

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Acts 8:26-40

²⁶ 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." (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. ³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." ³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Commentary

The Ethiopian eunuch was a spiritual pilgrim who was earnestly seeking to understand Scripture's prophecies of God's salvation. He had made the long pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship, yet because he was a Gentile and a eunuch, he was excluded by law from full participation in the very religious community whose resources could illumine his quest. Philip was one of the seven deacons chosen to assist the Twelve in their work (Acts 6:1-6). Directed by the Holy Spirit to travel south toward Gaza, Philip encountered the Ethiopian riding in his chariot and reading aloud from Isaiah 53. Philip asked the Ethiopian whether he understood what he was reading. And the man answered, "How can I, unless someone explains?" So Philip explained. Philip told the man the story of Jesus. The crisis the Ethiopian faces is exclusion

from the community of faith. So Philip's task is to clarify the membership requirements of those belonging to God in a way that redraws Israel's boundaries in order to include those who have been excluded. The Ethiopian symbolizes the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that in the last days God will gather the outcasts of Israel, including those eunuchs and foreigners (Isaiah 56). The man was reading from the 53rd chapter of Isaiah which speaks of the Suffering Servant's "humiliation." Perhaps the Ethiopian sees parallels between the Suffering Servant of the Isaiah text and his own situation as an outcast from the faith community to which he longs to belong. At the center of our passage is the man's question, "About whom does the profit say this?" That question gives Philip an opportunity to open the Scriptures to him, and explain the good news of Jesus Christ, whom the church has come to claim as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah's prophecy.

Reflection

1. The Ethiopian was not considered by the Jewish community as someone worth evangelizing because he was a eunuch and so would never be allowed in the Temple. Who are the people in our community that we have marked as "unredeemable" or "not worth the trouble?" Do we need to redraw the boundaries of "membership"?
2. Philip relied on the power of the Holy Spirit to guide his words to the Ethiopian, who then believed the gospel and was baptized. How is the Holy Spirit at work in our lives to bring unbelievers into the faith in Jesus Christ?

1 John 4:7-21

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. ¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶ So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the Day of Judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Commentary

In describing divine love, the author's style echoes that of Jesus' farewell address to his disciples, while the content of this passage focuses upon many different dimensions of love. The author's emphasis on God's initiative in love signals a critical, God-centered difference between *agapē* and romantic love or friendship or altruism. Contrary to our tendency toward the quid pro quo, God has decided in our favor apart from our ability to reciprocate, gracing us with love prior to and independent of any response we might offer, for no reason other than that love is the very nature of God knowable by human beings. For the author, love is not one thing among many that God does; *everything* that God does is loving, for God as revealed in Christ is nothing other than love. Nor is God's love abstract – love looks like Jesus, who sacrificed himself for human sin. God's love is creative. In the beginning, God breathed life into our earthly frames and God *continues* to create and to sustain in us a capacity for love that “does not ask or seek or demand...” (Karl Barth). God's creative love “makes us free for love as an action.” And, our love, generated by God's is not static; it matures in acts of obedience. Perhaps the most astonishing thing about this passage is that it exists at all. In spite of the hate that the author and his readers felt aimed at them, the author never advocates hatred in return. Instead, the author's community of faith remained focused on Jesus, remembered as one who loved and was loved.

Reflection

1. How does this passage say we learn to love? How do we know love? What is the difference between learning to love and knowing love?
2. The author says that because of God's love, we are called to live in new ways. What new ways do you think the author had in mind?

John 15:1-8

¹ "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

Commentary

The image of community that emerges from this passage is one of interrelationship, mutuality and indwelling. In a vine, branches are almost completely indistinguishable from one another; it is impossible to determine where one branch stops and another begins. All run together as they grow out of the central vine. What this vine image suggests about community, then, is

that there are no free-standing individuals in community, but branches who encircle one another completely. The fruitfulness of each individual branch depends on its relationship to the vine, nothing else. What matters for John is that each individual is rooted in Jesus and hence gives up individual status to become one of many encircling branches. At the heart of John's vine/branch metaphor is social interrelationship and corporate accountability. The community is exhorted to steadfastness in its relationship to Jesus, a steadfastness that is measured by our "fruits." To bear fruit – that is, to act in love – is rooted in Jesus' love for the community and issues in the community's embrace of that love as the central commandment of its own life. Each individual branch is subsumed into the communal work of bearing fruit, of living in love and so revealing itself to be one of Jesus' disciples.

Reflection

1. What kind of challenges does this view of communal life pose to our contemporary Western models of individual autonomy and privatism?
2. God holds all members of the community accountable to one standard – bearing fruit. To what kinds of norms do we try to hold members accountable? How can we build agreement on one common standard?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 22:25-31

- ²⁵ From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
- ²⁶ The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD. May your hearts live forever!
- ²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD;
**and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.**
- ²⁸ For dominion belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.
- ²⁹ **To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;**
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.
- ³⁰ **Posterity will serve him;**
future generations will be told about the Lord,
- ³¹ and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.

Closing Prayer

**Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**