

The Fifth Sunday of Easter May 3, 2015

***"DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"***

By Pastor Mary Anne Biggs

Acts 8:26-40 ~ John 15:1-8

I'm not ashamed to admit it ... I am a History channel geek. I once watched a whole series of shows about people who were alone and afraid. It was sort of like shark week for the abandoned and forgotten. One show was about Sir Wilfred Grenfell who was a medical missionary along the frozen Labrador coast in 1892. It was late winter/early spring when he received word that a young boy had developed a dangerous infection, and that he needed to come quickly. He loaded his dog sled and hitched his team and headed inland to help. He was in a hurry, so he took a short cut across an ice-covered inlet, and that's when the sled broke through and plunged beneath the water. Grenfell cut his dogs free and pulled himself upon an ice floe. He was alone with nothing but his dogs and a knife ... adrift and too far from shore to swim to safety. Soon the tide began to pull him out to sea. For two days he drifted several miles off shore with no other humans in sight. Heartbroken, he had to kill several of his dogs to make a coat. He used his shirt as a signal flag, waving it as long as his strength held out in the remote hope that someone on this sparsely populated winter shore might just look out to sea at the right moment and might just take notice.

Grenfell remained calm, but realistic. But late the next morning, though he had lost his glasses in the initial plunge and was somewhat blind from the glare of the sun on ice and water, he thought he spied the glint of an oar in the distance. Indeed, five men in a boat were risking their lives in the dangerous icy waters to rescue him. It was, to say the least, an unlikely rescue. However, a fisherman had noticed something strange far out to sea, and took the news to the one man on that stretch of the coast who had a rusty old telescope. This man searched the expanse for hours, and at last spied the lost missionary drifting on his ice floe. He alerted the people in a nearby village, who set lookout posts and began to mount a rescue. Grenfell had thought himself lost forever ... without a trace ... when all the while there were many eyes watching from the shore.

What our reading from the Book of Acts offers us today is the word that when we feel alone and lost, the eyes of God are still upon us. And God sends to us the opportunity of rescue. And one way God rescues us is with the opportunity to rescue others. The author of Acts gives us a scene with two characters out on a desert road. Who is saved and who is lost here? And who are we supposed to identify with in this story? It might not be as clear as you think.

An Ethiopian eunuch parks his chariot at a rest stop. He is on his way home after going up to Jerusalem to worship. He is a spiritual seeker. He reads the Isaiah scroll, out loud, in the custom of the day. He is a man of some wealth ... he can afford a personal copy of the scroll. He is an important man ... he is the treasurer of the Candace, as the queen of Ethiopia was called. His wealth and importance notwithstanding, he has an unsatisfied spiritual hunger ... to know God and be one of God's people. But like most of the men serving an ancient Near Eastern Queen, he has been emasculated as a protection to the royal bloodline. And that means, even though he

believes in the one true God of Israel ... even though he reads their scripture ... and takes the trouble to travel across rivers and forests and mountains and desert to worship at the one Temple of Israel's God ... he can never be a member of God's people.

You see, God's law says in Deuteronomy 23:1 that no eunuch may ever be a part of the Divine assembly. So he is out. He can never be in. The Bible tells us so! That's a hard word, "never." It is so final, so absolute. He cannot change who he is. And he cannot change God's law. Who can? Not you or me, oh no. Only God can change God's law. And that's exactly what God does.

Why does the eunuch read the Isaiah scroll? Perhaps because of the prophecy of Isaiah 56:3-7:

*Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely separate me from his people"; and do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree." For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant-- these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.*

An amazing passage ... and it was written in a time of exile ... when the prophet lived with his people among the very foreigners who had destroyed their Temple and killed so many of their people. Perhaps it was a way of saying, "We wouldn't treat you this way if you were foreigners in our land. Our God wouldn't treat you this way." The prophet foretells of a day when God will change God's own rules, accept the eunuch ... welcome the foreigner. But that day has not come, and the gatekeepers of the faith still exclude him ... so the eunuch is adrift ... alone in the desert.

The other character in this story, Philip, is a leader of the early Christian community. He has already been led by God to do some risky things. He has been forced to leave Jerusalem because of the persecution against Christians. He has gone to the Samaritans to share the gospel, and has baptized them into the new people of God. The Jews of that day did not include the Samaritans as part of their faith. An angel appears to Philip and tells him to go meet somebody on this deserted road. This follows the progression and point of Acts. The author wants to be clear that the inclusion of the Samaritans, then of a foreigner who is also a eunuch, and eventually even of the Gentiles ... is not an accident ... nor an achievement of the church ... but the intention and action of God. In fact, the church resists including these outsiders. It's against God's law. It's against the scripture. But a lot of walls are falling and God is knocking them down.

