

I think anytime we gather for our annual diocesan convention, it is a time to celebrate what is good, and true, and beautiful about our tradition. Henri Nouwen says that a celebration is more than just a party. To celebrate someone's life is to lift it up, make it visible, affirm it, and be grateful for it. I would suggest there is much to celebrate about this diocese and the Episcopal Church.

Today, as we celebrate the life of Philip, Deacon and Evangelist, I would like to make visible our way (perhaps one of our ways) of understanding and interpreting the Scriptures. But first, a word from our own David Veal, in his publication entitled, "Calendar of Saints." Canon Veal writes: "According to Acts 6:5 Philip was one of seven deacons selected and ordained by the church in Jerusalem. All were regarded as 'full of the Holy Spirit' but were chosen particularly to do housekeeping and administrative duties. Philip soon proved his mettle as an evangelist in Samaria where 'the crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip.' Many were healed and reconciled by his ministry and 'there was much joy in that city' because of his good work."

Bringing us up to today's story from Acts, David summarizes: "Once when Philip was traveling on the desert road south of Jerusalem he came upon an official of the Ethiopian court who was riding south in his chariot. The Ethiopian was reading from the book of Isaiah, and Philip struck up a conversation with him. The Ethiopian invited him to join him in his chariot and as they journeyed Philip converted him. The chariot stopped and Philip baptized him. Tradition has it that this Ethiopian convert introduced the Christian faith to Ethiopia. Philip eventually settled in Caesarea. He was married and had four daughters who were leaders in the Church."

Today we remember and celebrate Philip with gratitude, and as we do, I turn our attention to his encounter with the one nameless in the story – the Ethiopian eunuch. As the story goes, Philip is moved by the Spirit to go to the chariot and ask, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And the Ethiopian replies, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" Both Philip and the Ethiopian know that there must be more to the passage than the written word. And there is. We know that. There is an interplay between the Word and the Spirit.

Now, given that we are celebrating our tradition today, I could take us to the so-called “three-legged stool” – Scripture, Reason, and Tradition – that we read Scripture using our God-given Reason in the Light of our Tradition. But I’m going to take us back to the earliest Church, when one theologian (Pseudo-Macarius) put it this way: “Grace engraves on the heart ... the laws of the Spirit. [We] must NOT therefore draw [our] confidence ONLY from the Scriptures written in ink, for God’s grace also inscribes the laws of the Spirit, ... on the tables of the heart.”

By this quotation we can see that there was a dynamic interplay between Word and Spirit in the early Church. However, to do a little history, with the split between the East and the West came a split between Spirit and Word.

To unpack that a little, when the Church split at the first millennium between East and West (what we tend to think of as a split to the East by the Eastern Orthodox traditions, and a split to the West by Roman Catholicism) we saw the beginning of a divide in that interplay between Spirit and Word.

The West became mostly influenced by the Word – the cognitive, the rational, the structural. And then, with the Protestant Reformation, we in the West became further entrenched in the Word, as some western Protestant theologians declared that not only are the Scriptures the PRIMARY form of God's revelation, but the ONLY way by which God is made known.

And this theological move reflected the western personality. And religion in the West, like western culture and western science, was a religion of words: rational, empirical, and cognitive (good things, by the way).

Now, I'm not suggesting perfection in the East, but while the West can be characterized by the Word, the idea, the mind, the East is known by another dimension of reality – the Spirit. Poetry, music, and art are of the Spirit. The Spirit evokes a reality beyond the mind. Wind, movement, energy, breath, freedom, the heart: these are words of the Spirit, and they characterize eastern Christianity, other eastern religions, and eastern culture.

So, we've had this split between East and West. And yet, now that's beginning to change – perhaps to change back. Some have tried to pinpoint Vatican II, nearly 50 years ago, as the beginning of a new day in the West. Others would say that our nation's long overdue move to open immigration to Asians in 1965 was the defining moment. Asians brought with them Eastern practices which fed a deep hunger for those starved by an overly rational religion. Others would say that post-modern science, unlike Newtonian physics, observes what Eastern metaphysics has claimed all along: that all is one, all is connected.

Whatever the convergence of factors, with the shrinking of our world and our growing exposure to the East, western theologians are experiencing eastern dimensions of reality. And the people, longing to encounter the Divine Spirit – longing to not only know about God, but to know God – are not far behind.

All over our nation we see evidence of this thirst to encounter the Spirit, sometimes in ways that make some of us westerners uncomfortable: the charismatic movement; the growing popularity of eastern religions; and even New Age spirituality is an attempt to encounter something beyond the rational, morality-driven religion in the West.

We may be tired of hearing said, “I’m spiritual but not religious, but they are telling us something. People are seeking something more.

The Ethiopian eunuch is seeking something more. Philip says, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And the seeker replies, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” The un-named seeker in the story realizes that the meaning of the scriptures must go beyond the written word. And with Philip’s help, he gains understanding – is converted – though the interplay between Word and Spirit.

Here’s how a Roman Catholic monk, named Bruno Barnhart, sheds light on that interplay between Word and Spirit. First, he likens the Spirit to Music. He compares the Spirit to Music, and reminds us that to read or listen to scripture is to listen for the Music.

He says: “The scriptures themselves are the score, not the music. The music happens when the words, the marks on the page, are actualized by the Spirit of Life. ... The goal of reading or listening is to hear the Music.” [p 126]

The scriptures themselves are the score, not the music; marks on a page, not the music. The goal is to hear the music. The music happens when the words are made alive by the Spirit.

People, including me, and I bet you, are seeking the Music. We thirst for the Spirit. Now here's where I want to suggest something on this day of celebration. The Episcopal Church has roots in the mystical tradition of the East. I don't want to overstate that connection, but it's true that our earliest Prayer Book authors incorporated eastern theology into our prayers.

The interplay between Word and Spirit has deep roots in our tradition. While it is God's doing, and not our brilliance, today we celebrate the Episcopal Church. We lift it up, and make it visible, and affirm it, and remember with gratitude our calling, our voice, our song, in a culture seeking something more ... in the Name of the Holy Trinity, one God, in Whom we live, and move, and have our being.
Amen.

