

4.28.2024 Easter 5

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

“Love casts out fear”

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

Today’s readings are about abiding in God’s love. Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. Abiding in love, we are Christ’s branches reaching ever outward gathering and welcoming all people, as we bear the fruit of God’s love for this world.

Today’s readings echo Jesus’ words in last week’s gospel: “*I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also...So there will be one flock, one shepherd*” (John 10:16). Today’s reading from Acts 8 about the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch reminds us of the good shepherd who seeks out, loves, and gathers all people into one flock.

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch is significant because it is the first known account of the baptism of a black African, and in addition, it is also the first known baptism of a foreigner, a gentile, someone who was not Jewish. However, because the Ethiopian eunuch is also thought to have been a seeker in the Jewish faith the baptism of Cornelius in Acts 10 has also been put forward as the first gentile baptism. Nevertheless, the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch must have been considered significant because it occupies a crucial place in the Acts narrative prior to the conversions of both Paul (Acts 9:1-19) and Cornelius (Acts 10).

In addition, because Deuteronomy 23:1 prohibited eunuchs from entering the assembly of the Lord, the Ethiopian’s gender and identity as a eunuch prevented him from participating fully in God’s assembly. Yet the prophet Isaiah (56:3-8) also prophesied of a day when both foreigners and eunuchs would be welcomed in the house of the Lord – because God’s house was to be called “*a house of prayer for all peoples*” (Is. 56:7). The words of Jesus about gathering sheep of other folds into one flock are echoed in the words of Isaiah: “*Thus says, the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered*” (Is. 56:8). The Ethiopian eunuch’s baptism proclaims God’s welcome of all peoples.

As modern people, we really no longer have a gender-identity category for eunuchs, yet this story in Acts is profoundly relevant to our own times because foreigners and those whose gender and identity are perceived as different have not been and are still not always welcomed into the assembly of the Lord. The baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch is a reminder that ethnicity, gender, and identity were culturally normed in the Hebrew scriptures, and that through Isaiah’s

prophetic voice God promised a day when foreigners and eunuchs would also be welcomed because the house of the Lord was to be *“a house of prayer for all peoples.”*

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch is well known. He had traveled to Jerusalem to worship. Yet because of the prohibition against eunuchs entering the assembly, the Ethiopian eunuch probably worshiped from afar, perhaps outside the temple gate. In fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, the Holy Spirit sent Philip to this man, who was the treasurer of the queen of Ethiopia. Acts tells us he rode in a chariot, a sign of his wealth, power, and position in the world. When Philip met the Ethiopian eunuch, he was reading Isaiah 53 about the Suffering Servant. Philip asked him, *“Do you understand what you are reading?”* The Ethiopian eunuch replied, *“How can I, unless someone guides me?”* Philip’s question is also our question today: *“Do you understand what you are reading?”* God’s word continues to speak and reveal to us grace and hope for all people.

As they rode, Philip proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ. Seeing water alongside the road, the Ethiopian eunuch requested baptism, commanded his chariot to stop and Philip baptized him, welcoming this man who had worshiped from a distance, into Christ’s body the church. Philip welcomed a man whose body and personhood as both a foreigner and a eunuch had been rejected from God’s assembly.

Do we understand what we are reading? The Easter message is one of God’s unconditional love, that in Jesus Christ the words of Isaiah 56 are fulfilled. Jesus is the good shepherd gathering the sheep of other folds into one flock – *“a house of prayer for all peoples.”*

In today’s gospel, Jesus says, *“I am the vine; you are the branches.”* A church and its members are branches of Christ, reaching ever outward with the Easter message of God’s love for all people. This is the fruit that we are called to bear: abiding in Christ, we welcome all people into God’s house, into the fellowship of Christ’s body.

1 John writes, *“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”* The fruit we are called to bear is the abiding love of God for others, especially those who have not heard or not been welcomed into the assembly of the Lord. Early Christians didn’t only just love those who were like themselves. They loved and welcomed those who were different, the stranger, the foreigner, the outsider, because in their neighbors of differing ethnicities, genders, and identities, they knew they were welcoming members of God’s family.

Again, 1 John writes, *“We love because he first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and*

*hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.*” As a congregation, this is the fruit of love we bear each week in feeding the hungry, visiting those in need, and welcoming the stranger.

Again, 1 John writes, “*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*” More than at any other time in my memory, we live in a world that is overrun by a fear of difference. Human beings demonize sisters and brothers whom they have seen and with the same breath confess their love of the God whom they have not seen. Fear and hatred paralyze humanity from doing the good it knows it should do. Fear of difference robs human beings of the courage to love others. God’s perfect love casts out fear. Those who trade in fear and hate, and those who spread fear do not know love, and do not know God, for God is love.

Philip’s question is also ours as we seek to live out God’s word: “*Do you understand what you are reading?*” The gospel of Jesus Christ spread across the ancient world because Christians understood its message. Cultural, ethnic, national, gender, and religious difference were engaged with dialogue and welcomed with love, forgiveness, and acceptance.

The baptismal text, Galatians 3:27-28, says it well: “*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*” In the waters of holy baptism, what the world says regarding who you are ethnically, sexually, or culturally is loved and accepted by the God who welcomes each of us as beloved children. Jesus, the good shepherd, gathers all nations and peoples into one flock.

As Easter people, we rejoice in the words, “I know that my Redeemer lives.” He lives to bind us together with bonds of love that cannot be broken by fear. *Perfect love casts out fear.*

Welcome one another as Jesus Christ has welcomed you.

Welcome all people to the glory of God. Amen.