

The Fifth Sunday of Easter  
April 29, 2018  
Acts 8:26-40

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### **Beloved Community**

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I returned from time away following Easter, I discovered in my email a note from our synodical bishop, Bill Gafkjen. In that letter, he invites St. Thomas to be part of a pilot project addressing racism in partnered Lutheran and Episcopal congregations. We are asked to be one of six such dyads, joining with Trinity Episcopal Church to engage conversations under the rubric of the “Beloved Community Story Sharing Campaign.” We will discuss this further at today’s congregational meeting, but it led me to move away from the gospel reading this morning and to embrace the story from Acts for our reflections on the Word.

This story of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch offers itself to us as a corrective to our often Euro-centric views of Christianity and as a challenge the sin of racism that continues to afflict us. Note here that this conversion is of an Ethiopian—an African. The story appears to be the first dealing with the spread of Christianity beyond the Jews. The promise in Acts 1:8 was "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." That promise finds fulfillment in this eighth chapter of Acts.

This is the first evidence of the conversion of someone beyond Israel in Luke's writings. And, as is so often the case in scripture, stereotypes and prejudices are challenged with this remarkable story—both for the people of ancient Palestine and for us. This man had at least three strikes against him. He was an Ethiopian, seen by these ancient Israelites who had only very limited opportunity for travel, as foreign in the extreme. Also, he was a highly placed official in the court of a foreign land; in addition to his position, he served not a king but a queen, Candace. This would have been extremely odd in a country as profoundly patriarchal as was Israel. And finally, he was in Jerusalem to worship. How odd to receive an African man into the courts of the Temple. And if the word translated eunuch here is accurately rendered, he could not have been fully received into the Jewish faith because of Deuteronomic law preventing eunuchs from being admitted to the assembly (23:1).

Interestingly, and Luke could not have anticipated this, his story also challenges our predispositions. This story of the first Gentile conversion suggests that we revise Euro-centric sense of the church. A Black man was the first non-Jew baptized as a Christian. Perhaps not surprisingly in a culture that continues still to live with the sin of racism, I don't remember anyone mentioning that fact in all of my Sunday School lessons as a child. In fact, by the time I was confirmed I was only peripherally aware that Jesus was a Jew.

There is no way to be certain whether the baptism of Cornelius by Peter in Acts 10 and 11 or that of the Ethiopian eunuch by Philip came first in the movement of the church out from Israel. In either case, the Word of God began its spread across three continents in its very early days, well before the death of the apostles.

The church continues its struggle to broaden both the reach of the gospel and the minds of those involved in the enterprise. It is a continuing source of concern for me that our Church is not more representative of the diversity of peoples. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is among the least racially diverse denominations in the United States. We are 98% White! We are a middle class and a White church, and I wonder, even after having served a congregation in Gary that continues to be nearly 50/50 Black and White, whether our church or our nation will ever learn the lesson that Philip seemed to know immediately by the power of the Spirit. There is no indication in the text that he gave the slightest hint of hesitation when he had the opportunity to witness to the Ethiopian. Though some prejudice may be implied in the story, since this man is the only person in the story who is unnamed.

“Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah.” There appears to be no hesitation on the part of Philip; indeed he seems eager. He ran. He felt urgently the need to share his good news, regardless of the state or circumstance of the recipient. The more I read the story, the more amazing this simple event becomes.

At the risk of being less than politically correct, even as I preach about inclusion, I want to offer what I hope will be seen as a light way of confronting us with our prejudices.

Do you know the difference between heaven and hell? Heaven is where the cooks are French, the police are English, the mechanics are German, the lovers are Italian, and everything is organized by the Swiss. Hell is where the English are the cooks, the Germans are the police, the French are the mechanics, the Swiss are the lovers, and everything is organized by the Italians.

That joke does reveal our Euro-centric views. Substitute the names of African nations, and we would be hard pressed to make any sense of it.

The church ought to be the place where people from all diverse tribes and nations are affirmed in their magnificent variety, with their particular gifts and cultures—their actual gifts, not their presumed ones. The church ought to be a community where people can be what they are, and do what they do best. The church is the body of Christ, held together by the gospel and the Spirit of God.

