

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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John Klinepeter
Jesus sounds good but...God doesn't hear me | Acts 8**

Good morning! It's great to be back with you. As David said, our family spent about two years here as part of CPC and then the Upper Room as it was commissioned. I have to be honest, it makes my heart warm to see that the church here continues to be a church that sends churches. I was a part of being on that team when it was sent and what a joy that that community still exists as an extension, a part, a legacy of this church. It's just awesome to hear that it is still continuing. So we spent about two years here and then about seven years ago our family moved back to Chicago where we were from, and I took over as the lead pastor of the downtown church of Willow Creek, in an urban center of Chicago. As you know, Chicago has some real challenges and so we faced a lot of challenges building the church. It's been beautiful and amazing, and my wife—some of you remember her—is now VP of marketing at World Relief, a global not-for-profit. She travels the world trying to help people understand the narrative of the brokenness of our world, and I'm just so proud of her. She's an amazing and gifted leader and she's doing amazing things there. Then a few years ago I earned my MBA at the University of Notre Dame, which I think may be the only reason John invites me back due to our shared affinity for Notre Dame. So he invited me back, which I appreciate. So I got my MBA there and I recently launched a consulting firm called Better Good Group that helps companies and organizations do the good work that they are trying to do better through strategy and leadership development. I'm having an absolute blast. It's been a whirlwind seven years since we left here, and so fun thing to be back. It feels like family to us every time we come back. We still come back a few times a year to see good friends. It's just great to be back and a part of this community. And I have to say, I don't take it completely personally that John chose not to be here the week I came back, although feel free to give him a hard time about that! John has been a mentor to me. We started our relationship when I began here nine years ago. He's been a mentor and friend to me, and that continues still today. There's a legacy of John mentoring young leaders and I'm one of them, so anything John asks, I'll do. I just think the world of him, and again, I'm so honored to be back here with you as a family.

So, I get the privilege of launching a new series today, a series that appropriately comes right after Easter. This series is called "Jesus sounds good but..." Fill in the blank. Jesus sounds good. We've just spent a weekend focusing on His death and resurrection, and really focusing on the end of His life, but the rest of His life is this mysterious journey that we try to understand, and sometimes I think the church does a

disservice by somehow making us think it is not ok to have a million questions about God. I actually have found the opposite to be true. In my twenty-two years of ministry, I have found that when people come and meet with me over a cup of coffee, often the first thing out of their mouth is *I feel like I'm losing my faith. I'm filled with doubts and questions*. Inside I think *Oh good, finally we can dive into what a spiritual life is*. What has always concerned me far more is someone that is just kind of ok with their faith, someone who says, "Yeah, I kinda think God is there." Doubt is beautiful. Questions are beautiful, and what you are going to hear in this series is an opportunity to normalize the things we all feel inside that sometimes we're afraid to ask, especially in church. And the thing I think we should find great comfort in is the gospels—the first five books of the New Testament. The people closest to Jesus, His twelve followers, were filled with doubts and questions. They would see Him feed five thousand people, and the next day be like *is that guy for real?* We are thousands of years removed. Should it surprise us that sometimes we're like *I don't know if God hears me?*

So I want to begin today by normalizing the questions we all face in our spiritual lives, the questions about God, the presence of Jesus, the person of Jesus. That's what we are going to dive into. I want to begin with a confession. There are times in my beliefs about the presence of God where they are defined by whether He has done what I have asked for most recently. Now I'm sure this is only a sin I bear, and my confession is for me alone and none of you have ever perceived God's goodness or love through the filter of what He's done for you recently. So I'll take that as my own thing, not yours to bear. But I know for myself, I am prone to defining whether He hears me, and ultimately then whether He loves me, by whether I'm getting what I want. Whether He's responding the way I think He should—*God came through because He gave me what I wanted, therefore I will praise Him and give thanks*—is far too often how I live my life.

