

“Do You Really Understand?”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 10, 2009

5th Sunday of Easter – Mother’s Day

Psalm 22:25-31

Rev. John Wahl

Acts 8:26-38

Although Mother’s Day is not an official Christian holiday, preachers learn early that it’s not one to be overlooked. It’s both important and appropriate to recognize and honor the endless contributions of mothers, grandmothers, caregivers, surrogates and women of faith. On this day, we thank them for their role in our individual families and in this collective family – the church. And so, we give our moms cards of thanks and gifts of appreciation and maybe even a brief, one-day respite from their typical tasks and responsibilities.

We all realize, though, that the contributions of mothers have been anything but everyday and ordinary. Without them, of course, we would not be here. Each one of us should rightfully celebrate two Mothers’ Days: this one on the second Sunday of May as well as our own individual birthday. After all, the only thing we, as children, did on the day we were born was show up; our mothers did all the work.¹

But, no matter how we honor and appreciate the mothers in our midst, whether with cards or brunch or flowers or poems, the primary purpose for this Sabbath gathering is still the worship of God the Father and proclamation of our faith in Jesus the Son. This is God’s family gathering: bringing together God’s beloved and chosen sons and daughters; those who love God and take care of one another. This is the place where we remember God’s love of Jesus and Christ’s love for us expressed through selfless giving. This is the place where we come to know the love of Christ which can only be understood when we realize it is like the love found within a family: between parents and their children, between fellow daughters and sons of that same loving parent.

Granted, though, our understanding of family is limited by our experiences and the people with whom we have shared trust and love. Beyond that circle – no matter how large or small ours may be – there are others: people who lay beyond the boundaries of our comfort zone and lived experience. It used to be in ancient times that the distance was the primary determinant: someone who lived far away likely would look different, sound different, have a different religion and customs and practices. These days, with

¹ As quoted by John Buchanan, “God’s Extended Family” in *The Christian Century*, May 16, 2006.

improved modes of travel, communication and greater migration, there is a blending of backgrounds, race and religion and a gradual blurring of the traditional dividing lines. Who are the others that we have yet to encounter, acknowledge or accept? How might they fit within God's vision for the church as the good news is shared in every nation in every corner of the world?

This morning's story from Acts – about Phillip's life-changing conversation with the Ethiopian eunuch, serves as an important step in the communication of the gospel to an ever-widening audience; and the growth of the church to new and unexpected people and places. Our curiosity leads us to wonder who was this African (Gentile) God-fearer, why had he come to Jerusalem, what was he seeking, how well could he have known the scriptures, and what did Phillip have to offer him that he could not find anywhere else?

Yet, this story is – at its root – an example of the good news being offered to a widening circle of people, and therefore the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. It is also a continuation of a process which Jesus began of engaging people in the world who have been excluded or forgotten. Here, the good news is offered to a foreigner: someone who looked, thought, and acted in a way different than most early Christians. He may be just one individual, but he represents many who will soon join this movement that will continue to push the boundaries of acceptance outward.

What do we know about this Ethiopian man on the road? We know that he comes from far away, and that he is travelling to Jerusalem not on official business but out of his own religious curiosity. Among Jews, he would be known as a God-fearer: a gentile who has chosen to observe at least some of the Jewish Laws, though still not considered a part of the Twelve tribes of the nation of Israel.

We also know that he is not destitute. He is treasurer of the queen's finances and rides away from Jerusalem in a chariot. He was also wealthy or influential enough to have his own copy of the Old Testament scriptures which he was taking back home with him. One amazing part of this story is the Ethiopian's willingness to invite Phillip – who was not of the same financial status and was walking along the dirt road – to take a seat next to him in the chariot.

But, it is obvious from the text that the author wants us to know this Ethiopian is a eunuch, for it is mentioned five times in this short story. As a servant to the queen, he probably had been castrated as a young child – as many were – in order to assure they would be trustworthy attendants to female royalty. According to Old Testament regulations, these eunuchs were not eligible for full inclusion in the Jewish faith, and this

man most likely had not been allowed to enter the Temple during his recent visit to Jerusalem.

On his way home, the Ethiopian was reading from the Prophet Isaiah – during the part we refer to as the Song of the Suffering Servant: the one who is humiliated, rejected and finally led to slaughter. If he had skipped ahead a couple of chapters, he would have found the prophet writing about the future time when God “gathers the outcasts of Israel,” (56:8) “the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,” (56:6) “for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” (56:7)

The Ethiopian had faced rejection at the gates of the Temple; having been told that because of where he came from and what had been done to him he was not eligible to be a member of God’s family. And yet, he holds in his hands the very promise that he is acceptable in God’s sight; that he has been chosen to be a part of God’s family. But, the scrolls of the Old Testament are like a locked treasure, because he does not yet know Jesus Christ and understand him as the fulfillment of God’s holy and eternal purpose. He has not yet been taught that God shows no partiality to Jews over gentiles; or to royalty over servants; or to unscarred persons over the broken. In Christ, Paul says, there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female. All are beloved in the eyes of God.

Although it may not seem like the most tactful of questions, Phillip confronts the Ethiopian man, saying, *Do you understand what you are reading?*(8:30) *How can I?* comes the response, *How can I, unless someone guides me?* (8:31) “Notice that Phillip does not question or condemn the eunuch’s social status, national affiliation, ethnicity, gender or physical condition...Phillip simply teaches that prophecies in Isaiah have been revealed and fulfilled in Jesus.”²

Phillip, this follower of Jesus who had been elected deacon, served the poor and then suddenly visited by an angel and carried away by the Spirit, did not let the surprising circumstances around him change his faith. First among the Samaritans and now in the midst of this wealthy Ethiopian servant, Phillip proclaimed that the good news of Jesus Christ was for everyone, not only for a selected or qualified few.

Over the centuries following Phillip’s encounter with the Ethiopian, the church has not always been a place of radical inclusion. In too many times and circumstances, the church has put forward layers of tests and standards that impede the way to inclusion. Social status, nationality, gender, physical deformity; these factors have – whether

² Karen Baker-Fletcher in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 2

formally or informally – blocked the path of many who have desired to know Christ and the serve the church.

What is to prevent me from being baptized? (8:37) asked the eunuch. In hearing this request, Phillip paid attention not to the many reasons why the Ethiopian might not have been accepted – wrong nation, wrong job, imperfect body – but “heard the voice of the Holy Spirit speak a different answer to the man’s question.”³ “Absolutely nothing,” the Spirit would have told Phillip. And so the chariot stopped and they got down and he was baptized. And another person who had felt humiliated and rejected was given new life in the grace of God which we find in Jesus Christ.

“Here are my mother and my brothers,” (Mark 3:34) Jesus once told the gathering of his followers; not to replace his own family, but to widen the circle of inclusion. For “whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” (3:35)

May it be so for us – on this day that we celebrate the gift of families – that we might continually seek to invite and welcome others to come and take their rightful place within the family of God. AMEN.

³ Thomas Long, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 2