

In *Through the Looking Glass*, the Queen says to Alice, "I'm just one hundred and one, five months and a day."

"I can't believe that!" said Alice.

"Can't you?" the Queen said in a pitying tone. "Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes."

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said: "one can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

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I don't know if you've had breakfast or not, but our first lesson for today is made up of at least three or four impossible things. First there's the idea that Philip could be the star of this story. He wasn't one of the disciples. This isn't the guy who was recruited by Jesus along with Peter and Andrew. This Philip isn't even in the gospels and he doesn't show up as being even somewhat interesting until well into the Book of Acts. This Philip was a part of the church's early "Meals on Wheels" program.

If you check out the sixth chapter of Acts, you'll find that there was a huge kerfuffle because, although everyone had agreed that the widows of the congregation should be provided with food delivery, nobody had bothered to figure out how that should work. The disciples were spending time in word and prayer, but they had forgotten about service.

The Jewish widows were being cared for but some of the Greek widows were not. The twelve decided that the best solution was to choose seven men of "good reputation," to distribute the food to those who were in need and Philip was one of the seven. He was a server. He might have been called a deacon, but in terms of the hierarchy of the church, he wasn't someone who had been charged with decision making or setting precedents. At this point in the church's history, Peter and the other leaders hadn't resolved whether you could be a Christian without first becoming a Jew, so making a decision about who may or may not be baptized really wasn't a part of Philip's job description. Doing the actual baptizing? That was way out of his wheel house. Yet, there he was.

The second impossible thing about this story is the idea that Philip would be sent by an angel of the Lord to meet up with a eunuch serving in the court of the Ethiopian Queen.

The disciples were still trying to figure out whether you could be a Christian without being a Jew. And being a Jew meant you had to be circumcised. They certainly hadn't gotten anywhere close to talking about a case like this one.

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We know that the Ethiopian was returning home from Jerusalem where he had been to worship. Luke's first readers would have known that there was no way that this man would have been permitted to worship in the temple, not because of his race or nationality, although both of those things have been used as excuses to keep people from being a part of the church. It was because of his sexual identity. He was a eunuch and according to Deuteronomy 23:1, he was "half a man," unable to enter "the assembly of the Lord." He would never have been allowed to fully participate in Israel's worship. He was an outsider, lingering on the edges of Judaism. He wanted to know more. He hungered to understand the truth of the scripture he was reading, but he had to do his learning on his

own. Nobody at the temple in Jerusalem would have wanted to spend time with this fellow. He was too different. Too other.

Miraculously, Philip connects with this guy. By the grace of God he was sent to help the Ethiopian understand the words of Isaiah and that's the third impossible thing about this story.

There is much that the man might have been reading, but his scroll was opened to Isaiah 53. These are words that we read during Holy Week, because, perhaps better than any other passage in the Old Testament, these words foretell what Jesus would do on Good Friday.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed...

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent.

What an opportunity for teaching and preaching! Philip had the perfect opportunity to talk about Christ, the Lamb of God who gave his life for the sin of the world. He could tell the story of Jesus' life and death and resurrection. And then the Ethiopian asks the impossible question.

What is to prevent me from being baptized?

Philip might have listed a dozen different reasons for why baptism was impossible. But he didn't. God's grace made the impossible, possible and so the two men went down to the water and the unbelievable happened. Ordinary water, made holy by the word of God was used by one sinner to bless another. Together they came out of the water, redeemed and saved, not because of anything they had done, but by the gracious love of God.

Based on everything we know about human beings, it shouldn't have happened that way. But based on everything we know about God, we have good reason to believe that it did.

The Ethiopian asked, "What's to prevent me from being baptized?" And Philip's response was to share the love of God in word and deed. And then God rushes him on to the next opportunity to share the impossible grace of the gospel. He is whisked away to Azotus to people in Caesarea.

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The church has not always been as welcoming as Philip. Yesterday I found these suggestions from a congregation in another country and of another denomination. But please understand, there are Lutheran churches that have done similar things.