What I want to propose today is that when it comes to God hearing us, truly hearing us, we may be asking the wrong questions, and we may be measuring the wrong metrics of His involvement in our lives and His love for us. *Jesus is great, but will He show me He hears me by doing what I want? Jesus is great*—and I think the question we are really asking is—*but does He love me?*

I have two little boys. On the screens you will see a picture of them. So when we left here our boys were three and four; now they're ten and eleven. They are wearing their "Strong like mom" T-shirts. She likes that I bought them those, because she is this gifted and strong leader, and also, when we met my wife was ranked fourth in the world in karate. So they can be strong like mom...totally fine. And I'm incredibly well behaved at home! So I have these two little boys. I absolutely adore these guys. That's Gabe on the right and Will on the left, and they just rock my world every day. And they don't say

these words, but I think often in the nature of our relationship, inside they are thinking something like this: *Dad, I'm asking you for this, and if you truly love me, you will do it, or buy it, or give it to me.* I'm seeing some heads nod—maybe some parents in the room have felt that. They don't say those words out loud because they know I would say that's ridiculous, but I think sometimes they misunderstand our relationship, and actually that starts to seep into their identity of their relationship with their father—that I am as loving as I do what they ask. And again my confession today is that I think I put that same filter on God that my kids put on me. The crazy part is that as a loving father (because I love them so much) I won't do the thing they are asking for because I can see where it might lead. I can see how it plays out. So the thing they are equating with my love is actually less loving to do. The way they are looking at it is foundationally a misunderstanding of the nature of my love for them.

So back to today. God doesn't hear me. I want to push into that idea a little bit this morning. With that thought in mind, let's read from our text. I'm just going to read through this short section out of the book of Acts, chapter 8. If you have a Bible you can turn to it, if you have an app you can look it up, but it will also be up on the screens. Acts chapter 8, verses 26-35. This is a short section of scripture that probably you haven't heard taught in church...at least I didn't in a lifetime of church engagement.

²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." ³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked ³¹ "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." ³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. [Acts 8:26-35]

Let's go back to verse 26, and what we are going to do this morning is just walk verse by verse because there is something really important that we can miss in this story in the subtext that I think will reveal an understanding of God that is missed otherwise. Verse 26 says this:

“Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’”

In my experience when we are reading the Bible, any story that starts “an angel of the Lord said” is about to be a good story. Right? Think about it. An angel of the Lord said to Mary, “You will be with child.” That was kind of a big deal. An angel of the Lord said to Moses through the burning bush, “You will free my people, the Israelites, from Egypt’s rule.” And an angel of the Lord said to Saul on the road, “You will now be known as Paul.” Over and over in scripture, when any story starts with “an angel of the Lord...” it’s about to get crazy.

So our story begins, “An angel of the Lord said to Philip...” Now, it’s important to understand who Philip is. Philip, in the New Testament, is one of the seven. You know there were twelve disciples. Then there were eleven—Judas made some bad choices. The eleven were trying to do the work of building the church in the first century, and what they realized is that they were neglecting the poor. Now, the central message of Jesus, over and over, is to love the poor and care for the widows and orphans. They weren’t doing that, so they appoint the seven. Seven church leaders, who would be in charge of the work of the kingdom among us. One of those was a guy named Stephen. Do you remember his story? Just a few chapters before this in Acts he is stoned to death, and who was watching as he is stoned to death? Do you remember? Saul, who became Paul, and wrote half the New Testament. The seven were extremely important. So Philip is one of those seven, appointed by the disciples, to do the work of the kingdom. That’s what we know about Philip. And it says, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is an important distinction about the desert road. There were two roads that made this thirty mile trek from Jerusalem to Gaza. There was the king’s road—the nice road—and there was the other-side-of-the-tracks road, the desert road. You didn’t want to take the desert road. Think of the Good Samaritan, the guy who was beaten up along the road—that’s the kind of road it is. Now, I live in the most violent city in America; we have an incredible violence problem in parts of our city. There is a road that leads you through that violent area, and there is a road that leads you around it. Which do you think would be the most wise to take? God, through the angel, calls Philip to take the opposite road for some very important reasons. “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”

Verse 27:

“So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”).”

