

## God Space

Creating room for spiritual conversations -  
an encounter between two unlikely friends

Read Acts 8:26- 40.

This passage is a record of an event that takes place sometime after Jesus was raised from the dead and had appeared to his disciples. The focus is on an encounter between two unlikely friends.

*26-28 Later God's angel spoke to Philip: "At noon today I want you to walk over to that desolate road that goes from Jerusalem down to Gaza." He got up and went. He met an Ethiopian eunuch coming down the road. The eunuch had been on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and was returning to Ethiopia, where he was minister in charge of all the finances of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. He was riding in a chariot and reading the prophet Isaiah.*

*29-30 The Spirit told Philip, "Climb into the chariot." Running up alongside, Philip heard the eunuch reading Isaiah and asked, "Do you understand what you're reading?"*

*31-33 He answered, "How can I without some help?" and invited Philip into the chariot with him. The passage he was reading was this:*

*As a sheep led to slaughter,  
and quiet as a lamb being sheared,  
He was silent, saying nothing.  
He was mocked and put down, never got a fair trial.  
But who now can count his kin  
since he's been taken from the earth?*

*34-35 The eunuch said, "Tell me, who is the prophet talking about: himself or some other?" Philip grabbed his chance. Using this passage as his text, he preached Jesus to him.*

*36-39 As they continued down the road, they came to a stream of water. The eunuch said, "Here's water. Why can't I be baptized?" He ordered the chariot to stop. They both went down to the water, and Philip baptized him on the spot. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of God suddenly took Philip off, and that was the last the eunuch saw of*

*him. But he didn't mind. He had what he'd come for and went on down the road as happy as he could be.*

Today we begin a new series that will take us through February. Over this series we will be focusing on attention on a concept called 'God Space'. Some of you will have heard this phrase through a book of the same name. We had the author of that book run a seminar here at OBC a couple of years back. The subtitle of that book is "Where spiritual conversations happen naturally."

This book is probably one of the most helpful books I have read on evangelism. It removes much of the scariness and pressure, and gives hands on practical help on what we can do in our everyday life to share God's love with people through a very natural, very every day process. If you haven't read the book, it is in the library.

If we are honest, most of us feel a bit uncomfortable by this word Evangelism but it is simply sharing Jesus with other people, and like many other parts of our spiritual life, it should be something that comes very naturally to us as part of our everyday conversations with other people.

### **What do we mean by God space?**

- **God space** is all about finding the space within us and around us, or creating the space within us and around us so that we can notice where God is at work.
- God space is that space in which we serve other people - in Jesus' name.
- God space is that space in which we "wonder" about God, and even doubt about God.
- God space is our awareness toward what God is doing in our lives. Any time that we are sensitive to God's presence and what God is trying to say to us, that is what we are talking about when we talk about God space.

We believe that Jesus died and rose again, we believe that he came and preached about the kingdom of God, and how God's kingdom was advancing in the world. But we don't believe that those are just isolated historical events. The kingdom of God is present, it is always advancing in our midst, one person at a time, one relationship at a time, even one conversation at a time.

We as Christians often seem to live in spiritual isolation. Or we choose to live in spiritual isolation. And our culture teaches us to gravitate toward a private,

personal, spirituality - where your *personal* relationship with God is all that matters, and as long as *you are* good with God, then you're good. And we strive to have our personal needs met through this personal relationship with God. As long as we're good with God - God's happy with us. And as long as God is giving us our health and strength and financial stability and peace of mind and whatever it is that we feel like we need, then we are happy with God too. I spoke about this understanding a few weeks ago. It's call Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.

If our relationship with God is just between us and God then we are living in a state of spiritual isolation, which is not ultimately healthy, its certainly not the way God planned it.

Creating God Space in our lives enable us to see what God is up to, not only in our life, but also in the lives of the people around us and gives us the opportunity to be part of the work of building God's kingdom as well.

### **An encounter between two unlikely friends**

Today's passage from Acts 8 is a perfect example of someone finding God Space in the midst of everyday conversations.

To be fair, this is not an everyday conversation. I don't know the last time that God told me to go down a desolate road into a desert and go up to a complete stranger and start up a conversation about spiritual things. But it is an example of how we can find God Space, even in the midst of our everyday conversations, our everyday relationships, because it shows the importance of being open to what God is doing in our midst.

Usually in Bible stories like these we tend to gravitate toward one character or another where we think that person represents us. Today I'd like to suggest that we can identify with both - we should identify with both. Philip and this unnamed Ethiopian eunuch, this official, this important person. Let's start with that guy.

### **The Eunuch**

For anybody here who doesn't know what a Eunuch is – google it! This guy is wealthy, he is important, he is powerful within the royal courts of ancient Ethiopia. He is the treasurer in charge of all the finances of the Queen Mother of the Ethiopian empire.

The important part about this man is not that we have so much in common with him. However anybody endowed with that much wealth, if you can just come a have a chat with me afterward. We have a hall that needs a facelift, carpark repaired and a few other miscellaneous things.

### **This man is important in the story because he is not a Jew!**

You see up to this point, in the gospels, in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and this far into Acts, the followers of Jesus, for the most part, have been Jews, like Jesus was. But this man is not a Jew, he is Ethiopian, nowhere near a Jew. In fact, in the Greek way of understanding the world, Ethiopia was at the ends of the earth geographically, and remember what Jesus said to his disciples? That they will take the good news to all of the ends of the earth. Here is the first story about it going that far.

