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Living in HisStory: Revealing the True Wonder of Who God Is
Divine Appointments
Acts 8:26-39
Jeff Germs, October 7, 2018

Two weeks ago we looked at the failure of Peter and his denial of Jesus. We did a live poll that we showed on the screen asking if you have experienced any big failures in your life and how it had affected you emotionally.

[2 - Show Poll]

The visual was quite telling. And, by the way, you can still participate if you weren't here last week. Just open up your smart phone or tablet browser and go to www.menti.com. Type in the code 186076 when it asks and then choose your response.

75% of people who responded said they are still struggling, either somewhat or very much, with the weight of emotional baggage left over from the failure. Several people told me it was so good to see they were not alone.

At the end of the sermon I gave some pointers on how to deal with failure.

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We need to know that:

1. **Failure is normal - own it.**

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2. **See failure as an opportunity to learn and grow.** In other words, Fail Forwards, not backwards.

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3. **Don't let shame drive you into hiding or isolation.**

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4. **Stay humble and learn from Jesus.**

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5. **Choose life.**

On the way home from church I said to Ruth, "I missed one very important point. We also need to know that **we do not have to be defined by our past failures.**"

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If we think our past failures define us we will not learn from them. Shame will cause us to go into hiding.

Failure is so important. We have to make sure not to waste our failures. It's how we learn. If we aren't failing enough we aren't getting out of our comfort zones, and growth will be impossible. If we don't learn from our mistakes we will dive into the muck and mire of self-pity and play the victim. I think most of us do that from time to time.

Last week I was very tempted to dive into the pit of self-pity because of what I considered a big failure. If you were here when I did the sermon on Failing Forward you would have seen the news reporter and photographer who were here to do a story on the technology I used for the live poll. Apparently I'm the only pastor in Canada and one of the few in the world who are using this technology in a church setting. The article was picked up by over one hundred publications.

It was in all the major papers across Canada. CBC news heard about it and called to ask if I would do an interview with them on radio. Against my better judgement I agreed, in spite of knowing that I am terrible at that kind of thing. They called my home phone at 6:38 am and put me on hold. The guy who called said, "Gregor will be with you in a minute. In the meantime listen in on the show."

I looked at the heart rate monitor on my Fitbit and saw that my heart was beating at 123 bpm. For me, my normal resting heart rate is between 55 and 57 bpm. Then I heard Gregor start to introduce me and my heart rate started to increase — rapidly. I thought my heart was going to bounce out of my chest.

Then he asked me a question and I can't even remember what it was now. I tried to speak, but found that I couldn't breathe. I tried to answer, but I stumbled out a few nonsensical words. Then I stopped and confessed, "I am nervous for some reason. I speak to hundreds of people on Sunday and am not nervous at all. I don't know what's going on." He very graciously told me to relax and that radio is a different pulpit. I sort of relaxed and then began to mumble something that I'm sure was unintelligible. I got off the phone and felt like I had embarrassed myself in front of thousands of people. "What are my other pastor friends going to think?" I wanted to crawl under a rock and never come out. I have never been so embarrassed in my life. It was terrible.

I sat down in the chair where I do my quiet time every morning and I pouted. And then I thought about my sermon on Peter's very public failure. It was so public and monumental that we are still talking about it two thousand years later. I preached the sermon to myself again and reminded myself of those final points.

1. **Failure is normal - own it.**
2. **See failure as an opportunity to learn and grow.** In other words, Fail Forwards, not backwards.
3. **Don't let shame drive you into hiding or isolation.**
4. **Stay humble and learn from Jesus.**
5. **Choose life.**
6. **We are not defined by our past failures.**

It was like Jesus was using this opportunity to gently teach me. He wanted to make sure I was practicing what I preached. I looked at all the points from my previous sermon and realized that I didn't really believe them deep down in my heart. I know them intellectually, but head knowledge doesn't change the heart.

I sensed Jesus asking me, through his Word, the same questions he asked Peter. "Do you love [*agapao*] me? Do you love me unconditionally? Are you going to learn through your failure that I am really faithful? Do you think your life is about you? Or, do you want to learn that it is really about me?"

I told the staff what happened when I got to the church, and we all had a good laugh about it. The next morning I did another interview on a radio station from Calgary. That one went very well. I failed forward.

Last week Adrian did a wonderful job bringing us into the book of Acts, which is a history of the spread of the first Church. I think the main take away for me from his sermon was the importance of listening to the Holy Spirit, taking direction from him and then stepping out in obedience.

Sometimes we put so much pressure on ourselves and on others. We take on the job of the Holy Spirit, thinking it's our responsibility to point out the sin of others and try to make them straighten out. Or, we think it's our job to convict, convince, and convert our neighbours. Like Adrian said, "It's not!"