This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship. Now, something important to understand about the writer of the book of Acts. It's a guy named Luke—one of the disciples. We believe Luke was a doctor, and we know that in his writing style, he's a historical writer. He writes everything in detail. When you read the book of Revelation, it's based on a dream that John had, and you should almost read it like *The Lord of the Rings*...like this epic battle between good and evil, and it's mysterious and it's strange sometimes, and you have to read it differently than say, how you read Genesis, which is Moses' account of the creation, or the book of Psalms, which is this artistic, poetic section of scripture. Each author wrote differently and it's important to understand that context as we dive into a section because it tells us why they reference the things they do. What we know about Luke is that he was a historian, and he included important details very intentionally. So what he tells us in this section is that there is an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all of the money of one of the most wealthy rulers of the day—the queen of Ethiopia. So we know a couple of things about our Ethiopian eunuch friend. This person is royalty, in the highest leadership role in the government of a wealthy nation. Now why would that person not be on the king's road? Why would a royal person be on the desert road, the unsafe road, the back road?

So my kids...their favorite restaurant in Chicago is an Ethiopian restaurant, so we go there a lot. We eat a lot of Ethiopian food. And if you have been to Ethiopia or have Ethiopian friends, you know that Ethiopians have this beautiful, dark black skin. Even in the Middle East, an Ethiopian would stick out in the darkness of their skin, and they would be immediately identified as a foreigner. You may remember from the Old Testament that foreigners were not to be messed with by the Israelites. They were very fearful of foreigners. Now, we know that the message of the New Testament is the exact opposite of that. We learn that every tribe, nation, and tongue will worship at the feet of Jesus. We learn that there is neither Jew nor Greek...we are all equal at the feet of Jesus. That's how the new covenant works, that there's no more of this stratification of foreigner and non-foreigner, chosen and unchosen...it's totally different now. But that wasn't the message that our good friend Philip had grown up with. So we know some things about why this Ethiopian eunuch is on this road—because he was a foreigner and he would not be welcome in this land. He was immediately distrusted if he interacted with people, simply because of his skin color. In fact, the Old Testament is so clear with these warnings that he would have been identified as unclean. We also know from the fact that he was a eunuch that he couldn't be circumcised—it was physically impossible. Therefore, Deuteronomy tells us he could never be made clean, according to their Deuteronomic laws. So this is a foreigner who could not be made clean—exactly what every young Jewish boy would have been taught to avoid. So that's who is on the road...the Ethiopian eunuch. The man had gone to Jerusalem to worship.

Verse 28 & 29:

“...and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

Now, he’s reading Isaiah. Do you remember the time of the year we most often read Isaiah in the church? Christmas. Isaiah was the prophet who told us—700 years before Jesus—told us all about Jesus. He told us who He would be, how He would be born, wonderful counselor, Prince of Peace...you know all these verses from the Christmas narrative. Isaiah also talked about His death and resurrection. Isaiah was the prophet who focused on Jesus. That’s the context. Now, the eunuch is reading Isaiah and along comes a guy who is an expert on Jesus. Is God good at this stuff, or is this just accidental? No, God is intentional. So he is reading, and God says to Philip, “Go to the chariot and stay near it.”

Verse 30 & 31:

“Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. ³¹ “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.”

Ok, what did we already establish about the Ethiopian eunuch? He’s unclean, right? Proximity...you can’t get close to an unclean person. Philip is invited to come sit in his little chariot with the book of Isaiah next to an unclean man, and share with him about the news of Jesus. And he goes; he goes and sits with him.

