

*“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth”*

Our reading from Acts describes the scene of an Ethiopian eunuch wrestling this passage from Isaiah.

As a eunuch this Ethiopian had been shorn of his manhood. At some point in his life this man had been vulnerable and powerless to prevent what had been done to him. He had certainly transcended his early circumstances because he had risen to become a court official of the Queen of Ethiopia in charge of her entire treasury. He was a trusted official, a powerful official, a wealthy official. He was riding in a chariot, he was wealthy enough to own a scroll or scrolls – there were no cheap paperback editions in those days - and he could afford to travel to Israel from Ethiopia which was considered to be a far off and exotic land.

The eunuch had come to Jerusalem to worship so he was at the very least a Jewish sympathizer if not an actual Jew. He had come to worship, which indicates the depth of his spirituality but because of his physical condition he was considered deformed and therefore not eligible to enter the assembly, to participate fully in the civic or religious life of Israel. According to the Law the eunuch was a second class citizen. He who had much was still denied the essence of his full humanity both in reality and in practice. He was truly cut off because as a eunuch the Ethiopian could have no descendants.

Yet he was drawn to scripture and searching for hope in spite of his condition. Just a few chapters later in Isaiah God makes the promise: *To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast to 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”* (56:4-5)

God is always working in mysterious ways and in the moment when the eunuch is wrestling with scripture the Holy Spirit delivers Philip to guide him in its interpretation and to tell him the good news of God in Christ.

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It is easy to see why the early Christians thought that this passage from Isaiah, referring to a mysterious figure known as the suffering servant, was an allusion to Jesus. We are not so far from Good Friday that we can't remember reading the Passion Gospel and how Jesus allowed himself to be tried by Pilate where justice was denied him because Pilate did not find him guilty of anything but sentenced him to death anyway. Then the Romans attempted to humiliate Jesus by torture and insults, during which time he made no cry and finally they crucified him. Jesus the Paschal Lamb did not resist his fate and he offered his life for ours.

Therefore when the Ethiopian eunuch was reading this passage we can also understand why he might have possibly have identified with this mysterious figure.

In hearing the Good News the eunuch would have heard about the love of God that was made manifest in his Son, a love that we have expressed in a very poetic style in our passage from the 1st letter of John. What we hear is that God loved us. God loved us and “sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins”. Even though we can’t get out of our own way God loved us. Even though God probably knew that we were going to screw up with his Son, God became incarnate anyway. It is God’s love for us that enables us to love one another. God’s love is not a sentimental attachment, it is not fondness or affection, it is not romantic love, it is not liking or friendship, it is the very essence of what it means to exist, it is like pure creative energy, endlessly creating, redeeming, and sustaining. One way to think about the love of God is to think about the Holy Trinity and the dynamic relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that together constitute the Godhead and how that love is the energy that flows between them, an energy in which we can participate because of Jesus Christ. I can see you as precious in God’s eyes because I know myself to be precious in God’s eyes. And that creates the opportunity for there to be love between us because we are both beloved of God.

I saw something of what this means on Friday and Saturday when I was working with the participants in the Diocesan Church Development Institute, the program that I run for the Diocese. This was the weekend in which the participants present their projects, the work they have done in their home parishes based on the things that they have been taught over the last two years. The projects covered many different topics: one was about improving communication, another about creating a filing system, another about acquiring a piano, still another about doing a presentation about how to attract volunteers, and so on. All projects were geared towards helping the parishes become more effective in forming people in their baptismal identity and sending them out into the world to live out their apostolate - that individual way we have of participating the church’s mission to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. All participants submit written reports about their projects so the trainers can provide them some feedback. When I reviewed the reports I became concerned that some of them had missed some key connection points.

But the participants also had to present their projects verbally. As we listened to the participants present their work the depth of their commitment, the challenges they tackled and the knowledge and skills they had applied became apparent and I realized that they didn’t see that yet. What happened next illustrates the reciprocity of that energy that is like love. As trainers we reflected back to them and their audience what we had heard and where they had had success applying their learning and their new skills. Hearing this affirmation they began to see the work they had done in a new light and during other work sessions throughout their time together they were able to consciously apply this new learning with more confidence and more effectively. It was a great weekend and I and my other trainers have much to be thankful for and proud of.

I think that this is what we do for each other when we look at each other through the eyes of God. It’s like that moment when you pass a stranger on the street and for whatever reason choose to smile and suddenly they smile in return and for just a moment the universe is a kinder and gentler place. This is what Philip did for the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip did not see someone who was defective and could not become a follower of Jesus Christ. Philip saw a human being who yearned to know Christ. Philip knew the love of God for himself and for

anyone else who was willing to know it as well. Philip shared the Good News to reassure the Ethiopian eunuch that the promise of God was true and the Ethiopian eunuch responded to the opportunity. He finally knew himself to be an equally beloved child of God and says, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Nothing, there was nothing to prevent him from being baptized so the two of them go down into the water where Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch who then proceeds to go on his way rejoicing.

It's a great story that underscore God's love for us all and what happens when we look at the potential in everyone.

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God;"

Amen.