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Our job is not to convince or cajole or convert. Our job is to be witnesses. That means that it is the evidence of our changed lives that will point others to him. We can trust Jesus with our failures, knowing that he has us. We can learn from him because he is gentle and humble in heart.

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So, the question is always, **Am I entrusting myself to Jesus and allowing him to change me?** Am I responding humbly when I realize I've failed? Am I more loving today than I was last year at this time?

Am I more kind? Am I more gentle? None of us is where we should be, but there should be movement. And that movement, as we allow the Holy Spirit to transform us, should point others to Jesus. And at some point, when someone asks us how that change happened, we can tell them it was Jesus.

That brings us further into the book of Acts. Remember, Acts is about the meteoric rise of the church in the first century. God worked many miracles and signs and wonders, not only through the apostles, but also through average, ordinary men and women.

Today we are going to delve into Acts 8 and a spectacular divine appointment that Philip had with an Ethiopian official. We need to keep in mind when we read this that this Philip is not the Philip included in Jesus' inner circle of twelve Apostles. This is Philip the lay evangelist. He was not a professional. He was an average Joe. Let's take a quick look at who he was.

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Acts 6:1–7 (NLT)

¹ But as the believers [disciples] rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food.

The Greek word for “distribution of food” here is *diakonia*. It literally means ministry, or service. This was the first deacons' board.

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² So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. They said, “We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program. ³ And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility.

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⁴ Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word.”

The food program was so important that they knew it must not be neglected. So the apostles appointed some people who were mature and filled with the Holy Spirit to ensure that the ministry would continue. This allowed the apostles', and later the pastors', time to not be taken up with day to day stuff that would use up all their margin, so their time in prayer and study and teaching of the Word would be protected.

⁵ Everyone liked this idea, and they chose the following: Stephen (a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit), Philip [this is the Philip we are going to be looking at today], Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas of Antioch (an earlier convert to the Jewish faith).

These first deacons were men, but when you read through the letters in the New Testament there are also several women deacons mentioned. We'll take a closer look at that once we get to our study of Ephesians in November.

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⁶ These seven were presented to the apostles, who prayed for them as they laid their hands on them.

So, the first century church set up a structure of leadership to protect the time of those who had the responsibility of teaching and preaching the Word of God. Look what happened.

⁷ So God's message continued to spread. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too.

So, because the apostles' time to study, pray, preach and teach was protected, the Good news of Jesus spread and many people came to Christ.

Shortly after the seven were appointed as deacons, Stephen, one of the seven, went out teaching and preaching and performing miracles of God. Some religious leaders got some people to lie about Stephen saying that he was blaspheming Moses and even God. He was arrested and brought to trial. He took that opportunity to preach to them about Jesus and told them that they were responsible for killing the Messiah. They took offence at that and stoned him to death.

After Stephen's death a widespread persecution of the church began. Jesus' followers scattered all over the known world and with them took the message of the good news of Jesus. God turned a very bad situation into something very good.

We see this same phenomenon all throughout history. Wherever the church is persecuted it grows. Satan tries to hinder what God is doing through followers of Jesus and God turns it around for his good.

That leads us to our passage for today. Remember, Philip was not the disciple by the same name in Jesus' inner circle of twelve disciples. He was an ordinary guy who had a heart for God and lived his life depending on him. He was just a guy who was chosen to serve food to widows. But, he listened closely to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and then stepped out in obedience.

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Acts 8:26–39 (NLT)

²⁶ As for Philip, an angel of the Lord said to him, “Go south down the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza.” ²⁷ So he started out, and he met the treasurer of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under the Kandake, the queen of Ethiopia.

So, this man was an Ethiopian official, employed by the queen of Ethiopia. He was likely a Gentile who had at some point in his life converted to Judaism. The original church was made up completely of Jews. Things were starting to change. The message was reaching the Gentile population. Philip was sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit who set up this divine appointment for him.

The eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and he was now returning. Seated in his carriage, he was reading aloud from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

The exact passage he was reading from was Isaiah 52:13-53:12, in the Old Testament. I'm almost certain he was not reading from his Kindle. He wasn't even reading from a bound book like we have. He would have been reading from a scroll. He was seated in his chariot while it was being pulled by a horse or an oxen. He may have had a servant at the reins while he had his nose in the scroll reading aloud.

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²⁹ The Holy Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and walk along beside the carriage.”

Are you picturing this in your mind? Philip is in Samaria preaching the Gospel. An angel shows up and instructs him to go to a desert road. He jumps into action immediately and sees this Ethiopian official in his chariot reading from the Old Testament Scriptures.

I used to imagine that the Ethiopian was at a rest stop at the side of the road sitting on a rock taking a reading break. He wasn't. The chariot was on the move, but slow enough that Philip could walk alongside.

³⁰ Philip ran over and heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹ The man replied, “How can I, unless someone instructs me?” And he urged Philip to come up into the carriage and sit with him.