Verse 32-35:

This is the passage of scripture the eunuch was reading: [These are Isaiah’s words] “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.” ³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

Now, as we read this text, that part—the prophecy, the sheep to the slaughter—there’s something unearthed going on that we have to bring to light. See, in this passage we are able to read the words of Isaiah about the Good Friday experience we just talked through and lived in ten days ago. He’s describing Good Friday...a sheep to slaughter, a lamb before its shearer. Jesus didn’t say a word on the cross except to pronounce forgiveness over the people who were doing it to Him. He was silent. He was slaughtered. Isaiah is recounting this thing that wouldn’t happen until 700 years later.

After reading it, the Ethiopian eunuch asked this question: “Tell me please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Do you hear that desperation in his voice? *Tell me Philip, I must know. Who is the writer talking about?*

Now let's pause from the text for a moment. As I mentioned earlier, Luke is an intentional historian in his writing style. He was specifically referring to this man over and over again as the Ethiopian eunuch. If his name was important, if his genealogy was important, if anything about him was important other than he was an Ethiopian eunuch who was royalty and influential with the queen, we would have known it because Luke communicates every detail with intentionality. But all we get are these two words: Ethiopian eunuch. Now the first part of that descriptor gives us a glimpse of the narrative of him as a foreigner. We've already unpacked that. He's not one of us, Luke is saying. There's a reason he is on the desert road. But the second word to describe this man has even more profound importance in this context. Most eunuchs in the first century—we know this from historical writings—came from slave families in whatever region they lived. This man would have been born into enslavement and poverty. The practice of the day was to take a little boy from his slave family when he was between the ages of six and twelve. You can imagine the trauma of a slave owner barging into a family's home, grabbing that boy from his parents with no regard, and taking him away. As a father of two boys of that age, I can barely read this text when I'm by myself. I try to keep it together a little bit in a crowd. When I'm by myself and I read this, I can barely keep it together with the thought of those two precious boys being ripped from a home simply because of what they were born into. That is the context of this story. So taken from his family, and he would be drugged, causing him to pass out. Historically we know that this would happen, and while unconscious in a barbaric fashion, the boy's genitals would be cut off. This was done so that the child, when he grew up, could be in service of royalty with no threat to the women of the royal family. This was common practice in slavery at the time. We know from the story that the Ethiopian eunuch was the head employee of the queen, a position reserved for males who could be no threat to her. The only males who got close to a queen were eunuchs because they could not harm her. This tragic and cruel narrative is likely what our character in this story had gone through. Now with that context in mind, let's reread the prophecy from verse 32. “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.” When the man asked Philip if this story was about the writer or someone else, when he begs him—*please tell me, please let me know, who is this referring to*—he's really asking: *Is this me? How did the prophet know my story? Is he telling my story in this ancient book from 700 years ago? How did he know that I would be like a sheep to slaughter, like an innocent young lamb who was silenced? I was silenced Philip! I couldn't speak or open my mouth in protest because I was not conscious. I didn't have a voice to say “No. Don't do this to me. I don't want*

this.” I was humiliated Philip, and deprived of justice. Can you imagine the shame I felt, the anguish I felt when I awoke? The pain? Where is my justice? How do I get back my manhood? This is not just simply because I was born into slavery Philip, or because I was born poor. My destiny was set this way; this is not justice, but the definition of injustice. And yes Philip, let’s speak of my descendants as Isaiah referenced. There will never be any. I will never hold my child in my arms. That was taken from me too. The life I would have wanted to create, I cannot create. It was taken from the earth. How did the prophet Isaiah, some 700 years ago, know my story? How did he know my pain?

And if any of us in that moment were in Philip’s place, we most certainly would have had tears streaming down our face as we listen to a man trying to make sense of all this. How could our hearts not break at the painful journey this man has encountered his entire life? And maybe he is realizing it for the first time. And Philip, in his tenderness the text tells us, starts right there with those words—those prophetic verses—to help the man understand that Jesus had walked a similar journey. I imagine him saying, “You are not alone, my friend. The answer to your longing, the giver of hope, has similar wounds to yours. He was stripped naked and beaten, nearly to death. Humiliated, mocked, and made fun of as He hung on a cross without clothing. The humiliation and sadness you feel, He bore it as well. He knows every emotion you experience. There is someone who understands.”

