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When I was in third or fourth grade, my Sunday school classroom met behind the sanctuary. There, a small group of us met each Sunday to learn Bible verses. Even though I don't recall the teacher's name, I do remember some of the scriptures she encouraged us to memorize, such as Psalm 23 and the Lord's Prayer. Each time we could recite one of the chosen verses, we could pick out a prize from a basket, such as a bookmark with the books of the Bible listed on it. I don't recall whether I memorized those verses for the joy of learning scripture or to pick out a prize, but that teacher helped me begin learning to dance within the pages of the Bible.

There have been many other teachers along the way who encouraged that process, such as my college religion professor who gave assignments that prompted me to read much more of the Bible. Later, seminary professors helped me read the Bible in a way that considered the historical setting of the writers. By serving as a pastor of several congregations through the years, many members of those churches have shared their thoughts about various stories in the Bible. Together, we guided our dancing steps through the scriptures, listening for what God might have to say to us through those ancient writers.

Take a moment and think of someone who has danced with you through the Bible, someone who has encouraged you to read the Bible or has explained it in a way that has helped you understand it better. Maybe a family member...a friend...a pastor...a Sunday school teacher...or someone sitting near you today. I invite you to name that person...

Thanks be to God for those who have helped us dance through the Bible. It's a very ancient practice, one we see reflected in the Book of Acts when Philip helped an Ethiopian who was reading from the prophet Isaiah but didn't understand it.

Something prompted Philip to go to a road in the middle of nowhere, a wilderness road. An angel, the Spirit, a gentle nudge—all ways of explaining why Philip got up and traveled there, not knowing why. There he saw an Ethiopian court official, but in being a eunuch, which meant he was castrated, he was cut off from having any future family. Being from a foreign nation, he may have also felt cut off by being an outsider, and yet, we're told he went to Jerusalem to worship, so he had some connection to God. Philip noticed he was reading from the scroll of Isaiah, and when Philip asked, "Do you understand what you're reading?" the man replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

When have you ever wished someone could explain something to you? Maybe you've encountered those questions of faith that you wished you could discuss. Maybe you've had doubts about issues of faith, but you're embarrassed to bring them up in church. Oftentimes we may feel as though we're the only one who doesn't understand, when, all of us struggle with questions or problems from time to time, such as a little girl trying to understand something that went on at church.

As a mother and daughter walked out of church one Sunday morning, the mother said, "That was a nice service. I really liked the soft piano music during the prayer."

The little girl turned and asked her mother, "That was a piano?"

The mother nodded, and the little girl said, "Oh. I thought God had put us on hold."¹

Sometimes, when things don't turn out the way we expect in our lives, we may wonder if God has put us on hold. When we've prayed about an illness that takes someone we love, we may wonder if God heard us, feeling as though we called the wrong number and got put on hold. Someone facing a difficult decision who can't discern what steps to take next may feel as though life has been placed on hold. Someone facing

the difficult theological question about why bad things happen to good people may long for a conversation.

The ancient practice of spiritual direction offers a safe place to dance with these kinds of questions and struggles. Throughout the history of the church, and other faith traditions as well, members have sought guidance with someone often called a spiritual director, though a better title might be spiritual companion or spiritual guide. Rather than directing, as in telling someone what to believe, a spiritual companion offers gentle nudges, helping a fellow believer discern a direction to take while moving across the dance floor of faith.

Even after 30+ years serving as a pastor and having gone through lots of educational experiences, I still find comfort from conversations with my own spiritual director, which enables me to serve as a spiritual director to others. It's this dancing back and forth that nurtures our faith, just as physical exercise nurtures the body.

Philip received instruction from Jesus as one of his disciples, which he then was able to pass on to someone sitting in the middle of nowhere who didn't understand what he was reading. Being confused and alone in the wilderness can be a scary place to be, and that's when Jesus invites us to find dance partners, someone who can

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help us learn the basic steps of faith, no matter how much we already know.

Buddhist writer Pema Chödrön explains in her book *The Places That Scare You* how at an early age, someone helped her understand how to face those difficult times in life:

When I was about six years old I received the essential...teaching from an old woman sitting in the sun. I was walking by her house one day feeling lonely, unloved, and mad, kicking anything I could find. Laughing, she said to me, "Little girl, don't you go letting life harden your heart." Right there, I received this pith instruction: we can let the circumstances of our lives harden us so that we become increasingly resentful and afraid, or we can let them soften us and make us kinder and more open to what scares us. We always have this choice.²

We all experience fears or struggles of one kind or another, such as an aching heart. Maybe a friend betrays you. You lose someone you love. Or you struggle with questions of faith. Chödrön explains the

¹ Hodgins, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition #372.

benefit of this aching heart that we all experience at some point in our lives:

Sometimes this broken heart gives birth to anxiety and panic, sometimes to anger, resentment, and blame. But under the hardness of that armor there is the tenderness of genuine sadness. This is our link with all those who have ever loved. This genuine heart of sadness can teach us great compassion. It can humble us when we're arrogant and soften us when we are unkind. It awakens us when we prefer to sleep and pierces through our indifference. This continual ache of the heart is a blessing that when accepted fully can be shared with all.³

Philip, a follower of Jesus, surely had gone through a lot of heartache after Jesus died, and yet, he could still teach someone that even when Jesus suffered, God could bring new possibilities out of the struggle. I think that's something we all need to hear, so grab your dancing shoes and guide the steps of someone searching for a dance partner.

² Chödrön, Pema. *The Places That Scare You* (Shambhala Classics) (p. 13). Shambhala. Kindle Edition.

³ Chödrön, p. 14.