

You've Got to be Carefully Taught
Sermon by Rev. Jennifer Gingras
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Acts 8:26-39

This is my first Sunday back with you after a sabbatical as a short-term missionary with the World Council of Churches in the Holy Land, and my head is still fresh with memories. I hope you'll indulge me in sharing a moment that reminds me of the scripture story Gary just read for us.

One of our daily routines was to provide protective presence for Palestinian high school students attending the Al Bustan Municipal School in a village outside of Jerusalem known as Silwan. It sounds like something grand, but our work was really just to stand there with our vests on, greet the children and watch them walk up the hill to school.

That doesn't seem hard, does it? Why travel halfway across the world to become a glorified babysitter? Why did our presence there matter?

Studies show that non-violent protective presence decreases the level of violence; people behave better when other people are watching.

And there had been a lot of acts of violence lately... teens throwing rocks at soldiers, soldiers throwing tear gas canisters and shooting rubber bullets in return. If you are a teenager who regularly walks past soldiers who you consider to be foreign occupiers you might be tempted to tell them to get the hell out. And on the flip side, if you are an inexperienced young Israeli soldier just a few years older than the students, you might retaliate in any number of violent ways.

So our non-violent, international presence was supposed to help everyone within this system of violence and retribution be a little less reactionary. That was the goal, at least.

So there we are in this village, we're kind of new and the teens don't know us yet. For all they know we could be Israeli settlers, come to take control of their land. We didn't do a great job introducing ourselves, because none of us spoke much Arabic at the time. And that's on us.

The morning started off pretty quiet, soldiers had not yet arrived. A group of teens began to gather about 20 feet away from us, whispering, laughing and looking sideways at each other. That's when an older boy, probably about my son's age, picked up a small stone and threw it in our direction. His friend picked up another and followed his example. The first thrower missed. The second one hit my right foot (not hard enough to hurt).

Right in that moment is when I heard the still, small voice within me say *"go talk to them"*.

"Hey!" I called out. *"Saba Ilher"* (which is Arabic for good morning)...

And I began walking up the hill towards the group of kids. When I reached them, told them what my name was *"Isme, Jennifer"*, that I was from America. I asked them who they were, and they responded with laughter and smiles at my faulty Arabic.

Most importantly, they put the stones down.

Now, I could have left the moment that boy aimed the stone at us, hopped on a municipal bus and returned in safety to our placement house. But listening to that inner voice, going to talk with them, was exactly what was needed to break the cycle of violence and fear.

Not forever, mind you, but at least in that moment.

In order to follow that inner voice, I had to put away my fear. Maybe that's easier for me because I work with youth. For some reason, most middle-aged people like me get a little nervous around teens. Maybe that fear ramps up when the teens are Muslim and come from a rough neighborhood that has seen too much violence and poverty.

Fear fuels prejudice.

There are many kinds of prejudices that mess up the world. There is nationalist prejudice. Today there are children who will be carefully taught to hate Israelis, to hate the Palestinians, to hate the Arabs, to hate the Iraqis, to hate the Iranians, to hate the Russians, to hate the Japanese, to hate the North or South Koreans.

There is racial prejudice. People have been taught that blacks are inferior to whites, that First Nations people are lazy, that Mexicans are dirty, that Asians are taking our jobs. There are religious prejudices too.

From the time he was a little baby, Philip had been taught to be prejudiced against Gentiles like the Ethiopian Eunuch.

Just like the classic Roger's & Hammerstein song from the musical South Pacific...

*You've got to be taught to hate and fear,
You've got to be taught from year to year,
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught.*

*You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a diff'rent shade,
You've got to be carefully taught.*

*You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate,
You've got to be carefully taught!*

Philip was carefully taught by his parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. He was carefully taught by his friends and classmates. He was carefully taught by his rabbis who quoted selected scripture that made it seem as if his prejudice was God's will.

But all those little tiny boxes that we keep trying to separate ourselves with, God continually tries to pull us from. Philip is led by God into relationships with people who don't know Jesus Christ, and he winds up sharing his faith. I was led into friendship by God with a group of scared Muslim teens, and we wound up sharing laughter and joy.

In the Bible reading for today, we don't discover yet that Philip had four daughters who become prophets. Imagine their family dinners... four preachers! My poor parents just have the one, that's more than enough suffering for one family.

Philip had been carefully taught what the role and position of women was to be. Women were property, like farm animals that were to be obedient. He was taught that women should know their position in life and accept it, that they should not speak unless they were spoken to – except in church when they should be silent. But his daughters had been anointed to spread the gospel in public.

In the Book of Acts, we find stories about men and women whose hearts are filled listening to the indwelling Still-Speaking Spirit of God inside of them. Being filled with the Holy Spirit, Philip was sensitive to the Holy Spirit's voice inside of him: *"Get up and go Philip. Philip, go to Samaria. Philip, go to Gaza. Philip, go to the black man. Philip, go to the eunuch. Philip, go to your four daughters who are prophets."*

And he listened to that inner guiding voice, too. It wasn't merely his conscience. It wasn't an angel with flapping feathery wings; it wasn't an auditory hallucination; a dream or a nightmare. It was the inner guiding voice of God, the Spirit of Jesus.

Like Philip, we too can listen to the inner guiding voice as God talks with us about our marriage, our kids, changing careers, or being on the swim team. Listen. What do you hear? Amen.