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Trading Up

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

Acts 8:27-31

But an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a desert road. And he rose and went. And behold, an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a minister of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of all her treasure, had come to Jerusalem to worship, and was returning; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot.” So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And he said, “How can I, unless some one guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

A while ago there was a message on my answering machine at home. It was a message from a salesman at a car dealership. In his message he asked how my 2001 Buick Century was doing. He thought I might be thinking that it was about time to trade it in for a new model. He was even kind enough to suggest that the new Buick Lucerne is really sharp.

I didn't call him back, but it did remind me of the first time I traded in an old car and got a new Buick. That was way back in 1991. My first Buick was a beautiful navy blue model. It was a great car. I drove it for eleven years.

Well, shortly after we got that Buick, Janet and I took a trip south. On the way to North Carolina, we stopped off in Richmond, Virginia to visit a few old friends.

While we were there, Janet called up her former pastor, the Rev. Mr. Meredith Robertson. He was her pastor during all her growing-up years in Richmond. He was the pastor of Ridge Baptist Church; Janet was a Southern Baptist until I made a Christian out of her! That aside, Janet and Meredith were close friends. When he heard that we were in town, he invited us to come right over.

Meredith was a very gregarious, happy fellow. He must have been watching out the window, because as soon as we turned into the drive, he came rushing out of the house. The last time he saw us, we were driving an old 1974 model VW Beetle.

As we climbed out of the car, he yelled back into the house to his wife, “Come look, Ruby! They’ve traded-up to a Buick!” He said we had “traded-up.” I liked the sound of that.

“Trading-up” to something better is something I learned as a young boy. Every few years, discontented with what she had, my mother would decide it was time for new furniture. She was a thrifty woman. She would head down to her favorite furniture store - a store where she knew she could make a deal.

Somehow, she always got them to give her a trade-in value for her old furniture. That’s the way it was. Every few years, the old sofa and chair would go out the back door, back to the furniture store, and something new and better would come in the front door. Mom liked to “trade-up.”

Even in this disposable age, where so much of what we buy ends up being thrown away, it’s nice to know that trading in an old model for something new still works once in a while. It works at a car dealership. It used to work at my mother’s favorite furniture store. And we are taking a chance that it’ll work when it comes to a church, too.

It’s what we’re doing. We’re trading-up. A few years ago we decided to trade-up from our old church in that old location for a new church in a new location. Of course, we got detoured along the way. We ended up trading-in our old church for this temporary location. But today, we’re closer than ever to trading-up from this temporary location to our new church.

What we're doing is right in line with the history of our faith. From the beginning, the Christian faith has been all about trading in the old for something much, much better.

Just look at the Bible. When you open it up, you see that it's a collection of sixty-six individual little books - sixty-six books that don't necessarily seem to be connected to each other. But, it's more than a collection of un-related books; it's really one continuous story.

That story begins: *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth..."* [Genesis 1:1] And it ends with the Spirit of Jesus saying, *"Surely I am coming soon'... The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with all the saints. Amen."* [Revelation 22:20-21]

And in-between that beginning and that ending, there's a story the Bible tells. That story is a journey. It is a journey toward a deeper understanding. It is a journey recounting the ways God continued to reveal Himself to mankind. It's a story of how difficult it has been for mankind to trade-in an old, outdated understanding of God for a new, richer understanding of the nature of God.

It's what Paul was talking about when he wrote, *"When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways."* [I Corinthians 13:11] That's the journey the Bible takes. From the beginning to the end, you can read about how men and women began as babes in faith, with childish ideas about God.

- They thought He was a little god,
- a local god,
- a god for their tribe alone.

- They thought He was a god of war,
- a god of vengeance,
 - a god of wrath.

That's the way they thought, in the beginning. But the story tells the journey of how they grew up in their understanding and in their faith.

In the Bible you can read about how they slowly did it - in bits and pieces, through mistakes and sins, through trial and error, through pain and suffering. It was difficult. Sometimes it was traumatic. But, they did it; they traded-in their old understanding about the kind of God they followed for a more mature and grown-up understanding of the true nature of God.

It was a journey that took centuries - in fact, it's a journey that's not finished, yet. It's not finished for me. I doubt it's finished for you, either.

For the people of Bible times, it was a circuitous journey, to be sure; but with each and every revelation, those people gained a deeper and better understanding of God. It's what you will gain, too, when you're ready and willing to trade in your old ideas for some new, better ones.

Whether you like it or not, the way they learned is the same way you have to learn, too: today, every seeking, searching, serious follower of Jesus Christ has to be ready and willing to trade in old thoughts about God, old habits, old prejudices, old ways of worship for new and better ways.

