

Dear friends in Christ



“Outside-the-Box Audacity”

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Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31;
1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

It was “a simple, yet profound, act of courage.” That is how the Minnesota state Attorney General Keith Ellison characterized the action of Darnella Frazier. She knew that what her eyes were seeing was profoundly wrong. She pressed “record” on her smart phone.

Actually, OUTSIDE-The-BOX AUDACITY. Despite threats from an officer, she kept filming.

“When I look at George Floyd, I look at my dad, I look at my brothers, I look at my cousins...” She agonized that she couldn’t have done more to help George Floyd. Choking back tears, she continued her testimony, “It’s been nights I’ve stayed up apologizing and apologizing to George Floyd for not doing more and not physically interacting and not saving his life.” If ever there was “undaunted courage,” that day on a street corner, the actions of that seventeen-year-girl, that is what courage looks like.

That act of Philip on a wilderness road running from Jerusalem to Gaza was also a “simple, yet profound, act of courage.” This was a Spirit-inspired act of gospel generosity - another providential act of audacity. Had Philip behaved according to the norms of his religious teaching, he would have responded with horror, “But Lord, these are not our people. Unclean and uncouth. We don’t associate with their likes.”

Anyone who’s ever been assaulted by an ever-loving Glory Attack by the Spirit knows that Persistence is her middle name.

“Go. Go. No shillyshallying. Get off your backside and Go!”

“Go over to this chariot and join it.” “Now, be nice.” So, Philip ran up to it and heard the Ethiopian charioteer reading from the prophet Isaiah. Gently, Philip asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’”¹

With that simple question, with that audacious question, and perhaps a smile – the Body of Christ began to look a bit like the rest of the world. Philip not only “drew the circle wide,” he drew it wider still.² That inquiry opened the door to Spirit Outside-the-Box Truth and Generosity. God welcomes all folks.

It has been frequently said that Sunday morning, eleven o’clock, is the most segregated hour in America. In our church we certainly had no Ethiopians, or much of anyone else who didn’t look like me.

When I worked for then candidate Obama in Akron, Ohio, on Sundays when the headquarters was closed (see, progressives are not all heathen, we’d be off for church. I’d tried out several Episcopal churches, even brought a friend or two along.

Virtually all were very white-bread. No diversity at all. My home church of four thousand in Pasadena was a very diverse congregation. It looks like America. All Saints is definitely NOT the most segregated hour at eleven o’clock on Sunday morning. It was this diversity I had been missing.

Saturday evening, I got on the internet to see what other Episcopal churches might be out there. The second one I came to had a

¹ Acts 8:26—40, NRSV, 1989.

² Gordon Light, “Draw the Circle Wide,” 1994 Common Cup Company, 1998

Black acolyte in cotta and red cassock. I thought, “at least this congregation has some diversity.”

That Sunday I headed off to St. Philip’s, a little ways from downtown. I recognized the neighborhood because I had been there picking up some folks to drive them to the early voting location.

When I came in the door, I heard a familiar voice, an older, Black woman, exclaim, “I didn’t know you were a priest.” I had worn my clerical collar that morning. In the next voice she hesitantly asked, “Did I say anything bad.”

That Sunday, at St. Philip’s in Akron, Ohio, I was the diversity.

For several previous weeks she had been working next to me on the phone bank. At announcement time she introduced me as a priest working for a “certain presidential candidate” – a volunteer from the Diocese of Los Angeles. I received a standing ovation. Such an honor. Talk about being a prophet without honor in one’s hometown. I never got such a reception in anyplace that I ever called home.

But much more important, this congregation was every bit as spirited as mine at All Saints. The music alone could have gotten even the most frozen of the frozenest chosen saved. The liturgy was definitely not mumbled. It was entered into with exuberance, like we do at St. Francis.

Such is the gift the Spirit brought to the body of Christ when St. Philip climbed aboard that chariot that day. The heart and the mind of the church grew one size larger on that dusty road.

In the neighborhood of my childhood, we had one Black family, a dentist. And his ever-loving Christian neighbors stuck a hose left to run through a second story window and flooded their house while the family was on vacation. “Not our kind,” they hissed. No welcoming St. Philip here. Only a sick KKK mentality. Only a voter-suppression mentality.

The animosity of the faith community to outsiders was standard. There would have been separate water fountains for Jews and Gentiles. When Philip showed up for Sunday service with his Ethiopian friends, they would have been met with blank stares and

hostile grimaces. “What are these people doing here? They are not our kind.” Talk about “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner!”

But that’s how the Spirit works. Ever ready to blow up our religious rigidities. Ever ready to teach us a new lesson in humility. Ever ready to bless us with the delights of another culture. “See, I am making all things new” – the Gospel gift.

