

Weekly Reading – Monday, May 4, 2009

We're looking now at the texts for the fifth Sunday of Easter, May 10, 2009. It also happens to be one of the higher, high-holy days on the calendar, Mother's Day. Preachers wonder how to play that one. I usually have honored Mother's Day in prayers and announcements and not in the sermon. But then I am not very good at the flowery or sentimental. Of course, if one harkens back to the origins of Mother's Day as a peace movement you don't have to be sentimental. Good luck!

Acts 8: 26 - 40

A great deal has happened in the unfolding narrative of the Book of Acts since last week. The growth of the church in Jerusalem led (Acts 6) to expanding the leadership, adding the deacons. Philip, at the center of today's text, was one of those seven original deacons. Alongside growth in numbers the church in Jerusalem experienced growth in opposition from the powers that be. This came to a head in the stoning of another deacon, Stephen, a story related in Acts 7. Persecution does not destroy the growing church, but causes it to spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to "all the ends of the earth." Preachers might ponder the way God uses human sin for divine purposes. The wonderful story of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch fits into the emerging story of the gospel's reach to "the ends of the earth." Philip is sent by a messenger of God/ angel of the Lord/ the Spirit to an odd appointment. In other words, this assignation did not emerge from careful "strategic planning," program development or goal setting for church growth, but from Philip listening to what God wanted him to do. Out on the desert road, Philip saw the passing chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch, a court official in that neighboring land. The eunuch is, like many characters in Acts, a God-seeker. His heart is receptive. Lydia (Acts 16) is another such person). As such, the Ethiopian becomes a proto-type for all the seekers in our own culture, people in whose lives God is at work, but who need companions and community and those who come alongside them in their seeking. The eunuch has not found any of these in the established religious institutions he had just visited in Jerusalem. There he was tolerated but not welcomed, as he is both a foreigner and a "damaged" person. Philip helped this man to understand God's story, from Isaiah, that he was reading and to hear the story of Jesus. The eunuch, saw some water (interesting as they are in the desert) and said, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" This evocative and important narrative offers the church today a wonderful model for ministry to the spiritual needs of a thirsty, longing people. Philip comes alongside the eunuch in his journey, responding to his questions, taking him seriously, leading him to understanding and deeper faith. Note that the established religious institutions had only put up barriers to the man. Can the church today be Philip to the spiritual seekers whom God loves in our world? Or will the church simply put up barriers and confirm the divide between insiders and outsiders?

I John 4: 7 - 21

This passage is a treasure-trove of memorable, and remembered, verses. Verse 18: "Perfect love casts out fear." Verse 19: "We love because he first loved us." Verse 20: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars." Verse 11: "Beloved, since God

loved us so much, we also ought to love one another." There are so many Scriptural jewels here that it may be difficult to see the passage whole and not simply be dazzled by its parts. The overall theme is, however, clear: God's love for us is rightly responded to by loving one another. Easy to say, not always so easy to do! Before we rush on to specifics though, simply note that John is challenging a kind of spiritual gnosticism that transports people to another realm, the spiritual one, by saying that "No, faith and love are made real here and in real relationships with real people." For those inclined to do a Mothers Day sermon, this preaches. Being a parent remains a sacrificial vocation in a world not much inclined to support or value sacrificial vocations. Another way to frame interpretation and proclamation is to note the dynamic of gift and task. In verse 19 the gift is "he loved us," while the task is "we love." Our love for others is not in order to get someplace or to earn something. It is because we have been, by God's love and grace, brought someplace already and because we are loved wholly and deeply. As I like to say, "Salvation is all about grace ("he loved us"); ethics ("we love one another") is all about gratitude."

John 15: 1 - 8

I never really liked this passage until it became a pivot point in my own life and faith. I thought it sounded both vague and sentimental, flowery. "I am the vine, you are the branches; abide in me." Then, in course of things, and while struggling with a hard time in ministry and depression, I was praying this passage while on retreat and I heard Jesus say in a voice that wasn't at all sweet or sentimental, "I AM THE VINE; YOU ARE A BRANCH--WHAT PART OF THIS DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND?" Is that you Jesus, I wondered? Aren't you supposed to be meek and mild? Praying this passage, hearing the voice of Jesus in and through it, I was challenged and told, "Wake up!" I had been trying to do it all: be the vine, the vine-dresser and the branch. I had a smaller part: be a branch and let God work in and through you. Let Jesus be the vine. Let the Father be the vinedresser. Stay connected. Let God nourish you. Let God be God for you. Another great theme here is the organic metaphor. So often in the church we embrace and live by a mechanistic metaphor and imagine that things happen when we get all the parts and pieces in place. We get the plan put together and, as engineers, like to say "work the plan." An organic metaphor (vine and branches) says that things happen, fruit comes, on its own schedule and when the time is right. I didn't like this passage but it saved my life.