It is never easy. When you read the Bible, you will learn that every time the people traded-up to something better, it came after some pain, after some misunderstanding, after some controversy. It was always a struggle to break free from old prejudices, to overcome old differences, to set aside old distinctions; and to recognize that their old ways could not be perpetuated.

They traded up for something better.

I don't think any of us would be Christians today if the earliest Christians had not been willing to trade in their old ways for new ways.

The first Christians were all Jews. Back then, if you wanted to be a follower of Jesus Christ, you had to be a Jew, *first*. They followed all the Jewish laws.

But as soon as the message of Jesus Christ started spreading to all the people who lived around the nation of Israel; they had to trade in their old idea that Jesus came for the Jews *alone* for a better idea. That better idea was that Jesus came for **all** people, not for the Jews alone. When that idea first started making its rounds, most of the Jesus-following Jews rejected it. They were against it. They thought it was a really, really bad idea.

The first place the message of Jesus spread was to their next-door neighbors, the people of Samaria.

Those old Samaritans were not Jews, but they were *almost* like Jews. They had the same ancestors. They had the same history. They looked the same. They spoke the same language. Most of their customs and habits were the same. Most of their religious traditions were the same.

Even though they were a lot alike, it was still a scandal when the first Samaritans were brought into the faith. There was opposition. There were arguments.

There were many Christians, many church leaders, many first century elders, many deacons who said, “No, we can’t have *them* in *our* church!” But the Spirit of God would not be stopped, and those first generation Christians did it. Some did it grudgingly. Some did it reluctantly. But they did it. They traded in their first, most restrictive rule, that every Christian had to be a Jew *first*, and they welcomed their non-Jewish Samaritans from next door into the family of faith.

As soon as this happened, they thought they could rest a while and not have to change any more. But almost immediately, they discovered they had to trade in some other old restrictions and rules. They were called to cross another boarder, to scale another barrier. This is where today’s scripture story begins, when the Christian church makes its first move to the south of Israel.

The action takes place on that well-traveled road, the ancient equivalent of an “interstate” highway, the one that linked Jerusalem with Africa. This is where the Church of Christ not only moved out geographically, it also moved out across racial lines, overcoming language barriers, and smashed into sexual taboos. It also moved the church across national boundaries, from people who were “like” us to people who were “different” from us. It was the first real call for openness and acceptance.

The man at the center of the controversy was a black man from Ethiopia. He was also a eunuch. According to the Jewish religious laws and all social customs of that day, that meant he was only half-a-man. According to the law, he would always remain an outsider. He would automatically be excluded from the Jewish faith and the Christian fellowship.

Even though he was the treasurer for the Queen of Ethiopian,
 - even though he was rich and powerful,
 - even though he was coming back from a religious
 pilgrimage to Jerusalem,
 - even though he was a student of the Bible and
 read the holy scriptures regularly...
 - *because* he was black,

- *because* he was an Ethiopian,
- *because* he was a eunuch...
- (any one of which would have disqualified him in somebody's eyes) -
- he would always be kept on the outside of the Christian fellowship,
- he would always be shunned,
- he would never be good enough.

Those are the particular prejudices and barriers those first Christians were called to trade-in for something better, for some deeper understanding of how God wants His children to treat other people, people who are “different.”

In the scripture story, this outsider - this black, foreign, eunuch - meets up with Philip.

Philip was an in-sider in the first Christian Church. He was one of the first seven deacons of the church [Acts 6:1-6]. He was a man who was chosen because of his willingness to serve with his hands.

Philip had just brought into the faith the first Samaritans. Just when he thought he could take a little vacation, the Spirit directed him to the highway south of town. There, he saw a man sitting in a chariot.

The Spirit of God said to Philip, “*Go up and talk with this man.*” Philip didn’t hesitate. He walked right up to that stranger and proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ. When you read on in the scripture, you’ll see that Philip baptized that eunuch.

This encounter is the symbolic moment when the Christian Church traded in prejudice for open arms. It’s a wonderful moment.

- When Philip walked up to that man sitting in his chariot,
- racial prejudice was traded in for brotherhood,
- national prejudice was traded in for universal salvation,
- sexual prejudice was traded in for understanding.

That Ethiopian eunuch had a different skin color than Philip. He spoke a different language. He was from a different country. He worshipped a different god. He probably dressed in different clothing. And, he had a different sexual orientation.

When Philip looked at that man, Philip refused to see all those differences. The man Philip saw was a child of God. They had a theological discussion about Jesus Christ, *“Then Philip opened his mouth, and ... he told [the eunuch] the good news of Jesus. And as they came to some water, the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?’ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and [Philip] baptized him.”* [Acts 8:35-37]

What could prevent the eunuch from being baptized? A lot of people would have said a lot of things; but Philip took the black African eunuch’s hand, walked down into the water with him, baptized him in Jesus’ name, and welcomed him into the Christian fellowship.