It is in the Spirit that we find the power to accomplish what has been so difficult for the church. It is the Spirit that gives us, as it did Philip, the power and the motivation to overcome our prejudices. It is the Spirit that makes us one.

Interestingly, both of the stories of the proclamation of the gospel beyond Israel are clear that the initiative was not that of Peter or Philip. It was the spirit of God that motivated them. In the story this morning, it is evident from the beginning that the Lord is behind the scenes, preparing the way for the gospel. "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." And again, at the end of the story, the spirit is still at work: "When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing."

The Spirit, God's counselor, is the author and source of our proclamation and the power for overcoming racism. When we try to rely on our own power, our own strength, our own spirit, especially given our prejudices, we are bound to fail. Too many of our stereotypes and too much of fears and sins enter in.

The Holy Spirit dwells both within us and among us. The church is a community of faith, a communion of witnesses, a collective of love. That is why the proposed process involves sharing our stories in the context of beloved community. Alone we are incapable of being vital witnesses to God's inclusive redeeming acts through Jesus Christ. We are hampered by our prejudices, our tentativeness, and our fears. With the Spirit, we can do what seems impossible. The story of Philip or of Peter is adequate to demonstrate that fact. But there are other equally compelling witnesses.

- Alone, Abraham could not see beyond the boundaries of one small valley. With the Spirit he could envision the promise of an entirely new land.
- Alone, Moses was confined to chasing his herds in the wilderness. With the Spirit, he led the Hebrew nation to freedom.
- Alone, David couldn't imagine being other than a simple shepherd. With the Spirit, he became the king of all Israel.
- Alone, Joshua felt the new weight of leadership heavy on his shoulders. With the Spirit, he used that weight to knock down walls and take entire cities.
- Alone, John the Baptist was an outcast and a misfit. With the Spirit, he was a prophet and a visionary, the one who prepared the way of our Lord.
- Alone, Mary was insignificant and lowly. With the Spirit, she was the bearer of the greatest gift God has ever given.
- Alone, Peter hid in the high priest's courtyard. With the spirit, he stood in the temple and preached with confidence.

- Alone, Paul was filled with pride and rage. With the Spirit, he was filled with love and peace enough to become not a persecutor of Christians but the greatest of Christian missionaries.

Although little known in American churches, St. Lawrence has been sculpted, painted and crafted in bronze or stained glass more often than almost any other saint of the Christian Church. In England alone, more than 250 churches are named for him, as are six in Rome.

St. Lawrence was martyred in 258 A.D. But we remember him, not for his martyrdom, but for his being Archdeacon of Rome. His responsibilities included maintaining the sacred vessels of the small, struggling church and distributing alms to the poor. While he was Archdeacon, the Governor of Rome took Pope Sixtus captive and demanded, "Where is the treasure of the church?" The Pope would not tell, and they tortured him to death. But in his agony, Pope Sixtus somehow mentioned the name of Archdeacon Lawrence. They took Lawrence captive.

"Where is the treasure of the Church?" they demanded, threatening with the same fate that befell the Pope. Lawrence replied, "I cannot get it for you instantaneously; but if you give me three days, I will give you the treasure." The Governor agreed. Lawrence left.

Three days later he walked into the Governor's courtyard followed by a great flood of people. The Governor walked out onto his balcony and said, "Where is the treasure of your church?" Lawrence stepped forward and pointed to the crowd that accompanied him—the lame, the blind, the deaf, the poor, and the outcast of society—and said, "Here are the treasures of the Christian church."

The holy word that comes to us from Acts this morning bids us to recognize the true treasure of the church—its extremely diverse and individually gifted people, regardless of their race, position, or any other circumstance of their being. It is a word that continues to challenge the individual, the church, and our world. It will continue to be a matter for our growth in grace.

Perhaps this story from Acts, with its depiction of an unhesitating Philip and its assertion of the power of the Holy Spirit may give us both hope and guidance. May its witness and openness to the Spirit inspire us to full and open hearts, welcoming all people in the fellowship of Christ and working to overcome all vestiges of racism and prejudice. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.