This man had come to worship God in Jerusalem, as many people did, Jews and others, and on his way home he is reading a scroll, another sign of his wealth and education. He is reading a scroll of Isaiah, the prophet Isaiah, that's in our Bible. In Isaiah chapter 53 we read words that today we read with a clear understanding that it is talking about Jesus. It has phrases like, *'he was wounded for our transgressions, he carried our sorrows, all we like sheep have gone astray, but our sin has been laid on him.'* We read those words and think, 'aha of course that's talking about Jesus', but this Ethiopian man, as important as it was, as powerful as he was, did not understand what he was reading. He didn't know about Jesus.

Now he could have pretended to have all the answers, he could have just ignored this sort of confusing passage and moved on with his life which was after all, pretty good, but instead he humbled himself.

In this story he humbled himself in a number of ways to listen for what God is saying in his life. He invites a stranger, a Jewish commoner, Phillip, just a regular everyday person, not nobility, not royalty, not an important figure, a foreigner, to sit next to him in his Chariot and then he listens. Not just about Isaiah, but the whole story of Jesus, and then he notices some water and says why shouldn't I be baptized to show my allegiance to Jesus, to show my acceptance of this story, to show how I'm connecting my life with this story of Jesus Christ.

Each of us no matter our spiritual background, no matter our age or experience or maturity, each of us needs to be sensitive to what God is doing

within us. Each of us needs to learn to hear God's voice and to seek after him. Each of us needs to become more and more aware of the God Space within us.

Each of us is the Ethiopian man in the story, searching for meaning and answers in our lives with a God shaped vacuum that only God can fill.

### **Phillip**

And each of us is also Phillip, or at least each of us has the opportunity to be Phillip.

Phillip was a regular everyday man. It could be that he was one of the 12 followers of Jesus, as there was a disciple of Jesus name Philip. It could be that he was another man named Phillip, the text isn't very clear about that, in any case

Whichever Phillip it was, he was a follower of Jesus who was sensitive to God's Spirit. He was lead down this road in the desert, not knowing whom or what he would find on that road. He was bold enough to approach the chariot of a foreign official and yet he had the wisdom to listen and not to jump in with an agenda or preconceived notions about how this conversation should go.

Philip asked a probing question; do you understand what you are reading? And that allowed him to gauge the situation and to listen for what God was saying to him, to engage in a spiritual conversation with this Ethiopian man. He entered into a conversation with a complete stranger because he was sensitive to God's desires and sensitive to that man's situation.

Each of us is called to be Philip as well, not necessarily to have spiritual conversations with complete strangers on a regular basis. That's not something that I feel uncomfortable about, but there are some that do, and that is great but not necessarily for everyone. But definitely we are all called to be sensitive to God's desires and to the needs of people around us - because we're connected to each other;

- we are not spiritually isolated from the people around us,
- we are connected to the people in our homes,
- we're connected to the people in our classrooms,
- we are connected to our neighbours,
- we are connected to the people that we meet in the supermarket.
- We are connected to people who are similar to us,
- we are connected to people who are quite different.

And we as followers of Jesus have a responsibility to learn to share the love of Christ with people around us, when the time is right. We have a responsibility to become more sensitive to the God space in other people's lives.

We are both Philip and the Ethiopian man in this story.

### **Creating God Space**

So how do we do this, **how do we create God Space** where conversations of a spiritual nature can happen naturally? How do we go about doing this? How can we become more open to having spiritual conversations with people around us? How can we practice this kind of sensitivity, even as a congregation, because again, it's not just you and God that has to be right in terms of God space, but our congregation, our gatherings, our events, our meetings, the way we engage with each other, should be marked by this kind of sensitivity to God's Spirit, because creating space for God to work in people's lives is a congregational task too.

How do we do this thing? That's what this whole series is going to be about. Over the next several weeks we are going to unpack this idea of God space and look at how it can work in different ways in our lives over the course of the next several weeks.

### **Illustration circle.**

But for today I would like to have some volunteers to help with an illustration I need 6-7 volunteers. You are not going to have to say anything.

All of us in this room represent the people in our community. Tauranga, or maybe the wider Otumoetai area including surrounding suburbs. And these 6 individuals represent our congregation. These people have come out of the wider community and form a body of believers, a church family, generally speaking they like each other.

Now to demonstrate your Christian unity I would like for you to form a circle and hold hands with each other.

Excellent - notice what they did, they all turned inward.

The danger with church life, congregational life is that when we choose to come together as a congregation, it's natural for us to come together with people whom we like, who are similar to us, who we have common interests

with, and to turn inward and say this is a good thing that we've got going here. To ask people to join this is kind of a natural thing, and that is what we often think evangelism is about - getting people to join this closed off circle, where people have their backs turned toward you. But as outsiders to this circle, this doesn't seem like a welcoming place, it's kind of looks like their own club.

The goal of this series on God Space is to get us to think, what if we as a congregation remain connected to each other, because that's really important, we've got to stay connected to each other and support each other and help each other through hard times, but what if we turned outward, what if we were an outward focused church where things that we did were for the benefit of those who are not in the circle. They say the church is the only organisation that exists purely for the benefit of those that are not part of the circle. It exists so that other people might be introduced to Jesus. We exist so that the message can be shared and that help can be given and that love can be shared with people who are not part of this circle.

What would it look like if we were to turn outward yet still remain connected to each other?

Get group to do that – it looks like a completely different group, you can see their faces. They are still connected but they are able to see the needs of the community far better. That's the perspective that I hope we can we can gain as we develop as a church.