That was an unprecedented act. That was a courageous act.

What do you think the Spirit of God is calling you to do? Is He calling you to trade in some of your prejudices? Is He calling you to overlook some obvious stumbling blocks? Is He calling you to go out and tell somebody about Jesus? Is He calling you to reach out to somebody who is different?

When you come across a person who is a little different, or a lot different, whom do you see? This scripture makes it absolutely clear:

- color, race, national origin,
- language, creed, habits,
- style, social status, dress,
- sins, mistakes, even sexual practice -
- it’s absolutely clear!

None of that matters.

What matters is that right in front of you is another child of God. And your job? Welcome him in. Make her part of the family.

The Spirit’s message is clear: God’s love and forgiveness is for all people, no matter what. Jesus Christ comes to seek and save everyone who is lost, everyone who is hurting, everyone who is searching, everyone who is willing.

Your job is to love and understand and befriend everyone, even the ones who are different. The Spirit is calling you to trade in your old prejudices that have become barriers for God’s love, acceptance, forgiveness, and mercy.

That's good news! The Gospel message of God's love is powerful enough to bring down all the walls of prejudice -

- powerful enough to show no partiality,
- powerful enough to forgive and understand,
- powerful enough not to care what somebody looks like,
- powerful enough to love and accept even those who are different.

Jesus calls you to trade up for something better.

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch was a turning point in the history of the Christian church. When you embrace and accept this story and make it part of your mind-set, it will be a turning point in your life.

Just maybe, through this story, the Spirit of God is telling you that you don't have to stay the way *you* are, you don't have to stay stuck in the rut you're in, you don't have to be limited by the parameter of your deeply held prejudice. *You* have the power to change.

As we look forward to that coming day when we will trade up from this temporary location to our new church facility, let us listen to the Spirit of God. The Spirit is calling us to trade up to a new openness, to wider-stretched arms, to a new witness.

O, when we get out on Shawnee Road, I hope we'll get a whole lot of people coming to our fellowship who are just like us - people who think like us, people who act like us, people who will be easy and fit right in. I hope we get a lot of people like us.

But I think the Spirit of God is calling us to trade in the easy road for a more difficult journey. I think the Spirit is calling us to reach out to different people, people who have been excluded, people who have been shunned, people who have been told they're not good enough. I think the Spirit of God is calling us to open up our arms to the people who are hurting, the people who are ostracized, the people who are rejected. The spirit wants us to bring in the ones who have been left out.

When we trade up to our new church home, the Spirit will give us the power we need to create a shepherding, caring, hospitable, accepting, and open fellowship which will welcome everyone who is seeking - and that even includes everyone who is different.

Two thousand years ago, the word became flesh and dwelt among us. The first generation of Christians were determined to trade up. They wanted to trade in their old lives for something better. They did it by listening to the Spirit of God and making whatever changes needed to be made.

They didn't sit still. They didn't cling to yesterday. They didn't long for some mis-remembered tranquillity of a time that never was. What they did was to get up and go out. And in the going, they changed the world.

What they did had nothing to do with numbers. The first generation of Christians were a small group. They were a small minority every where they lived. They were not very popular with their neighbors. They were the outsiders in their social setting.

They were just a handful of ordinary, average folks who were anything but impressive. Yet, they were different, and they changed the world. They believed in the Risen Jesus, and that belief changed their attitudes and their behavior.

They traded in their old lives, their pre-Jesus lives, for something better. There are bound to be some things you'd like to trade in.

Maybe some ignorance you'd like to trade in for some wisdom,
 - some prejudices you'd like to trade in for understanding,
 - some habits you'd like to trade in for better actions,
 - some mistakes you'd like to trade in for a second chance,
 - some words you'd like to trade in for kindness,
 - some sins you'd like to trade in for righteousness.

The good news is: Jesus Christ came for you, and He invites you to trade 'em all in for something better.

So many people have done the same thing before you. They all traded in their yesterdays for a tomorrow with Jesus. And when they did, it made a difference.

How about you? When you trade up to a new life with Jesus, what story will you tell? What faith will you pass down? What witness will you make?

Out of all the Christians this world has seen,
 out of all who have gone this way before,

out of all that glorious company of disciples and
martyrs,

of apostles and missionaries,
of peace-makers and forgivers,
out of them all...

only **you** are left.

Today, it's your turn. Today, you hold in your hands, the future of
Christianity. Today, you have in your soul the power to reach out with the
good news of the greatest love ever told.

Today, you have the chance to trade up to be more like Jesus.

What will you do?