

Easter 5-B  
5/2/21 CTK

*John 15:1-8; Acts 8:26-40*

*Grace and peace to you from God our Father, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Today's first reading is from the Book of Acts, which we sometimes call Acts of the Apostles but I think a better name is Acts of the Holy Spirit. After all, it's the Spirit who drives the action in the Book of Acts throughout the whole book. Beginning with the Spirit's dramatic entrance on the Day of Pentecost, blowing through the house and setting tongues of fire on the apostles, all the way to the last chapter, when Paul in his old age, in the city of Rome, his life and ministry winding down, channels the Holy Spirit speaking through the prophet Isaiah.

And in everything in between. When Peter converts thousands of people at a time, we see it's because he has been filled with the Holy Spirit. It's not him, it's the Spirit. Just the same as when we do mission today: it's the Spirit at work in us. When Paul and Timothy on Paul's second missionary journey are almost ready to enter Asia they stop short and go a different way because the Spirit tells them to.

In the very first chapter Jesus promises the disciples that he will send the Spirit to give them power to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth. That's what happens in the book of Acts. But here's the really important part: the story isn't over. The Spirit is still filling the church with the power to be Jesus' witnesses, here in Lower Richland, throughout Columbia, in South Carolina and to the ends of the earth.

Today we hear once again the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip, you remember, was one of the deacons appointed by the apostles to do housekeeping chores, serve meals and so on in the church at Jerusalem while the main apostles were doing the preaching and teaching. This at a time remember when the church consisted, basically, of Jews in the city of Jerusalem. This is the very beginnings. But now the Spirit is ready to spread out chooses Philip to take the good news outside the box. An angel of the Lord, sends Philip out of Jerusalem out into the wilderness on road to Gaza, to meet there an Ethiopian eunuch, on his way home from worship in the temple.

Now a word about eunuchs. Eunuchs were a special kind of a category of people in ancient times, in Jesus' own day and the OT days. In the strictest sense they were

men who had no reproductive organs. As Jesus himself says in Matthew's gospel, some eunuchs were born that way, some were made eunuchs by others, some by themselves and some were simply people who had chosen not to make babies – to be celibate. Some scholars think that the word eunuch in scripture is a very general term for people who didn't fit into the usual categories of maleness. In other words, people who today might describe themselves as non-binary, queer or just generally LGBTQ.

We see in the book of Deuteronomy that eunuchs were religious outcasts in early Judaism. Leviticus puts eunuchs in the same class as the blind, the lame, people with blemishes; people who also were considered to be unclean in some way and unworthy to be part of the worship community for some reason. But that seems to have changed by Jesus' time and of course, Jesus himself welcomed everybody. He loved outcasts. The only people Jesus had an issue with were the people who wanted to exclude others.

So Philip meets the eunuch, who is riding along in his chariot on his way back to Ethiopia reading Hebrew scripture. He's clearly a seeker, probably a so-called God Fearer; a Gentile who loved Yahweh and would stand in the outer reaches of the temple to worship. The Spirit was very interested in Gentiles in the book of Acts and this man is a Gentile, as well as a eunuch and a Black African. Really outside the box. Perfect because so much of Acts is about the church having to overcome its resistance who aren't like them.

Philip tells the eunuch about Jesus, whom he says Isaiah prophesied about, and the Ethiopian eunuch is hooked. He wants to be baptized right now. Insists on it. Here's water, he says, what's to keep me from being baptized. Let's do this. So they do it. The Ethiopian eunuch is filled with the Holy Spirit in his baptism and goes home rejoicing. Philip and then is whisked off once again by you know who to year another Gentile area, Azotus near Caesarea to continue breaking down barriers. Or dividing walls as it says in the book of Ephesian.

This is Jesus' wish for the church, as we see in our gospel reading today – unity. Our gospel reading today is a snippet of a long passage in which Jesus is saying goodbye to his disciples and talks directly about his wish for the world - his wish for love, and unity after he is gone. Unity with God and one another. He uses another one of the I Am statements we've been talking about: I am the vine, you are the branches. In other words we are all connected to one another and to God. We can't be one with God without being one with one another. No exceptions. First John says that if a person does not love their brother or sister, they cannot

love God. That means everybody, even the most annoying among us. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer pointed out, part of what it means to take up our cross and follow Jesus is to bear one another's burdens too.

And the Spirit is still at work in the church and the world. The story is still being written. And we are making progress. I read this week about a poll by The Public Religion Research Institute that said 76% of Americans favor laws that protect LGBTQ people from discrimination in jobs, housing and public accommodations. Even among Christians, 60% of the people polled favor full inclusion. The Spirit is still at work to overcome our resistance. And I am sure it can be frustrating to God with so much to work for us to do in the world that denominations continue to struggle and even have schisms over whether or not to accept the "eunuchs" of our day as full partners in the gospel.

Thanks be to God, the Spirit is still at work in us to uplift us. The Acts of the Holy Spirit are still going on, gathering God's children in the Spirit's tether. And that is very good news for us because it means that you and I are gathered too.

*And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.*