

Easter 5 April 28, 2024

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, as we hear your word of love proclaimed today, may we be strengthened to follow in Jesus' Way of Love, sharing that love freely with all. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

I particularly like the story from Acts that Tess just read for us, but hearing it again this year I cannot but hear that this story, as lovely as it is, it takes place in Gaza, bringing to mind all the tragic suffering and death that now characterizes Gaza. In Philip's time, we are told this was a wilderness, and in our day it is now a site of untold destruction, largely reduced to rubble, and the site of the tremendous, unimaginable evil delivered mostly on the innocent civilian population of over two million people. So before I go any further in this sermon, once again I reiterate my daily prayers for an immediate ceasefire, for the return of all hostages and for aid to be released to avert mass starvation, especially for the children and for the health care system to be quickly rebuilt. Holding that prayer close in our hearts today, let us cast our eyes back to Philip's day and the story we hear today: a divine word comes to this follower of Jesus, sending him to the wilderness, but no other instruction is given. Regardless, Philip encounters a high treasury official of the Ethiopian royal court, returning from worship in Jerusalem and puzzling over the prophet Isaiah; now Philip's instructions are clear, "Go over to this chariot and join it." Philip does this and hears the words of Isaiah and asks if there is understanding of Isaiah's words. And Philip uses this as an opening to tell the good news about Jesus, to open up not only understanding, but even joy and to open his soul to faith in God's goodness and love. And so the Ethiopian is baptized, the first known African to become a follower on Jesus' Way of Love, the ancient beginning of a legacy that includes St. Athanasius and stretches into our own day with Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Perhaps if that good can come out of the wilderness of Gaza so long ago, perhaps our prayers and hopes for Gaza and the people of Palestine might still stand a chance even in our own day.

What centers that story of Philip and the Ethiopian official? What is the real turning point there? To me, it is that good news about Jesus. Philip, of course, is in a unique position to tell that good news: one of the twelve followers of Jesus, but as his name indicates, although Jewish, quite probably of Hellenistic origin, with a Greek name (and recall the story in the 12th chapter of John's Gospel, when some Greeks have heard of Jesus and want to see him, it is Philip they approach with this request). But Philip hears this good news of Jesus as a Hellenistic Jew, what we might call nowadays an "intersectionality" with his perceptions and his identity formed in that unique relation, he is well equipped to speak to those outside of Judaism's mainstream, and so he preaches and baptizes many people of Samaria and even of African origin as we see in today's lesson. For Philip, I suspect, it is this unique position that gives him a strong faith and ability to proclaim this good news about Jesus: Jesus is that one who showed him that God's love knows no limits, no bounds, that God's love reaches over the small limitations of class and culture, of race and gender, that God's love tears down the walls we build between one another, just as thoroughly as the walls of Jericho come tumbling down. I suspect that for Philip, he was loved even as that Hellenistic little guy he was, maybe not born into the native Jewish people like his Galilean and Judean colleagues, but every bit as strongly loved by Jesus as any one of them. That sense of inclusion, that inclusiveness of God's love, not divided by tribe or clan, but one people together, one people on the Way of Love as Jesus has called them. No wonder Philip can be so assured and strong in his faith and proclamation when called down to the Gazan wilderness.

Philip plays a leading role in John's Gospel, which compared to the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, it is John's gospel that is the Book of Love. Jesus speaks about the depth of love and commands us to love one another as God has loved us, "For God so loved the world..." It was this early Johannine community, this early gathering of the followers of Jesus, that saw God's love as the center of our being: that God loves us and sends Jesus, the manifestation of divine love into the world that we might live. The First Letter of John makes this point over and over again: it is the love God has for us that encourages the author to write, "God is love...and those who abide in love abide in God." This is the sacred center for John in his gospel, for the community of those who see the primacy of this divine love and I believe for

Philip as well, one on the margins, yet one who is fully and completely formed in that divine love. This love is open and hopeful, looking to the horizon of God's redeeming and amazing grace, casting out fear and divisiveness. Because we are loved by God, we are called to love our friends, our beloved sisters and brothers, those who are the very face of God to us.

Coming now, today after our lovely, joyous and jam packed celebration of "Good Shepherd Sunday" last week, just as the good shepherd calls us each by name to be the shepherds of our community, here in the congregation and throughout Barre, so today in the same light, we are called to shepherd in love because the good shepherd loves us so completely and tenderly. And that love is **not** a weak or abstract thing. Although our modern science does not have the means to quantify it, this love has the power to rebuild lives, the power to feed hundreds and even thousands of people right here in Barre, day after day, this love, in its tenderness, it can reach out to to make a young child know that she is special and has great gifts to share with us all and the world. Maybe we can't touch it or smell it, but we know when this love is in the air, like a spring breeze, and it might be heartbroken at the disasters visited upon God's children, but still more than ready to pick up a shovel and a bucket and go muck out a stranger's basement, or simply to give a kind smile and a listening ear to someone in need of a little caring. This is that Way of Love to which Jesus calls us, this is the good news about Jesus that Philip shares so freely, this is the love God blesses us with and surrounds us with every single day, and when we know the depth of love, that God loves us, love you and me, then we can see this love and share it and pass it on to others. My beloved friends in Christ, in this Easter season, we gather in power of that love, in the Way of Love Jesus leads us, and we are graciously given the power of the Spirit of Love to share with our neighbors as it is freely given to us. May we be strengthened now, in our prayer, through our worship and praise, nourished by the very presence of Christ, to love as fiercely and as tenderly as we are loved. All this we ask in the name of the Risen Christ, giving thanks to God for this loving goodness and thanks to Christ for bringing this love into our lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.