See, Jesus starts His restorative work in each of us at that place of our greatest wound. He did the same thing with everyone He encountered when He walked on the earth. With Zacchaeus He met him at his wound, the woman at the well, Peter, Nicodemus and countless others...He met them at their wounded place to bring restoration and healing. This is the place that God wants to start to speak His love into our lives. He doesn’t need you cleaned up and in your Sunday best. He doesn’t care what your position or title is, how much wealth or influence you have accumulated. God wants to meet you where you are wounded, that He might bring healing and restoration and make that wound, and you, and me, whole again.

The story of Philip and his new friend, the Ethiopian eunuch, ends in a beautiful way. At this point he has told him the message of Jesus and they are traveling together in the chariot. Philip with this unclean man, going down the road...you can just imagine their conversations about the person of Jesus as they go down the road. They are traveling together and they come to a body of water. Verse 36 says this:

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?”

Philip said, “If you believe with your heart, you may.” The eunuch answered, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”

³⁸ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.

What can stand in the way the man asked Philip? Nothing. Not his wound or his heritage, or anything else about his life. With Jesus, who he was was enough. It is believed that this interaction between Philip and the eunuch happened right about 50-60AD, so about twenty years after Jesus had been resurrected. By 250AD, so less than 200 years later, there was one particular nation in all the world that was thriving and living out the teachings of Jesus in a profound way. Any guess what country might have been thriving as a spiritual place of Jesus 200 years later? Ethiopia. Much of our faith that we practice in America today gets its foundational traditions from the early church in Ethiopia. Ethiopia evangelized the world. Scholars have tried to figure out how this happened. There were documentaries created—I've seen many of them—and books written about the expansion of Christianity due to the followers of Jesus in Ethiopia. There are theories about the waterways, and other explanations, but if you ask a person of orthodox church heritage in Ethiopia, they will tell you the story of an Ethiopian man on a road leading from Jerusalem who encountered a disciple of Jesus who explained the love of Jesus in a transformational way, and then upon return to Ethiopia, this man used all of his influence and his power as an advisor to the queen, to tell everyone he could about the love of Jesus. He helped others learn of this love that could meet them at their place of greatest wound, and a nation was transformed.

I believe that Jesus meets each of us right where we are, in a unique way most often connected to the place of greatest wound within us. He is longing to do the same for you. What if the loving Father isn't defined by giving us the things we ask for, but instead by the fact that He will meet us right where we are and never leave us, no matter what? What if hearing us is far more about His presence in our lives than being the genie we can ask and get what we want from? I mentioned these two little boys I have, and each night when I tuck them in—they have these bunk beds, and Gabe is on the bottom and Will is on the top, and I lean down to Gabe and I say, "Now Gabe..." and I lean up to Will and I say, "Now Will...is there *anything* you could *ever* do to make me stop loving you?" And they say, with all the sass of a ten and an eleven-year-old, "No dad, you tell us every night." So I say, "Hey guys, is there anything, any choice you could ever make, anything you could ever say, any question you could ever have that would make me leave your side?" "No dad." Now they know. What if that is the nature of our Father's love for us? What if hearing Him means redefining what it means to hear? What if His love for us is manifest in His presence with us and His unconditional love for us? What if that's what it looks like?

Let's pray together.

God, would You speak into each of our hearts this morning that kind of presence and love for us? God, I just sense that in this room today there are some of us who just feel like You are far, and my prayer God is that You would—for anyone who is asking it of You—as only You can, could You, even today, bring someone across their path, some situation that reminds them of Your presence? That reminds them that You will never leave us or forsake us. And God, give us new ears to hear Your presence with us, and Your love. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.