When I was the director of a youth drop in centre in Calgary we had a young man who was a regular. He had been coming for a couple months and he was always angry. I could tell by the way he dressed that his family was not well off. His pants were about three inches too short and his white socks were very noticeable, as were the holes in his shoes where his toes poked through.

He was an extremely intelligent young man. I think he was in grade seven and he always had a book with him. I played chess with him and he would often win. His vocabulary was probably better than mine.

One day I walked upstairs and saw him sitting at the concession bar reading one of the Gospel tracts we had in a rack on the bar. It was the first time I had seen him pick one up. He would come in every day and if I tried to talk to him about anything spiritual he would say, with some obvious venom in his tone, “I don’t believe in God. I believe in science.” We had many conversations and I told him that God actually believes in science too. As a matter of fact, he is the creator of all the laws of science. My young friend wouldn’t buy it.

So, on this particular day I walked upstairs and came upon him reading a Gospel tract about how God loves him and that if he trusts in Jesus’ death to pay the penalty for his sins he could be forgiven and have a relationship with the God he didn’t believe in.

I said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” I asked the exact question Philip asked the Ethiopian who was reading from the Scriptures. Any guesses as to how this young man responded?

He snapped back at me, (and these were his exact words) “How can I unless somebody explains it?” There was an edge to his voice. He was angry at the world. I said, “Would you like me to explain?” “Sure,” he said.

I sat at the bar with him and talked to him about how much God loved him. I told him that God loved him so much that he was willing to die for him. Tears formed in his eyes and he opened up and told me about the horrific life he was living. His older brother was in jail. His home life was abusive and chaotic. He had much to be angry about.

I told him that I didn’t have many answers to those problems, but I could introduce him to someone who does. I asked if he would like pray and invite Jesus into his life. He wept and said, “Yes.”

That was a divine appointment set up by the Holy Spirit. He continues to work like that today. God is working around us, in our hearts, and in the hearts of our neighbours, friends and family. We can look around and see what he is doing and then join him.

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³² The passage of Scripture he had been reading was this: [Isaiah 52:13-53:12 - written several hundred years before Jesus, about Jesus] “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter. And as a lamb is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth. ³³He was humiliated and received no justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.”

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³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, was the prophet talking about himself or someone else?”

³⁵ So beginning with this same Scripture, Philip told him the Good News about Jesus.

There something very important that we could easily miss here. Philip was sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. That is very clear.

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And he was also very sensitive to where this man was at in his heart. He started from where he was. He recognized that the Holy Spirit had been working in the heart of this Ethiopian man. He started with where he was at and then pointed him to Jesus.

I think we sometimes put undue pressure on ourselves and others. We hear testimonies and sermons telling us that we need to go out witnessing about Jesus. We feel the pressure to be 'good Christians' and sometimes we do more harm than good because we don't start from where people are at. We start from where we think they should be. God never does that with us. Jesus gently and humbly takes us from where we are at and leads us to where we should be.

Remember our often quoted Scripture from Matthew 11:28-30.

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Matthew 11:28–30 (NLT)

28 Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light."

Read the Gospels and you will see very quickly how Jesus gently and humbly took people from where they were at to where they needed to be. Remember the Samaritan woman at the well? Or the woman caught in adultery? Or Zacchaeus, the hated tax collector? Or Nicodemus, the Pharisee? How about every single one of his disciples? All of the so called 'sinners' Jesus treated very gently and took them from where they were at to where they should be. That's how Jesus leads us as well.

The only people Jesus treated harshly were the hard hearted religious people, those who thought they were okay and didn't need his help.

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36 As they rode along, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look! There's some water! Why can't I be baptized?"

I love this part. They're riding along talking about Jesus in the chariot of this Ethiopian official. The lights come on for him. It is clear that Jesus is the Messiah he had been waiting for. He believed. They ride by some water and the Ethiopian says, ***"Look! There's some water! Why can't I be baptized?"***

He would have understood baptism. All Jews and Jewish proselytes understood baptism. It was a part of their religious heritage. It was the most natural thing for him to ask for.

Philip didn't say, "Nope, first you need to go through a lengthy baptism class and we need to make sure that your faith is real," as if he could judge the condition of someone's heart. The Ethiopian believed that Jesus died to save him and asked to be baptized. There was no waiting for some special feeling. He knew that if he was obedient to Jesus he should get baptized immediately, not *to* save him, but as a sign that Jesus *had* saved him.

Next week we are going to have another opportunity to come forward and get baptized. If you have trusted Jesus, but have not been baptized, we want to invite you come forward and take that step of obedience. Don't do it for me. Don't do it for anybody else. Do it as a step of obedience as a declaration to yourself, to the world, to the Devil, and to God that you have trusted Jesus to forgive your sins so you can have a relationship with a holy God and spend eternity in heaven with him when you die.