Thanks to the early witness of Philip, Peter, Lydia and a long line of others, the Body of Christ has taken on the flesh of all peoples. Just as the Sunday school song says, “Jesus loves the little children. All the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white They are precious in his sight...”

Jesus might, but not so much the little corner church of my early years. Oh, we would have been polite. Scrupulously polite. But most likely, no one would have gone up to that little black Ethiopian child or his mother and invited them to coffee hour. Not the church of my childhood in our very wealthy, white neighborhood of Long Beach, California.

It is not our natural proclivity to go up to strangers, to roll out the welcome mat. I remember the summer we drove our new Volkswagen squareback way into Canada, up into the Northwest Territories, above the Arctic Circle. We were visiting old friends from Los Angeles, way up there fleeing cold drafts, and other sorts of drafts. They told us of a little Anglican mission church that would be holding services that Sunday. In the parking lot we stuck out with our California license plates. As there were only about twenty-five in church for morning prayer that Sunday, we continued to stick out.

I had imagined that a number of folks would be curious about the California tags and new model Volkswagen. Would want to find out what brought us from so far away. But shock. Not a soul spoke to us. Not a word. Until we were unlocking the car to leave. One guy whose car was next to ours briefly said good morning or something brief. That was it. Talk about Anglicans being the “frozen chosen!” And I didn’t think that we were threatening. Though we were Americans. That might have done it. Americans, then, were considered pretty scary by many Canadians. Yeah, maybe Jai and I were too scary.

The fact is, most churches left to their own devices, are not that hospitable. A religion writer for one newspaper noted that the norm was that visitors were mostly ignored. Everyone wanted to greet their friends instead. Only a few churches had a ministry of hospitality, went out of their way to really make strangers feel welcome.

It takes a lot of push by the Spirit to get outside one's comfort zone. But with a humongous push by the Spirit, that's when the miracles start. Like a match tossed into a box of fireworks.

This gospel vine has more grafted onto it than what our small imaginations will allow. And the fruit it bears is beyond reckoning. It's all of us and more. much more. That's what makes the bouquet of the vintage so enticing. Stick with the Vinegrower. Sometimes the pruning is painful. But always necessary. And the results are, can I say it, "heavenly?"

Did you catch the recent episode of Nova, "Picture a Scientist?" If what popped into your mind is an old white guy in a lab coat, with spectacles and maybe a beard – you've already flunked the test.

Unfortunately, too many girls and young women suffer the same constricted vision. Your Holy Spirit directed reading assignment is **Code Breaker** by

Walter Isaacson, That's the story of Dr. Jennifer Doudna, the leader of the team that has developed the vaccine COVID-19. The vaccine that may save civilization as we know it.

Like most women in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) fields, she had to struggle for recognition and opportunity. I remember that there was only one woman student in our entire geology department. My brother-in-law, a math major, says it was that way at his college.

One of my best teachers at Cerritos College was Dr. Hengstler, who taught trigonometry and logic, among other things. At least, that's what she attempted to teach me. Tough as nails she was; but one of the most dedicated teachers in the place. Definitely, one of the best teachers I ever had. As a math major, I can only imagine the crap she had to contend with, the insufferable men who demeaned and ridiculed her. We certainly had them in my math and science classes. But we students were greatly enriched that she stuck it

out, that she persevered – that she was a woman of courageous audacity.

We, all across the board, are being prompted by the Spirit to draw the circle wider and wider still. In our church, math, science or in politics – it's a Gospel blessing. It's an enrichment. It's worth the fight, and we men need to join that fight. Ask St. Philip.

I close with an audacious revision of the Prayer of St. Francis. Yes, we must pray for harmony and peace. But not the peace of the grave. Not peace at the expense of the marginalized and shoved out.

Called the “**Reverse St. Francis Prayer:**”

Lord make me a channel of your disturbance.

Where there is apathy, let me provoke,
Where there is silence, may I be a voice,
Where there is too much comfort and too little action,
Grant disruption.

Where there are doors closed and hearts locked,
Grant me the willingness to listen.
When laws dictate and pain is overlooked,
Grant me the willingness to listen.
When tradition speaks louder than need,
Grant me the willingness to listen.
Disturb us, O Lord. Teach us to be radical.

Grant that I may seek rather to do justice than talk about it;
To be with as well as for the poor;
To love the unlovable as well as the lovely;
To touch the passion of Jesus in the Pain of those we meet;
To accept responsibility to be church

Lord, make me a channel of your disturbance.³

Spirit Work. All...to draw the circle wider still. Amen.

³ Author unknown, from the *Claremont Courier*, Jessie Smith, April 30, 2021.

