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**Title:** Belong. Become. Believe: Follow the Verbs

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**Text:** [Acts 8:26-40 \(CEB\)](#)

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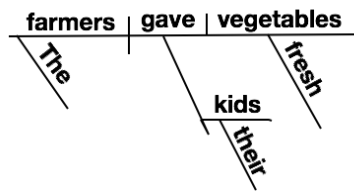
Several years ago, in a small town, a bar opened next door to the Baptist church in town. As you can imagine this did not sit well with the members of the Baptist church. They didn't want a bar next door to their church. They prayed that God would intervene, that God would act and do something that would force the bar to close. A few nights

later lightning struck the bar, burning it to the ground.

The bar owner knew that the members of the church had been praying for something to happen to the bar, so he decided to take the church to court. The members of the church insisted that they had nothing to do with it and were offended that anyone would think they had anything to do with it. Both sides went to court and presented their cases. The judge listened and said, "Well, I don't know what I'm going to do here, but it seems to me here is what we have."

"We have a bar owner who believes in the power of God and we have a church that does not."

As we continue a series today that we are calling Belong, Become, Believe, we are asked to consider that question. Do we believe in the power of God? We are looking at how one becomes a part of the Christian community and what it means to be the church together. The traditional pattern is that someone confesses belief in Jesus, learns what is expected of someone in a life of faith, and finally, finds belonging in a community with other Christians, what we know as the church. That pattern has changed in the last twenty years or so. It doesn't work anymore. It never really worked for those on the outskirts of the church. It's not the way Jesus worked. Jesus modeled a powerful gospel of homecoming, of belonging. So over the next several weeks, we will be looking at how the power of belonging to a community serves as the beginning of everything anyone needs for true life. We belong then become then believe



One of the things I loved about English class in middle school and high school was diagramming sentences. You remember that exercise where you would dissect a sentence to see which parts of a sentence were the nouns, the verbs, the adjective, etc. Well, today we are going to follow the verbs.

At the beginning of the book of Acts, which was written by the same author of the Gospel of Luke and in many ways a continuation of Luke's Gospel, the Risen Christ, right before ascending to heaven tells his disciples, among other things, this

*"...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."* Acts 1:8a (CEB). They are to share the Gospel, to preach the Good News that all belong to God, literally to the ends of the earth.

Shortly after Jesus gives his followers this charge, a person named Philip finds himself where some would consider the ends of the earth. This is not Philip the disciple, rather it is a second-generation Philip, a person who worked as a food distributor and someone who is a leader in the early church. When you travel in remote areas, you have probably passed one of those signs that say, "next gas station 100 miles away." That's where Philip finds himself and where we encounter our first verb.

*"An angel from the Lord spoke to Philip, 'At noon, take the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a desert road.)"* Acts 8:26 (CEB)

## **GO.**

The early church was not just a church that gathered in only one place. It was not the type of church that simply waited for people to come to them. They did not believe that the power of God was contained by their walls and that people had to come to them to receive the love and grace of God. They believed that the Good News of Jesus Christ was too good not to share. The church was not a destination, rather it was everywhere. So, Philip is sent.

Out in this deserted land, Philip encounters someone he would not have encountered had he stayed in Jerusalem.

*"So he did. Meanwhile, an Ethiopian man was on his way home from Jerusalem, where he had come to worship. He was a eunuch and an official responsible for the entire treasury of Candace. (Candace is the title given to the Ethiopian queen.) He was reading the prophet Isaiah while sitting in his*

*carriage. The Spirit told Philip, 'Approach this carriage and stay with it.'*  
Acts 8:27-29 (CEB)

A lot has been written about this Ethiopian eunuch. who he is and what he represents. but we know at the time Acts is written, Ethiopian was a term used to describe people with dark skin who lived south of Egypt. He would have been excluded from the worshipping community. To be called a eunuch means that he had been dehumanized. He had been dehumanized by an empire. A reminder that throughout history and still today, empires seek to dehumanize, especially those on the margins. The church is called to be the antidote to this type of treatment. The church proclaims that all are children of God, that all belong to God.

So where others have sought to dehumanize, Philip, through the power of Christ, joins with this person. Philip sees their shared humanity. He joins him.

## **GO JOIN**

How often do we sit in our bubbles that we have created for ourselves? How quick are we to make assumptions about people that we've never spent any time with or even attempted to get to know? Why do we assume people do not have a place in Christ's family?

There are so many people today who are curious about God while also desiring to live a more meaningful life. Many people are seeking communities and conversation partners to help make sense of everything. And yet, the church too often has neglected the opportunity to meet people where they are at, to join in others' lives, to hear their stories.

As Philip runs alongside the Ethiopian eunuch to join him, he hears him reading.

*"Running up to the carriage, Philip heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you really understand what you are reading?'" The man replied, "Without someone to guide me, how could I?" Then he invited Philip to climb up and sit with him. The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, about whom does the prophet say this? Is he talking about himself or someone else?" Starting with that passage, Philip proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him. As they went down the road, they came to some water." Acts 8:30-31, 34-36 (CEB)*

There is mutual listening and conversation, and God is at work in this conversation.

**GO**  
**JOIN**  
**LISTEN**

Are we willing to be a guide for another? Are willing to learn from others, most especially those we have not traditionally learned from? Our challenge is to expand our horizons to see what through God is possible.

One of my favorite new tv shows of the last year is a show called *Ted Lasso*. Ted Lasso is an American football coach who has never played or coached English football... what we call soccer here and is called football most everywhere else in the world. He has a Kansas drawl and a folksy charm. He is hired because the owner wants to burn the team to the ground. But Ted has a unique ability to listen to others. He has a heart of gold and he understands that all have a capacity for goodness. One day, he tells a soccer crowd in a soccer pub his life's motto. "Be curious, not judgmental. While judgment walls you off from others, curiosity opens you up to them." --Ted Lasso

Listening is about opening ourselves up to others. Opening ourselves up to possibilities God has in store that we may not see.

We do not get to define who people are, who they are becoming, or what they believe. That is God's work. But we do get to travel and share the road along the way. And then finally, the ask. You will notice it is not Philip who asks rather it is the Ethiopian Eunuch who asks about faith. It is Philip's response that makes all the difference in the world.

*"As they went down the road, they came to some water. The eunuch said, "Look! Water! What would keep me from being baptized?" He ordered that the carriage halt. Both Philip and the eunuch went down to the water, where Philip baptized him." Acts 8:36-38 (CEB)*

**GO**

**JOIN**

**LISTEN**

**ASK**

Notice the ask here is not made by Philip, rather it is made by his traveling companion.

“What would keep me from being baptized?”

At the time, the law would have said that the eunuch could not have been baptized. But to Philip, the answer is clear...nothing. Nothing prevents you from being baptized. They go down to the water. Water on a desert road.

When people come to us looking for a new life, looking to belong to a new community, to become the person God made them to be, there is nothing that should prevent them from doing so.

So, Philip gets into holy water with his new friend, and together they find new and renewed life.

You may think that you have nothing to offer another when it comes to inviting them into the family of Christ, and into the life of the church. When we hear the promise of you are my witnesses, it makes us squirm just a bit. The idea of bearing witness to someone else about God’s good news.

The truth is that we all have something to offer. Follow the Verbs and allow God to work through you. Believe in the power of God. You might be surprised that not only will another’s life change, but so will yours.

**GO**

**JOIN**

**LISTEN**

**ASK**