- *On this joyful occasion, it would be most encouraged to make a financial offering to the parish in thanksgiving for the gift of your child's Baptism. A generous monetary gift back to God would be appropriate and very appreciated.*
- *Please prepare your donation ahead of time by placing it in an envelope with the name of the child who is baptized on the outside with the date of baptism. Please give it to the Priest or Deacon before or after the Baptism.*
- *If the offering is a check, please make it out to "name of church here."*

I've been asked what the charge is for baptisms. This isn't as outlandish as one might think. And how do we decide who can be baptized? Those who understand? Those who believe? Can infants be baptized? The church has been arguing about that for two thousand years.

Do the parents have to be members? If they aren't members, do we need a letter from their hometown pastor? Who is welcome and who isn't?

What does it **cost**?

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Last year, my niece texted me that she was pregnant. And then right away she sent a second text to ask me if I would baptize her baby. I didn't know what to say.

I wasn't serving in a congregation. We don't do baptisms in the seminary chapel. If I went Denver where they were, was there a congregation that would allow me to baptize Hazel? The baby's parents aren't members of a church. Her grandparents don't go to church. Would Hazel's great-grandparent's pastor let me baptize her? Would it be wrong to ask my college roommate if I could baptize the baby at the church she pastors?

I couldn't figure out how to say, "yes." And I wanted to say "yes."

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Over the years, churches have said "no" because of race, nationality, class, gender and sexual identity. The church has found ways to keep out people who are seen as dangerous and suspect because they are different.

Perhaps more frequently, are the times when the church has said no to coming to the Table for Communion.

My father-in-law loved to tell the story of a time that they were visiting my mother-in-law's home congregation. Earl was raised in the Lutheran Church in America and Jan was brought up in a Missouri Synod congregation where you needed to be a member in good standing in order to take communion. They were visiting the grandparents and on Saturday, the pastor said that since Jan had been brought up in the congregation, she could take communion the next day, but not Earl and the kids.

That morning, they sat up in the very front of the church. Mom, Dad and four children. When it came time for the Communion liturgy to begin, Earl stood up and said, "All right kids, we're leaving now. The service is over for us."

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Have you registered? Are you a member of this church? Do you believe the way we believe? Do you understand what's happening? Do you understand it the way we understand it? There are churches around the world who would not welcome you and I to the table. And many who would not come to this table for fear that we were not doing it correctly.

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Several years ago I was presiding at a wedding service. The bride had grown up in a Christian family but her church wouldn't agree to host her wedding because they were living together. The groom, who had become a Christian as an adult, had grown up in a Muslim family.

At the rehearsal, I explained that everyone who wanted to participate was welcome to come up for communion during the wedding, but as I said the words, I assumed that the groom's father would not come for communion. And yet, he did. "What do I do?" he whispered. And I wondered what I should do. He wasn't baptized. He certainly hadn't taken a First Communion class. What did he know or believe about what was happening? Then I handed him the bread, "The Body of Christ, given for you." And I told him to dip the bread into the wine.

Did I do the right thing?

I hope so.

I don't know why he came forward, but in some way he felt invited. Those kinds of things don't happen very often. There's usually more opportunity to talk about what we do and why we do it with those who are interested. We have time to talk with parents about the meaning of baptism. We plan occasions when we talk about the meaning of Holy Communion with our children. We hold New Member Classes to help orient people to what happens in this place.

But when it comes to invitation-

When it comes to gifts of love and grace -

I want to be the kind of pastor that says "yes!"

I want St. Matthews to be the kind of church that says “yes” far more often than it says “no.” How can we embody the gracious love of God who sent Philip to one that others called only “half a man?” How can we bear fruit that testifies to the generosity of our God and gives glory to God’s name?

There are pastors and bishops and church council around the world who are afraid that the church is dying. There are meetings and workshops centered around the fact that people are afraid that the church they know will soon be no more. But as my friend Pastor Jennifer Olikainen says, “God knows how to work with death.” God knows how to make something new out of something old.

John says there is no fear in love because fear has to do with punishment. If we say “yes” to new ways to serve, with people we have not yet met, we don’t need to be afraid if we are abiding in the love of God.

If we love God, we must love our brothers and sisters as well. All of our brothers and sisters. And in order to do that we may have to go to them, rather than waiting for them to come to us.

It may seem impossible. But I believe that the impossible is just what God has called us to do.