

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – August 15, 2021 – Unless Someone Guides Me
Galatians 3: 25-29 and Acts 8:26-31 and 35-38**

The North Hill neighborhood has always been a place of rich, ethnic identities. For years, the streets were home to residents of Italian descent who built a community center to honor their heritage, and developed dozens of local businesses. But, along with the retraction of Akron’s tire industry, North Hill fell on hard times. Store fronts were abandoned. Blight was common.

“In late 2006, President George W. Bush surprised the refugee resettlement world by announcing the U.S. would accept up to 60,000 Bhutanese refugees.”¹ Since then, Akron alone has resettled more than 5,000 of these, with many moving to North Hill. The refugees are sending their children to local schools. They are learning our language and customs. They are going to work at local factories, and they are establishing businesses of their own. In time, long-slumping homes sales began to recover, even prior to the pandemic, and Akron’s population decline stabilized. For this, we owe much to the refugee community.

¹ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/akron-ohio-bhutanese-refugees_n_59ca88cfe4b0cdc773353640#:~:text=AKRON%2C%20Ohio%20%E2%80%95%20Akron%20owes%20its,here%20during%20the%20last%20decade

On Thursday of this week, the U.S. Census Bureau released statistics showing trend lines for the American population since 2010. On the whole, we are more urban and more ethnically diverse than we were one decade earlier.² Census data has confirmed once again that America is a melting pot of diverse nationalities and ideas, of numerous traditions and lifestyles. And here in Akron, we need not go far to discover neighbors whose cultural experience is vastly different from our own.

In our second lesson this morning, we find a narrative filled with cultural nuance. Philip, one of the twelve disciples, is sent by an angel of the Lord down a wilderness road. He does not know why. Yet, while traveling there, he encounters a man from a distant land.

The fellow traveler is an Ethiopian, a court official of the queen. He is one of her most trusted representatives, in charge of her entire treasury. Steeped in status, he moves along the wilderness road by chariot. We learn that he has recently traveled to Jerusalem, and that he is now headed home to Africa. In the midst of his journey, he reads from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. It is a valuable, hand-written document which few could afford.

² <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2021/population-changes-nations-diversity.html>

Guided by an angel, Philip approaches the chariot, posing a question in keeping with his own status as a teacher. “Do you understand what you are reading?” the disciple asks. “How can I,” the Ethiopian responds, “unless someone guides me?” With this, the scene is set for the divine encounter.

The unnamed foreigner extends an invitation, which Philip gladly accepts, to join him in the chariot. And once they are seated together, the Ethiopian questions his new riding companion regarding the mysteries of biblical revelation. Acts says, “Then Philip began to speak, and beginning with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.” Not long thereafter, the chariot approached a body of water where the Ethiopian requested that he be baptized. Philip gladly obliged and, when the foreigner emerged from the waters, he returned to his home to share the message of Jesus.

As a Christian minister, I feel deeply connected to the celebration of the baptismal sacrament. The water that we bless symbolizes the cleansing, the restoration, the healing of God’s people. Affirming our oneness in Christ, these waters flow freely from the same font. All are welcomed. And whether we are male or female, rich or poor, young or old, native or foreign, the words spoken are exactly

the same. Without distinction, each receives the same powerful signs of God's claim upon our lives. And throughout the church universal, baptism is vital to our being.

You may recall, as Matthew's gospel draws to a close, that Jesus leads the remaining eleven disciples up a mountain where they worship together. And there, he addresses them as one body, saying, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

As the latest Census reminds us, the ends of the earth are here - in North Hill, just around the corner, where Bhutanese refugees have settled by the thousands. This is the multi-national, pluralistic, melting pot of which Americans speak so proudly. And it is these, our neighbors, whom Jesus bids us to love and to serve. In scripture, we are reminded that the message of Christ is not our own personal possession. It is, instead, a gift of grace for all times, and all places, and all peoples. Therefore, we baptize and proclaim Christ's goodness to the ends of the earth.

Today, with great joy, we have claimed as our own one who is already known to us. Kyle, Kathryn, Xavier, and Georgia have been a part of this congregation for years. And when their family recently expanded, ours did as well. Together, we gladly welcomed Vaughn into the Westminster community of faith, grateful for the opportunity to walk with him, and to shepherd him, and grow alongside him as disciples of Christ.

And now, as Vaughn embarks on his formative years, we vow to continually pray for him - that he will be nurtured in love and strengthened in the faith for every challenge ahead. Until, with God's help, he may one day affirm for himself the promises made by his parents and this congregation on his behalf. Yes. When the time is right, it is our hope that he will join the ranks of those five confirmands whom we welcomed into full membership in the life of our church just this past Sunday. And at every step along the way, let us always remember none of this is possible unless someone guides them. May God bless Vaughn Vuchak, our most recent class of confirmands, and all who seek to know the glory of God to the ends of the earth. Amen.