. They are not the same thing. We can’t make anyone a Christian, so we must forever let go of that burdensome responsibility. What we can do is point people to Jesus, and when we do, it’s the Holy Spirit’s job to illuminate that Jesus is the way, that there’s no other path to God than through him, that Jesus is the truth, that he alone can show us what is real, and that Jesus is life itself, that full and forever joy comes only from him.

Our job is to give good news about Jesus because, as the eunuch asked, “How can I know unless someone guides me?” We are called to be guides and, one of the best ways to guide people into the good news of Jesus is to tell stories about him. We are to share the stories of Jesus from Scripture. Or, better yet, to read the stories of Jesus from the Scriptures together, just as Philip did on this day. And when we do, we must trust in the Holy Spirit’s wisdom and timing. We must trust that the Spirit is the one who will open people’s eyes and awaken their hearts to the reality that Jesus is the Messiah.

We conclude our journey together today where our Scripture itself concludes with joy. Verse 39 reads, “And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away (and this must’ve been pretty

interesting) and the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing.” When we share Jesus with others, we may experience some weeping along the way. This is true. It’s not always easy to share Jesus with others, but we can be sure that joy will come in the morning. Spiritual conversations are challenging and they have their ups and downs, but ultimately they lead to joy. In his refreshing little book, *The Reluctant Witness: Discovering the Delight of Spiritual Conversations*, Don Everts explores a recent study which shows that Christians who have dived into the waters of spiritual conversation report positive feelings, including peace 71% of the time, joy 55% of the time, and even exhilaration 19% of the time. In fact, a majority of Americans (77%) are glad about their most recent conversation with someone who did not share their faith.

As we make disciples, the Holy Spirit guides the mission. The Holy Spirit reaches the margins. The Holy Spirit illuminates the Messiah. The Holy Spirit also brings joy.

When we consciously depend on the Holy Spirit to make disciples of us and to make disciples through us, we will ultimately experience joy. We will leave a legacy for others of joy in the heart of Jesus Christ. This is what life is all about. There are some things that we who are in Christ can only do now here on earth that we cannot do forever. As we say in the ECC, these things come down to joining God and God’s mission to make more disciples among more populations in a more caring and just world

Mission Friends, let’s do this!