

St James United Church

Message for April 21, 2024
Fourth Sunday of Easter



“No More Barriers” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

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

We began our worship service this morning with baptism, appropriate in the Easter season as we reflect on our sharing in Jesus’ risen life through this sacrament. Because of that, I want to focus mostly on our reading from Acts where Philip, a Christian deacon, meets an official of the queen of Ethiopia, and because of their meeting the official is baptized. The story gives us insight into what it means for us to be baptized and so to be an Easter church, a people of the resurrection, not always easy in the current realities of our world.

I name that last point confessionally. Our Acts reading is set two thousand years ago, but that era isn’t what came to me when I read the story. Instead I went to our modern context. I noted how the official was from Ethiopia, a country I link to the famine in the 1980s. I’m sure many of you remember that time, especially the songs recorded to raise funds. And though Ethiopia was never colonized by Europeans like other African nations but instead was an independent kingdom with a Christian heritage dating back to the 4th century, my perception is still influenced by the history of colonialism and the slave trade in the rest of the continent. Add to this that the official was likely Black, as a eunuch likely enslaved, that based on Christian art I tend to see Philip as white, he was likely free, and we end up with power dynamics in my conception of the story different from what the author originally intended.

So, what did he intend? Our story is set in first century Judea, a province of the Roman Empire. It is a colonial setting, but for Philip and not for the official as my first thoughts suggested. In our still colonial context, race drives our judgements, but at that time religious identity was a stronger influence. We need to think of that, along with ideas of gender, if we want to understand this story. The official oversaw the treasury, giving him power and influence, but he sought something more that in the end only Philip could give him. Likely a non-Jew drawn to Judaism, he would have found disappointment while in Jerusalem. As a eunuch he was likely castrated as a boy and so after puberty was male but looked more feminine. Trusted by monarchs because they were seen as less of a threat, these men were nevertheless viewed with suspicion as they straddled genders. When he got to Jerusalem, he would have found that he couldn’t belong as he so wanted. I’m sure he’d sought to take part in a mikvah, a ritual of conversion like baptism, but he likely didn’t even get that far, barred even from worship in the Temple. No wonder he was pondering the suffering servant in Isaiah: “In his humiliation, justice was denied him.”

It was into this situation that Phillip arrived, well suited because as a deacon he attended to the needs of widows and other people on the margins because of the judgment of others. Unlike

people who viewed the official suspiciously because he transgressed traditional boundaries, Philip just saw someone in need. As I've shared with both congregations, Jesus calls us to continue his ministry of reconciliation. and a big part of that is being like Philip. He took the time to listen to someone in pain, rejected because people only saw what he wasn't, not who he was. That is our call as well, to reach out to those of us in our community who are made to feel we aren't worthy over quite arbitrary characteristics. As Philip did that, he did something else. He helped the official see how he and Jesus were connected, both of them like the suffering servant, joined in a shared humiliation.

And because of this, the official was joined to a shared restoration. As we've pondered over this Easter season, the story of Jesus didn't end in the suffering and humiliation of the cross. The cross was transformed into the tree of life and Jesus' honour restored in his resurrection. Jesus shares this through baptism, affirming for each of us a new identity in him as siblings. Unlike what the official experienced at the Temple, in Christ there is no barrier, no boundary, just bonds shared in grace, or to use the image from our gospel, a gift of being grafted into the vine. He found that among his various identities none needed to be a marker by which he'd be excluded. In the water he'd be affirmed in the one identity he'd sought, to be included as a child of God.

And who of us doesn't seek just such an identity, especially in a world where we feel anything but. This story reminds me of an experience when I lived on the reserve. As you know, I was still a priest then and as such trained to see my being gay like I was defective in some way. As I look back, I see that as an expression of colonial power, like biases about race or gender, but then it was just a burden on my heart. Thankfully, that burden was lifted by a woman who became my elder. She knew my story and one day asked if I'd at a women's sweatlodge ceremony. "None of the men will be doorkeeper," she said. "They get spiritually overwhelmed, but you won't," she assured me. I went and she was right. For the first time in years, I felt worthy, like I belonged.

I'll be forever grateful to her for that. Again as an expression of colonialism, I was sent to teach the gospel in her community. But she was the one who taught me, showing me what Christian community looks like, as Philip did when through understanding rather than judgment he brought the official into Christ's spiritual family. And the official paid that forward, tilling the soil for a vibrant, independent church that would be the world's second oldest church in the world. We often point to Philip as a model, but we also have the official who reminds us to be as open to each other as what the Spirit prompted in Philip, and so to replace our barriers and our boundaries with bonds of love.

This teaching is ultimately the author's intent, not just for this one story but for the whole book of Acts. In a few weeks as Easter comes to a close, we'll hear an earlier story in Acts, when after the disciples receive the Spirit at Pentecost, Peter preaches how this fulfilled Joel's prophesy that the Spirit would be given to all genders and ages, to the enslaved and the free. That is the why of Christ's ministry of reconciliation, the why too of our being restored in the waters of baptism, that we be empowered like Philip and the official, to see everyone as a sibling. My first impressions of the story show we aren't there yet. But we will get there as we keep listening to the Spirit, and to each other. Amen.