

“Was There Hesitation in His Heart?” May 2, 2021

Acts 8:26-40

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Fifth Sunday of Easter

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I would like you to think this morning about hesitation.

What it is like to hesitate.

To pause.

To give yourself time to consider what you are about to say or do.

Hesitation is not always a bad thing, right?

How many of you have ever said something sharply to a loved one or a friend, or you fired off an email, and a day or two later you came to regret saying things the way that you said them? And you wished you had hesitated?

Decades before anyone had ever imagined email or texting or social media, when Karl Barth was a young theologian, he and the theologian Emil Brunner were in a scholarly debate about the proper place of natural theology.

Who cares, right?

But it mattered greatly to them.

At one point, Brunner published an essay on the subject—
and Barth objected.

Barth objected **STRONGLY**.

With venom in his voice, Barth issued a sharply worded blast **AGAINST** Brunner, a response that became famous in theological circles, not only for its content but also for its title:

“Nein!” “No!”

That’s what Barth titled his response to his friend: “No!”

And he did not write the response gently, and he did not say what he had to say lovingly.

And Brunner was deeply wounded by the harshness of Barth’s rejection, and the rift between the two friends lasted a lifetime.¹

I wonder if Karl Barth, perhaps the most prominent theologian of the early 20th century, I wonder if he ever paused—hesitated—before publishing such a stinging response?

Hesitation can be a good thing, right?
A helpful thing.
Sometimes, it’s a life-saving thing.

Last summer, my wife and I were out for a walk.
It was evening, the sun was going down.

As we’re walking, I’m talking, not paying much attention at all to anything other than what was in my head at that moment—and my wife said, “Ben, wait...”

And she pointed and I paused.
Thank goodness I paused.
I looked where she was pointing her finger...and there was a copperhead, crossing the street, right where I was about to step.

I’m glad my wife was paying attention to more than just my ramblings at that moment.

¹ This story has appeared in many places. I have taken it from an article by Thomas G. Long, “Growing Old and Wise on Easter,” in *Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2001.

A brief hesitation—that’s all it took to keep our evening from becoming a lot more complicated...

I’d like you to think about the act of hesitating.
Because I wonder if, in our text for today, Philip hesitated.
It sure doesn’t sound like he hesitated.

On the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza, Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch.

A stranger, a foreigner—at the Holy Spirit’s instruction, he speaks to this stranger, and he teaches this stranger, and then—when the stranger asks to be baptized, Philip baptizes this foreigner.

The text does not tell us that Philip hesitated.
But I wonder if, in his heart, he had a moment’s pause.

It was one thing to talk to this foreigner.
Quite another thing to baptize this foreigner, to say to this person from a far-away land, you belong with us, here in God’s church.

This was, after all, the early church—Gentiles had not yet been welcomed into God’s church at this point in the story. The early church was having debates about who should and should not be a part God’s church.

You can read about the early church’s hesitation in Acts, chapter 15:

“Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’ And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and

some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.”

Did you catch all that?
Dissension. Debate.
Requirements.

That’s what the early church was discussing.
All of which makes me wonder if Philip hesitated.

What will the folks back home say when they hear that Philip baptized an Ethiopian eunuch?

He’s not like us, Philip.

Heck, Philip, you had to explain the prophet Isaiah to this fellow—
why didn’t you bring the matter to us?

Why did you baptize him right away?
You’re setting a precedent here, Philip.
Now we’ve got a problem on our hands, Philip.
There was no vote for this, Philip.

I wonder if Philip thought about all that.
I wonder if there was any hesitation in his heart....

With the peer pressure, I would understand if Philip paused,
because there were other apostles who paused.

Do you remember what happened with Peter?
Between Peter and Paul?

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes:

“But when Cephas [that’s Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction.”

At one time, Peter ate with anyone.

At the same table, breaking bread with anyone.

Then, when some others in the early church put some pressure on him, he stopped eating with anyone.

And the Apostle Paul was horrified!

Do you see what happened?

Peter—the rock of the church—hesitated when it came to embodying the grace and welcome of God.

Sometimes, we should not hesitate, right?

Sometimes, we need to move right away.

Sometimes it makes all the difference if we speak up right away, act right away, make a commitment at the moment we find ourselves in.

A couple years ago, some of our extended family with three young children in tow made a move from one state to another. Mom posted on social media:

“It’s been a rough transition for all of us—especially Reid. The other kids at school are incredibly sweet but Reid gets nervous and often finds himself alone. Change and transitions are all a part of life and we’re trying to teach him to be brave. But truthfully it breaks my heart. I hate dropping him off at school every day, anticipating when I pick

him up that he'll tell me how he wants to go back to his old school, and how lonely he is.

“Until Friday, when he came running out to the car and said, ‘Mom, look!!’ He was holding a note from another kid in his class. The note said:

‘Hi Reid. It’s your buddy James. Do you want to play with me and Jake at recess?’

“Reid was beaming with joy and said, ‘Mom, I have a friend now.’ [James] noticed Reid had been alone and wanted him to feel included.

“Today, we walked in and [James] handed Reid a gift and said Happy Birthday! I started crying. And Reid looked at me and said with a giant smile, ‘He remembered my birthday!’”

“James is in 2nd grade. He notices the details. His simple act of kindness has changed Reid’s world (and mine).”

No time to hesitate.

Have you ever had the experience of hesitating—and then realizing, after the fact, that maybe you should have acted right away?

Martin Niemoller was a German pastor in the 1930s who, when Hitler first rose to power, supported Hitler. But eventually he saw the evil in Nazism, and he came to oppose Hitler’s regime.