Philip goes out to the place where he is led and finds the eunuch reading the Isaiah scroll, a text about someone who suffers for the sake of others. "Do you understand what you are reading?" he asks. It's a really good question, and one we should ask of ourselves. Can we ever claim to always fully understand the scripture? This very story shows us why we can *never* dare to think we understand the Bible so well that we would exclude any people from their place among God's people. The eunuch replies: "How can I understand unless someone explains it to me?" So Philip tells the eunuch about Jesus, the Messiah, and what God has done through him.

Then comes the critical moment, and the eunuch has a question of his own. "Look, here is some water. What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Isn't that a great question? I mean, usually, what prevents people from being baptized is their own fear or embarrassment or doubt... their fear of being wrong ... embarrassment about the public declaration of faith they might not live up to ... and doubt, not only about God, but about themselves. Can they live up to such a high calling as being a Christian? Well, the answer is no, of course. But they can claim the grace. They can begin the journey and trust its good end to God's hands. We don't follow Jesus because we understand everything and already have a perfect faith. Like the disciples of old, we follow Jesus in order to understand. Faith and understanding grow with the journey.

Clearly in this case, though, the eunuch wants to be baptized. He's not the one preventing his baptism. He yearns to be part of the new people of God. But can he be? After all, Philip is a Jew who believes in Jesus, but he is a Jew and God's law says that the eunuch is out. We don't want ... God doesn't want ... any of his kind in the congregation.

And so it goes ... many people are prevented from being baptized ... not because they won't ... but because the church won't have them. Now I could tell you some sad stories about other churches and criticize them for excluding Christ's beloved from their community. But I'm not preaching to them. I'm preaching to you. Whom do we exclude? What state of being do we reject in God's name? What about those who have ideas different from our own? What prevents us from telling certain people the good news so they can be baptized into the grace and love of God?

Well Philip baptizes the eunuch and it sets a dangerous precedent. It changes the law of God about who's in and who's out. The tiniest hole in the dike is opened and in the very next chapter the dam breaks loose so that even a gentile, even a Roman, even a Roman soldier is included in the community of the beloved. It's scandalous ... and it's God's doing ... and it's God's will!

The eunuch is rescued in this story from his isolation, from his exclusion. But Philip and the church are rescued, too, from their narrowness ... from their self-righteous judgments ... from their misunderstanding of grace. The church was so close ... awfully close ... to being just a new version of the scribes and Pharisees' religion who appointed themselves the gatekeepers of grace deciding who's in and who's out. And sadly, a lot of the church has become just exactly that ... to the point that I want to ask them Philip's question about the Bible ... Do you understand what you are reading? Grace has no gatekeepers because grace has no gates. The only rule about grace is ... do you accept it or don't you?

We are the eunuch in this story because there is something about every one of us which would exclude us if it weren't for the radical, scandalous grace of God. And we are Philip in this story because we have been included in that limitless grace ... and to be included is to be called to share this grace with others ... to forgive as we have been forgiven ... to love as we have been loved ... to include as we have been included. Like Philip, we are called to become encouragers of faith ... to nurture and bless the spirit of everyone ... the Spirit *in* everyone we meet.

This is our mission and the old word for it is "evangelism," which means simply, sharing the good news. Don't let this word scare you. It is not the call to judge everyone and tell them they're going to hell unless they believe what you believe. It is not the call to be arrogant, intrusive, manipulative, or self-important or to target certain groups for religious extinction

through spiritual imperialism. Rather it is the call to grow in our faith by sharing our faith in word and deed ... to invite people and leave them the choice ... and to include them in the grace of Christ by including them in our own good graces. Philip learned as much as the eunuch in this encounter. He would have been less ... the church would have been less ... if this meeting had not taken place ... and if Philip had not shared the blessing he had received from God.

My friends, here is the Bible in a nutshell ... when we think we are alone, we are not. The eye of God beholds us. When we think we are lost, we are not. God reaches out to rescue us. God did this by sending someone named Jesus ... God does this still by sending someone in Jesus' name. And we are saved by grace ... by receiving it ... and by sharing it ... by being the “someone” that God sends to bless another life. You have been blessed. You are called to bless. Thanks be to God!

May we pray?

Thank you for including each of us among your children and in your family, dear God. Thank you for the people you have sent into our lives to bless us with your love and offer us the invitation to be part of the ministry of blessing in the world. So show us how to bless. We already know whom you wish us to bless - everybody, everybody, in Jesus' name. Amen.