

Disciples Series: #3: Philip, the Hesitant Disciple
2 Corinthians 4:2b-6 (and John 14:6-11 read during sermon) NRSV

By John Gill

Today is the third Sunday of our twelve-week sermon series on the Twelve Disciples of Jesus. So far, we have looked at that most unlikely disciple, Matthew, and that most devout of disciples, Nathaniel-Bartholomew. Today we turn our attention to a disciple who has been described as being the least colorful of all the disciples – a man who is depicted in the Bible as being dull, unimaginative, hesitant, vacillating, and apathetic... a man (you might say) who is a lot like you and me! And maybe that's why we can identify with him so easily. We all can see ourselves – in Philip.

Philip was born in the village of Bethsaida on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. He was one of three disciples who (we are told) was from Bethsaida. The other two were the brothers, Andrew and Peter. Beyond that, we know very little about Philip's background.

It's especially interesting that the only stories we have that involve Philip are found in the Gospel of John. In the first three Gospels, the only mention of Philip is among the lists of disciples.

It's true that there is a famous story about a certain "Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch" in the Book of Acts, but that "Philip is a different person than "Philip the Disciple." That other Philip was among the seven Deacons chosen by the Apostles to serve in the early church. The other well-known Deacon was Stephen, the first martyr of the church, as told in the Book of Acts.

No, the disciple, Philip, is barely a footnote in the first three Gospels. But John, in his Gospel, includes as many as four different incidents in the life of Jesus that involve the disciple, Philip.

The first time we hear of Philip is the passage that we studied last Sunday from the first chapter of John. You'll recall that Jesus called Philip to follow him. But Philip didn't want to follow alone, so first he went to find his friend, Nathaniel, to try to get him to come along, as well. We focused on that text last Sunday when we looked at Nathaniel, so we won't spend any time on it this morning.

The second episode in which we find Philip mentioned is in the story of the feeding of the 5000, which is recorded in the sixth chapter of John. When the large crowd came to Jesus, Jesus turned to Philip and asked, "Where can we buy enough food to feed all these people?" (The scripture goes on to say that Jesus only said this to test Philip – that Jesus already knew what he would do.)

And Philip failed the test. He replied, *"For everyone to have even a little, it would take more than two hundred silver coins to buy enough bread."*

You see, true to his personality, Philip was not very perceptive. Here, Jesus was speaking about "spiritual food," but Philip could only think of physical food. He couldn't get beyond the

mundane details of life. Unimaginative and blind to the spiritual realm, Philip proved that he couldn't comprehend what Jesus' ministry was all about.

We will be dealing with this passage in more detail in a few weeks when we talk about Andrew, the other disciple mentioned in this story, the one who brought the little boy with the loaves and fishes to Jesus.

We see Philip again for a third time in the twelfth chapter of John. After Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, some Greeks wanted to see Jesus. And, who did they approach? Philip. And, did Philip immediately take them to Jesus? No. He hesitated. He wouldn't act alone. So first he went and checked with someone else – this time Andrew. And then together they took the message to Jesus. You see, Philip seldom acts on his own initiative – he is hesitant, unsure of himself – he doesn't seem to have much self-confidence in own judgment.

But, the passage I want us to think about for just a few moments together this morning is the final episode in John's Gospel that mentions Philip – a conversation between Jesus and his disciples in the fourteenth chapter, that tells us more about Philip's character than all the other texts combined:

READ: John 14:6-11

⁶ Jesus said to him (Thomas), "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." ⁸ Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves."

Poor Philip. Poor blind, unimaginative, hesitant Philip. It seems that he just can't get it right.

Here, Jesus is nearing the end of his earthly ministry, within hours of his crucifixion, and he is still teaching his disciples as much as he can before he must leave them – and Philip just doesn't understand!

Jesus says, *"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."*

And Philip puts his foot in his mouth again: *"Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."* And Jesus was very disappointed with Philip.

You see, Philip was blind – just as blind as the beggars who had been touched by Jesus and healed. Yes, Philip had eyes, but he just couldn't see. You might say that "he couldn't see the forest for the trees."

Here Jesus points to himself and says, plainly, "*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father,*" but Philip just can't see it! He had been with Jesus from the very beginning, yet he still doesn't have a clue about who Jesus really is. How sad.

What about you?

Like Philip, are you blind to who Jesus really is? (Lots of people in our world are!) Is it hard for you to see the forest for the trees? Have you been with Jesus all this time, and still do not know who he really is? (That describes lots of people who have sat on church-pews for years – maybe even some here/listening this morning!)

Jesus tells us, as he told Philip, that he and the Father are One. And he says that, if we can't believe that is true based on what he says, then we ought to believe because of what he has done. And, what a remarkable thing he has done!

When we look at Jesus, we see God... we see a God who loves us enough to come into the world as one of us, to experience human birth, to struggle with human temptations, to know our pain and sorrow, and to die our death. If that's not enough to make you believe, then you are more blind than Philip, and are more to be pitied.

You know, I like to think that this encounter opened Philip's eyes. That, from that day on, he understood who Jesus really is, and that he believed in his heart that Jesus was his Savior. Whether it was this conversation with Jesus that opened his eyes or the resurrection a few days later, it is clear that Philip was a changed man.

So, what ever happened to the disciple, Philip? Legend tells us that, after the ascension of Christ, Philip traveled to Scythia (in what is now southern Russia) and preached there for twenty years. He then preached at Hierapolis in Phrygia (now Turkey), where he found the people there worshipping idols that depicted a monstrous serpent or dragon.

The story goes (- and you can decide if you believe it -) that Philip held up a cross before the idol and commanded the serpent to disappear, and immediately the reptile slithered out from beneath the altar – at the same time, emitting such a hideous stench that many people died.

According to the story, among those who died was the king's son, but the apostle Philip restored him to life. Well, the priests of that dragon cult were so angry with Philip that they took him and crucified him – and while still on the cross, they stoned him.

As he died (so the legend goes), Philip prayed a prayer of forgiveness for his enemies and persecutors – just like his Master had done. By his life and death, Philip had proven that his eyes had been opened and he clearly saw God in the face of Jesus.

What do you see when you look at Jesus? Do you see a good man? Or do you see God? Jesus says to us, as he said to Philip;

"Have I been with you all this time... and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?"

Philip – poor, hesitant, blind Philip – finally had his eyes opened – and he believed.

By his life and martyrdom, Philip lived the words that the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: *"For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."*

(repeat) "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

So, how about you? Have you spent a lifetime with Jesus, and yet never recognized who he really is? If so, this morning, may your eyes be opened - to behold, in Jesus, the very face of God!