

Children are sponges. I knew this going into fatherhood. At least, I thought I knew this. I had envisioned how fun it would be to teach Emi new things. How to ride a bike. How to tie her shoes. How to read Latin. That sort of thing.

But I was unprepared for how much I taught her and continue to teach her without even realizing it. The words and phrases she picks up from me. The likes and dislikes that I have that have become her likes and dislikes simply because she wants to be like me. The skills she has because she's watched me and learned those skills from me.

Children are sponges. They are observing everything you say and do. Learning from everything you say and do. And as a parent you are always teaching them, whether you intend to be or not.

Because they need it. That's why their brains are wired to be sponges. They need guidance. They need to be taught. They may hate it when you sit them down at a desk and try to give them a formal education. But deep down, they love to learn.

But, you know, that doesn't really change as we grow. Sure, we become more responsible for our own education. But we still need that guidance. Whether it's formal education in high school and college, or training on the job, or just those little pieces of advice that we get from parents and friends. We never stop needing people to guide us.

And we see that today in our First Lesson. With an unlikely encounter between two very different people on two very different journeys. The first is a man named Philip. This is not the apostle Philip. This is the deacon Philip. One of the Godly men chosen along with Stephen to help lead the human care ministries of the early church, feeding widows and orphans.

Philip had been working in Jerusalem, when his fellow deacon, Stephen, was arrested and stoned to death. Becoming the first Christian martyr. And that event sparks a wave of persecution that drives out pretty much all of the Christians living in Jerusalem. Only the apostles themselves stay behind.

So Philip is on the run. But he's evangelizing as he goes. First in the city of Samaria, where he has great success converting the Samaritans. But God doesn't let him stay there. No, he tells Philip to go south. To go into the middle of the desert. No explanation. No rationale for doing this. Just an angel who appears and says, "Go wander around the desert for a while." To his credit, Philip obeys.

He meets another man there. A man who is also on a journey. He's an Ethiopian. A high ranking official of Candace, the Ethiopian queen, and in charge of her entire treasury.

He's also, surprisingly, a Jew. There aren't many Jews in Ethiopia at this time. But there's apparently one. And he's a pretty devout one, from the looks of it. Because he has travelled a really long distance to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. And he's spent what was probably a considerable sum of money to buy a copy of the book of Isaiah.

And so he's on the same road that Philip is traveling, heading south back to Ethiopia, when Philip catches up to him. And the Holy Spirit gives Philip a nudge and says, "That guy... he's the reason you're wandering around the desert." So Philip goes up to him and he hears the Ethiopian reading out-loud.

What he's reading is a vitally important passage from Isaiah 53. One that we usually read on Good Friday itself, because it is such a clear, unambiguous prophecy of the crucifixion. *"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."*

Now, for a Christian, it's obvious this passage is talking about Jesus. But for a Jew, it's a really confusing prophecy. Who in the world is Isaiah talking about? There's no one important in Jewish history that matches up with that description or with the rest of Isaiah 53.

So it's not surprising that the Ethiopian doesn't understand it. What is a little surprising is how the Ethiopian responds to Philip's offer to explain this to him. Because the Ethiopian is not exactly crying out for Philip to evangelize to him. They are alone in the middle of the desert.

If you wanted to learn how to play the piano, where would you go? Probably to a piano teacher. If you wanted to learn how to cook, where would you go? Probably to a chef. If you wanted to learn more about France, where would you go? Probably to someone who had been to France.

This Ethiopian wants to learn more about the book of Isaiah. But he doesn't go to a theologian or to an expert on the Scriptures or to a rabbi or to any other authority. No, he goes to the middle of the desert. And eventually, back to Ethiopia. Where there are no other Jews to help him.

All of the external evidence says that he does not want to learn more about Isaiah or about this passage. And yet, when Philip asks him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" the Ethiopian replies, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

Every person needs guidance. Whether you're a 7 year old child or a 70 year old man. And most of the time, when we need help, when we need guidance, when we need to be taught something new, we know exactly where to go. To our parents. To our friends. To a teacher or an expert.

But when it comes to matters of faith, there's often something that keeps us silent. There's something in our sinful nature that says, "I don't need anyone else's help." That convinces us that we can be spiritual at home. That we don't need a church. That we can worship God in our own way, without anyone else.

And yet, if someone were to walk up to those same people and ask them if they understand God's Word, many of them would cry out, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

I'm convinced this is the reason why the Mormon church is the fastest growing church in the United States. Because those missionaries who knock on our doors and annoy us to no end? They work.

Not because they have the truth. Not because they're actually offering people the Gospel. But because they're not afraid to walk up to a person in the middle of the desert and ask, "Do you understand what you're reading?" They walk up to people who are secretly crying out for help, and they give them guidance.

So why don't we? What stops us from being that bold? Well, the reasons I've heard – the reasons, frankly, that I've given – are pretty weak. They're things like, "I don't want to offend them." "I don't want to be annoying." "I don't want to turn people off to Christianity." "I don't know what to say."

You know what? Those are lousy excuses. They really are. And like I said, I'm guilty of it too. Going to seminary teaches you an awful lot about the Bible. But it can't make you bold. And it can't kill that sinful voice inside you that says, "They don't want to hear what you have to say."

But they do want to hear. They may not say it. They may not show it. They may not even realize it themselves. But they want somebody to guide them. They need somebody to guide them.

Guide them where? Guide them to Jesus Christ. Guide them to his death and resurrection. Guide them to repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Guide them Holy Baptism. Just as Philip did. It's not a complicated road that you take them on.

And its even easier because it's a road that you have walked. And that's the best training you can get for this task. Just consider what Jesus Christ has done for you and you'll know exactly what he's done for them.

Jesus died and rose again for you. Though you are a sinner, he has forgiven you. Baptized you and made you his own. That you may live eternally with Him.

This is the good news we preach. This is the guidance we give. That opens up the scriptures and makes all things clear. Led by the Spirit, we wander the desert of this world. Until the Spirit gives us a nudge and says, "That man... that woman... they're the reason you're here. They need your guidance. They need God's forgiveness. They need to be baptized in Jesus' name."

And the only question we need ask is, "Do you understand what Jesus has done for you?" Amen.