

## *The Conversion of St. Philip*

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa  
The Feast of St. Philip

It is a good day to be the Cathedral of St. Philip! On this special Sunday, we get to celebrate our patron saint Philip and all the saints of the parish, *and* we get to welcome new saints into this holy communion with holy baptism!

Today's baptisms mark these children's beginning and belonging in the one, holy, universal Church—the mystical body of Jesus Christ—, in which all churches and Christians across time and space really are one, even when they don't look or act like it. *And* baptism marks these children's beginning and belonging in this Cathedral of St. Philip, a particular incarnation of that mystical body, among a particular community of Christians—that is, all of us!

And we, all of us, remember today who we are as members of Christ's mystical body and of one another, as God's beloved children, as recipients of grace upon grace upon grace. *And* we also remember who are as this particular parish named after Philip the deacon and evangelist.

As we learn in Acts of the Apostles, Philip was one of the first disciples assigned to a special ministry of service, or *diakonia*, as the early church was growing, to make sure that the most vulnerable were not left behind. Then, when a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, he was among the disciples who were scattered and who, as they were scattered, preached wherever they went, so that the word spread, and the church grew, anyway—in spite of efforts to destroy it.

Instead of letting Philip rest on his laurels, an angel commanded him to go out *again* to a dangerous desert road, where he encountered an Ethiopian eunuch and, at the Spirit's prompting and the Ethiopian's invitation, showed him the good news.

It's such good news that the Ethiopian wants to be baptized, too. And, why not? he asks. Well, he's a foreigner, and a eunuch; and he hasn't been through the baptism workshop. But before Philip can answer, the stranger leads them to a pool of water, and Philip baptizes him. Then the Spirit whisks Philip away again to continue his preaching tour, with a new understanding of the fullness of God's salvation.

This story is often called “the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch,” but it’s a conversion of Philip, too, isn’t it? Through this stranger, through the Spirit, and through Philip’s openness to them, Philip is changed, also. And the church grows. The church becomes more whole.

In 1846, when five railroad families first gathered for Communion in downtown Marthasville (as Atlanta was called then) and began to imagine a church, it was Philip's name they chose. Two years later, St. Philip's Episcopal Church moved into its first building across the street from today's state capitol. There was a second building, and a third, which is where the church was when it became a cathedral in 1904. In the 1930s, when the streets of downtown Atlanta had risen higher than the church doors, the congregation moved here, to the intersection between Peachtree and Andrews, which for many Atlantans at the time, like my grandfather, seemed like the end of the earth.

The “little gray church,” which some of you remember, and which you can see in a stained-glass window in the Andrews transept, was built here, with its doors opening out to the city. Mikell Chapel was finished in 1947, and this cathedral, where we gather today, in 1962.

The Spirit continued to blow, as the Spirit does, and to grow the church and its witness and service. About forty years later, with Dean Candler's leadership, we "let our light shine" by adding a wide-open Atrium to welcome all people into this house of prayer, and an education wing to nurture spiritual learning and growth and community.

There have been many other changes, of course: in our spaces, liturgies, and ministries. There have been conflicts, too. After all, we are one body with many members, and just as strongly held many opinions! Like our patron saint, we have been converted, too, again and again, as we have tried to follow the Spirit, live out the Gospel, and love God and one another.

I like the way Benedict understands conversion. Benedictine monks take vows of obedience, stability, and conversion. But wait! Aren't stability and conversion opposites? No! Not for Benedict. For him, the vow of conversion doesn't mean restlessly grasping for the next best thing, or always looking around the corner for something better, but rather growing in the spirit, being renewed, wherever you are.

And stability doesn't mean clinging to what has been or what you have right now. Rather, it is commitment. It is trusting that we are in the place in which God wishes us to be<sup>ii</sup> and making a difference there. It means taking root and growing, where we are. Growing down, with deeper roots in the ground, and growing within—in self-awareness, understanding, acceptance and compassion. Growing up, maturing. And growing outward, toward others.

Today, I give thanks for all the saints of this parish, past and present, who have taken root and made a difference here. I give thanks for those who built and planted and dreamed this place into being—into being a place from which blessings flow.

I give thanks for *you*, the saints we see today, teaching our children, sitting through meetings, planning for and imagining our future, preparing this altar, arranging flowers, calling and caring and praying for one another, studying and singing together. Burying the dead. Welcoming newcomers and strangers. Learning how to love and to let yourselves be loved.

I give thanks for the service—the *diakonia*—that flows out from this parish into the streets, the city, the world. To hospitals and prisons and shelters, schools and workplaces, retirement communities, respite care.

I give thanks for you who, like Philip, preach the good news of Jesus Christ wherever you go, in word and example, witnessing with your life to the wideness of God's mercy, to the trustworthiness of God, to the power of the Holy Spirit making all things new and working in you, doing more than we could ever ask or imagine.

Thank you! And thanks be to God!

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<sup>ii</sup> Br. Michael Gallagher, OSB, in Community of Hope International Training Video, "Module 1: Benedictine Spirituality" (2015).