After the war, expressing his regret for his earlier views, he published a now-famous poem.

It's familiar to many.

Displayed in the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, the poem reads like this:

“First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I did not speak out—Because I was not a trade unionist. Then they
came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

It is the problem with hesitation.

Of course, it's one thing to wisely HESITATE when one sees a copperhead...or to say SPEAK OUT when one sees the evil of Nazi ideology.

But what about when things aren't so clear?

What about issues and decisions that are ambiguous, complicated, or divisive for the church—whether one hesitates or not?

A few years ago, Christopher Edmonston, who is the senior pastor at White Memorial Presbyterian Church in Raleigh, NC, wrote of the following experience:

“Recently at a funeral at another church, I saw a man who left [our church].

[He left because of a stance, a vote that the Session of Edmonston's “purple” church decided to take.]

“I was on edge as our last conversation was full of pain and anger,” Edmonston writes. “He looked me in the eye and told me he was very

happy at his new church, a church which affirms the moral beliefs he holds dear.

“Then this man who had been furious with me did the unexpected. He kissed me on the cheek...He reminded me that while he didn’t agree with me, he still loved me. I told him that I still loved him too. While he is no longer a part of our purple church, we were still connected by a faith and a trust in Jesus Christ which, more than anything else we can name, possesses the code for...healing...and the renewal of Christ’s church.”²

It’s a story that leaves me wondering...if I had been in that man’s shoes, or Christopher Edmonston’s shoes, would I have hesitated?

Would I have hesitated to show grace to someone with whom I disagreed, or someone who had wounded me? Would you?

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”

So he got up and went.

*Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.”
So Philip ran up to it...*

It sounds like Philip had a sense of urgency.
Do you know what that’s like?

² Christopher Edmonston, “Pastoring a Purple Church,” The Presbyterian Outlook, January 2, 2018, found at [Pastoring a purple church - The Presbyterian Outlook \(pres-outlook.org\)](http://pres-outlook.org).

To respond to God’s love and the good news of Easter not with a leisurely pace, but with a sense that what we do in the world matters right now, that how we choose to love one another, and our neighbors, makes all the difference right now?

Another of my colleagues recently wrote:

It’s easy for churches right now to “ignore the urgency of this moment.”

What’s the urgency?

“That, after a year and more of isolation, fear, uncertainty, suffering, and death (especially among our most vulnerable and marginal neighbors), women and men in our culture
are actually asking deeper questions
about...their life
than they have in quite some time.

People are hungry for community, care, connection, depth, and a renewed sense of justice. They are yearning for hope and asking about meaning.

[People] are searching for the very things that followers of Jesus, at our best, are equipped to address.”³

Near the end of Emil Brunner’s life, his estranged friend Karl Barth sent him an urgent message:

“If he is still alive, and it is possible, tell him, ‘Yes.’

³ Mark Ramsey, “What’s the Urgency?”, The Ministry Collaborative, April 27, 2021.

Tell him that the time when I thought I had to say ‘No’ to him is now long past, since we all live only by virtue of the fact that a great and merciful God says his gracious Yes to all of us.”⁴

To all of us.

This—I think—is what is so urgent for God’s Church these days. To see God’s Church as a place for all of us.

To be a place that reaches out—like Philip—to everyone. To friend and stranger.

To those who live like us, or think like us...and to those who are, in some way, foreign to us...

A few years ago, the singer/songwriter Gabriel Kahane bought an Amtrack ticket out of New York and decided to travel across the United States by train for two weeks.

He covered almost 9,000 miles, went through 31 states, left his phone at home... and ate all of his meals in the train’s dining car.

Because he was traveling by himself, he ate all of his meals in that dining car...with strangers.

He writes:

*In the course of my travels,
I chatted with postmasters, real estate agents,
nuclear engineers, schoolteachers,*

⁴ Thomas G. Long, “Growing Old and Wise on Easter,” in *Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2001.

*farm equipment saleswomen, nurses,
long haul truck drivers,
retirees headed to the Grand Canyon...a cowboy...
an aspiring music publicist,
a public utility employee focused on solar energy
who...professed to be a climate change skeptic...*

The list goes on.

Where much of the world finds us sorting ourselves into cultural and ideological silos, the train...does precisely the opposite....

To be sure, I encountered people whose politics I found abhorrent...but in just about every instance, there was something about the person's relationship to family, and loyalty to family, that I found deeply moving. That ability to connect across ideological divide seemed predicated on the fact that we were quite literally breaking bread together.

I mourn the decline of complex truth...the desire to understand rather than simply to be right.

After a few days of the dining car routine I began to wonder if the train might be a salve for our national wound....allowing us to see each other as human rather than as mere containers for ideology.⁵

Now I'm not suggesting that all of us go ride Amtrack for two weeks by ourselves.

I am suggesting that by definition, God's church is a place where we do not choose whom we break bread with...God does that.

⁵ Gabriel Kahane, "How the Amtrack Dining Car Could Heal the Nation," *The New York Times*, November 28, 2017.

God gathers us here, so that we can be equipped by the Holy Spirit with a RENEWED URGENCY—

to share and spread the hospitality,
the generosity, the justice, and the joy
of the gospel of Jesus Christ OUT THERE...

Think about those people in your life who have NOT PAUSED when it came to showing you welcome and patience and grace when you needed it most in your life.

Think about what that meant to you.

Now, when it comes to extending that same welcome and patience and grace to people who are family to us, or unfamiliar to us, or even displeasing to us...what will we do?

I hope we will not hesitate when you and I answer that question.

Amen.