

**Fifth Sunday of Easter
Year B**

Acts 8:26-40
1 John 4:7-21
John 15:1-8
Psalm 22:24-30

† † † In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I had seen him working in the store many times. He was always a friendly cashier and we mostly chit-chatted about the usual grocery store things- the lines, the crowd and the weather. That day was different. He was stocking shelves and he stopped me with a question. Are you a pastor? His question took me off-guard. After years of wondering and sometimes wandering in the wilderness, I had recently decided that ordained ministry was not my call and stopped my discernment.

During Eastertide we are reading from Acts, the story of the early Christian community living into the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is the story of “getting up and going” as the community is led by the Holy Spirit. Growing in numbers and in their understanding that God’s love is for everyone, the community doesn’t have a smooth ride. As the early Christians share the good news and lead others to join them, they are stretched and challenged. There is disagreement among the members and the leaders. They are at odds with the Empire and with the Jewish establishment. They are persecuted.

Sometimes, they believe they know where they are headed, only to have the Holy Spirit lead them somewhere unexpected. They, like Jesus, cross boundaries, showing those around them how God’s love embraces everyone. Abiding in God, acting from and through God’s love.

Philip has already been traveling before we meet him today. He was one of seven disciples designated to serve at the communal table because the distribution of food was unfair to the Greek-speaking widows. Soon after receiving that ministry, however, Philip is among the disciples who flee Jerusalem because of the persecution of Christians. He heads to Samaria, where he heals the lame and casts out demons. He also baptizes Samaritans, resulting in a visit from Peter and John.

In today’s reading, we see Philip as he leaves Samaria at the command of the Holy Spirit to “get up and go” to the wilderness. He does it without fully understanding why he is going or what he will encounter. Once there, he obeys the Spirit’s nudge to approach the chariot of a high-ranking official in the court of the queen, a eunuch. The man is wealthy and educated. He is reading a scroll of the Prophet Isaiah on his return from a trip to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple. The eunuch invites Philip into his chariot and asks for help understanding the meaning of the specific section of Isaiah he is reading. The eunuch may see himself in this passage. Eunuchs were frequently marginalized. As accomplished as he was, it was unlikely that he would

be allowed in the assembly of the Temple, perhaps one of many humiliations he suffered over his life. These two people have never met, and yet, one offers hospitality and the other accepts.

To get a full understanding of this scene, imagine a high-ranking diplomat stopping his expensive car on the streets of DC to invite a street preacher in for a Bible study. (Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and writer, suggests this modern equivalent to that scene.)¹

Through their conversation, which includes Philip's proclamation of the good news about Jesus, the eunuch is moved to ask for baptism (after noticing water). The eunuch's confidence demonstrates that he understands the Easter message as a declaration that God is bringing new possibilities to places and people that might have once seemed "far away" (2:39) to some.²

Philip, grounded in the tradition of the Torah and the prophets and transformed through the resurrection of Jesus, listens to the Holy Spirit and baptizes the eunuch. The eunuch recognizes that he is included in this community and that God's love is truly for everyone, including him. The eunuch goes on his way, rejoicing. Tradition tells us that he preached the good news of Jesus to Ethiopians, starting the Christian church there.

This encounter between Philip and the eunuch is far from a one-sided transformation. Philip, following the command of the Holy Spirit, is apparently also changed. He responds to man's request for baptism without hesitation. He abides with and so deeply anchored in, the love of God and the teachings of Jesus, that he loves unconditionally and acts in the freedom of that love. Philip goes on to continue spreading the Gospel wherever the Spirit takes him.

The day the grocery store employee stopped me, he was wearing a skirt that day and was in the process of significant change in his life. We talked, not about lines, or crowds, or the weather, and I never saw him in the store again.

This interaction was the first of a series of "unexpected" conversations that led me to "get up and go" to places I didn't expect and to step into ministries that I hadn't previously considered. Looking back, I know that the Holy Spirit was at work in each those experiences, opening me to the joy of the resurrection and nudging me to bring God's love into the world. Perhaps you have had similar experiences with the Holy Spirit leading you to new ministries.

Maybe you've been changed by working with a child in Sunday School, talking with a resident at Sleepy Hollow or students at Poe or Belvedere. Perhaps you've gone to Hurley and learned about the lives of our sisters and brothers there, while at the same time learning about yourself. I invite you to share those stories with others to help us to grow in our knowledge of God's movement in our lives as a community.

The Holy Spirit continues to move among us here at St. Alban's and in Annandale. A few weeks ago, I heard about the work of the Spirit manifested in the lives of volunteers working with refugees to help them resettle in Northern Virginia. The volunteers spoke about the profound change they themselves experience as they serve as mentors, tutors, and provide transportation assistance to people who are settled here by refugee agencies.

If the Holy Spirit is nudging you to “get up and go,” I invite you to consider joining any one of these ministries. You will work directly with people who are marginalized or who feel left behind.

These encounters can change us, moving us more deeply into relationship with God. They move us to live as God’s people, to share the good news in a world that values power and authority over love.

We love because God first loves us. We act because God acts in our lives. God’s grace transforms us and makes us ready to “get up and go.”

And in doing so, may we, as the eunuch did, find ourselves rejoicing!

AMEN!

Notes

¹ Taylor, B.B. (2008). Acts 8:26-40: Homiletical Perspective. Feasting on the Word. Year B, Vol. 2. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. p 457.

² Skinner, M. Preaching Acts in Easter (Year B). Online. Working Preacher <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5122>