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³⁸ He ordered the carriage to stop, and they went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing.

Let's wrap this up. Here are some things about Philip for those of us who are already trusting Jesus.

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Things to learn from Philip:

- 1. His heart was soft to what the Holy Spirit was teaching him.**
- 2. His eyes were open to what the Holy Spirit was doing around him.**
- 3. His will was obedient to where the Holy Spirit was leading.**

For those of you who have not yet trusted Jesus, or have just recently trusted, here are some things about the Ethiopian who took a step of faith and began his new life with Jesus.

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Things to Learn from the Ethiopian:

- 1. His heart was soft to what the Holy Spirit was teaching him.**
- 2. His eyes were open to what the Holy Spirit was doing around him.**
- 3. His will was obedient to where the Holy Spirit was leading.**

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Here are some questions for us in closing:

- 1. Is your heart soft towards what the Holy Spirit is teaching you?**
- 2. Are your eyes open to what the Holy Spirit is doing around you?**
- 3. Is your will obedient to where the Holy Spirit is leading you?**

In other words, are you joining him in what he is doing?

We are going to celebrate communion together now. This is for everyone who knows they need Jesus.

Before we celebrate together take a moment of silence and meditate on these verses:

³² The passage of Scripture he had been reading was this: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter. And as a lamb is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth. ³³He was humiliated and received no justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."



Living in HisStory: Revealing the True Wonder of Who God Is
Divine Appointments

Acts 8:26-39

Week of October 7, 2018

Objective of this study: To learn to be more sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

[Remember, the main goal of each Growth Group is to allow God's Word to change your heart so that others would see Jesus in you and be likewise changed to be like him. He wants to change the world through us.]

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.
2. Spend five minutes in silence asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
3. After the five minutes have someone interrupt the silence and read **Psalm 145:8-19** meditatively to the group. Pause after each phrase letting God speak to you. **Did anything “jump out at you”?**

Welcome (5 minutes)

Tell about your favourite, “Wow! What a small world” story.

[It's really important when doing this study that we each think about ourselves specifically and ways we need to grow, not how Christians in general need to grow. Do the hard work of letting the Holy Spirit speak to *your* heart.]

Word (30-45 minutes)

1. What stood out from the sermon?
2. Read Acts 6:1-7 and Acts 8:1, 26-39.
 1. Describe Philip. Who was he? What was he like?
 2. Describe the Ethiopian. Who was he? What was he like?
 3. What are all the things you notice about obedience in this passage? Consider both Philip and the Ethiopian.
 4. What did the Holy Spirit do? What did Phil and the Ethiopian do?

Work (30-45 minutes)

4. Have you noticed the Holy Spirit's promptings in your life? What happened when you responded? What happened when you didn't respond?
5. What are divine appointments? Have you ever noticed them in your life? What happened?

Sermon Quote: “I think we sometimes put undue pressure on ourselves and others. We hear testimonies and sermons telling us that we need to go out witnessing about Jesus. We feel the pressure to be ‘good Christians’ and sometimes we do more harm than good because we don't start from where people are at. We start from where we think they should be. God never does that with us. Jesus gently and humbly takes us from where we are at and leads us to where we should be.

Sometimes we put so much pressure on ourselves and on others. We take on the job of the Holy Spirit, thinking it's our responsibility to point out the sin of others and try to make them straighten out. Or, we think it's our job to convict, convince, and convert our neighbours. Like Adrian said, ‘It's not!’

Our job is not to convince or cajole or convert. Our job is to be witnesses. That means that it is the evidence of our changed lives that will point others to him. We can **trust** Jesus with our failures, knowing that he has us. We can **learn** from him because he is gentle and humble in heart.”

6. What is our role, and what is the role of the Holy Spirit?
7. Consider these questions:
 1. Is your heart soft towards what the Holy Spirit is teaching you?
 2. Are your eyes open to what the Holy Spirit is doing around you?
 3. Is your will obedient to where the Holy Spirit is leading you?
8. What are you taking home this week? What changes in mindset or practice do you sense the Holy Spirit prompting you to make?

Prayer

1. Spend the rest of the time praying for each other. **Praise God together for how he works, and how he allows us to partner with him to accomplish things in his kingdom.**
2. Here are some things you can pray about for the church:
 - A. That, as a church, we would actively and purposefully engage in the mission of Jesus in Campbell River.
 - B. Pastor Adrian and the **Radiant Life** ministry.
 - C. Our church board and staff as they lead us to live out the mission of Jesus
 - D. River Kids ministry as they reach out to kids in our community.
 - E. **Our missionary of the week:** Duane and Dawn Bakken in Asia Pacific with New Tribes
 - F. **Local CR church:** Oceancrest Salvation Arm - Captain Keith and Violet Hopkins