

Coming Alongside- October 25, 2020  
Acts 8: 26-40  
First United Church of Christ  
Rev. Wendy Vander Hart

May God still speak through these words of scripture and sermon.

Andy Gustafson was the Associate Conference Minister for Stewardship and Financial Development and a colleague of mine in the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ. He was a deeply faithful man remarkably surviving the murder of his wife and two children in their home. Scripture anchored Andy's life and church provided the community he needed to restart his life eventually marrying again and building a family with children and grandchildren.

Andy convinced us that every scripture from the Bible was about Stewardship. We tested this belief on more than one occasion building sessions of Stump the Steward into the Conference Annual Meeting. You can imagine how learned clergy would line up at the microphone in front of 6-700 people trying to Stump the Steward. They brought bibles flopped open, to find the text that would leave Andy baffled and the clergyperson feeling righteous in their win.

But alas, the Steward was never stumped. Somehow, some way, Andy spun a stewardship connection to the most obscure references in the Bible and left people standing on their feet in applause.

So perhaps I need to channel Andy today taking on a story about an Ethiopian eunuch (which is shorthand for a castrated male), a disciple following an angels' instructions, and an encounter on a desert road that ends in baptism to find a message for Stewardship within. Challenge accepted!

If Stewardship is about investing in shared vision and values – this story describes the kind of church we want to be. Here is the church I see in this story.

I see a church that supports seekers in community. When we meet the Ethiopian eunuch he is reading scripture out loud riding in a chariot on a desert road. It was the custom of the day to read aloud, almost an invitation for others to hear and community to be built. Philip, who is on the road at the prodding of an angel, hears these words and inquires- inviting himself into conversation. The text does not say that Philip gives him all the answers to his questions, in fact it does not record what Philip says at all. Instead we are reminded that people reading scripture together is what the church is built to do. We learn and question and wonder together. We come alongside another to remind us that we do life together. Seeking is not a solitary action, it is best done in community.

In this story, I see a church that does not limit who God loves and with whom God can work. The Ethiopian does not fit any easy categories of gender, or wealth, or power. To the typical Jew of the times he was a foreigner, a man banned from the Temple because of his physical condition, a political figure to be questioned. Perhaps it is not accident that the scripture mentions divine intervention a few times to move Philip into the Ethiopian's path. It takes an angel's message to get him on the road and the spirit to move him towards the chariot. It is a barrier-busting encounter that we must believe remains with him into the rest of his life. From that day on, Philip sees no strangers.

In this story, I see a church that changes lives- even the ones who seem to have life all figured out. As they stand over the water that surprisingly appears on a desert road the Ethiopian asks a most profound question – “what is to prevent me from being baptized?” After listening to Philip and recognizing the good news that he is proclaiming, the Ethiopian identifies, “this Gospel is for me, why shouldn’t I be baptized?” And like a preacher who preaches the sermon they most need to hear themselves; Philip knows that by baptizing the Ethiopian his own life is forever changed. Philip is willing to dive into the intimate work of helping another beloved child of God on the road to self-discovery. They were two people that never should have met. Their lives were as segregated as our white from black communities today. And yet somehow God brought them together to teach us what it means to be church. Friends I firmly believe that God is calling us to such moments right now.

There is power in coming alongside someone. Maybe you can think about a time when someone came alongside you and helped open a new path in your life. Maybe you remember a time where you came alongside and offered that gift to someone – a time when your gift of listening or accompaniment made all the difference. Or maybe you can think about a time when crossing a socially constructed barrier led to an encounter that opened your world view.

And lo and behold, I believe Andy Gustafson was right. This is a Stewardship scripture because it is a story about the church built on the inclusive, welcoming, hospitable practices of Jesus. It is a story about the church breaking conventions that open spirits. This is a vision of church worth investing ourselves in.

We are stewards of God’s love and hope in the world. We offer the greatest gifts there are to give – the gift of welcome, of purpose, of meaning. In so doing we invest in each other’s lives, we care, we do. We come alongside each other as equals in the sight of God, not as ones who have all the answers, but as ones who desire to see each one live fully into the people God intends.

In a few moments, we will hear testimony from Mary Wood – who shares her 99th birthday with us today. God bless you Mary! Listen for what Mary declares about a people with a vision. The greatest gift we could ever receive is accompaniment in finding our God-given purpose in the world and partners to achieve it. That is the church at its best – provokers of purpose and partners to enact it.

Even in this time of pandemic – this church, these people you see in tiny screens have managed to come alongside each other and do anti-racist work. We have come alongside each other in small and meaningful ways to break the isolation of this time. We have come alongside our partners in the United Church of Christ to move from justice talk to justice walk.

This coming alongside has inspired my decision to give to First UCC. The common practice of Interim Pastors is to maintain giving at the local church where membership resides. My spouse Joanne and I give away a total of 13% of our income each year. We tithe, we give the full ten percent to First Church in Cambridge on our combined household income of \$103,000. But I have to tell you First UCC – I have seen you come alongside one another through some trying times of transition. I have seen us struggle to come alongside when we are physically separated and succeed in significant ways. In my past experience as Associate Conference Minister I can think of only a handful of churches that would be as encouraging as you for Pastor Lauren and me to boldly preach about racism.

So, I have consulted with Joanne and we will tithe on our tithe this year to you First UCC. It is my way of coming alongside you to be the church that God needs us to be in this time. I pray as we discern purpose and touchstones, challenge and comfort for these days that we will build a community that practices the revolutionary love of Jesus that sees no strangers, and is ready to respond as the spirit moves. May it be so. Amen.