

The Fifth Sunday in Easter -- May 2, 2021

Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. **Amen.**

We thank you, most gracious God, for delivering us from the dominion of sin and death and welcoming us into the kingdom of your Son, We pray that, as by his death he has recalled us to life, so by his love he may raise us to eternal joys; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Hymn 685 -- Rock of Ages

Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee;
Let the water and the blood from thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure, cleanse me from its guilt and power.

Should my tears for ever flow, should my zeal no languor know,
All for sin could not atone; thou must save, and thou alone;
In my hand no price I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.

While I draw this fleeting breath, when mine eyelids close in death,
When I rise to worlds unknown and behold thee on thy throne,
Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.

A Reading from the Acts of the Apostles -- Chapter 8

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet

Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "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." The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Psalm 22

All you who fear the LORD, give God praise* All you descendants of Jacob, give God glory.

Revere the Lord, all you descendants of Israel* Give God glory, all you children of Abraham.

For the Lord has never despised* Nor scorned the poverty of the poor.

From them he has not hidden his face* But heard them whenever they cried.

You are my praise in the great assembly* My vows I will pay before those who fear you.

The poor shall eat and shall have their fill* May their hearts live on forever and ever!

All the earth shall remember and return to the Lord* All families of the nations worship before God.

They shall worship him, all the mighty of the earth* Before him shall bow all who go down to the dust.

A Reading from the First Letter of John -- Chapter 4

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Hymn 435 -- At the Name of Jesus, Every Knee Shall Bow

At the Name of Jesus every knee shall bow,
Every tongue confess him king of glory now;
'Tis the Father's pleasure we should call him Lord,
Who from the beginning was the mighty Word.

Humbled for a season, to receive a name
From the lips of sinners, unto whom he came,
Faithfully he bore it spotless to the last,
Brought it back victorious, when from death he passed;

In your hearts enthrone him; there let him subdue
All that is not holy, all that is not true:
Crown him as your captain in temptation's hour;
Let his will enfold you in its light and power.

The Holy Gospel According to John -- Chapter 15

Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

In the former seaport of Norwalk, Connecticut, there is a quirky, utterly unique grocery store called Stew Leonard's – with its own very colorful history. Started by a former milkman, it calls itself "The World's Largest Dairy Store." There is an outdoor zoo, costumed mascots, and great big enthusiastic signs all around telling you about what's on special. The gag is that everything is on special, and costs

less-per, the more you buy. The food is very high quality, but the selection and the shelving are limited – you navigate your cart amongst pallets and puppet shows that keep the kids entertained. A lot of the infrastructure – baking, cooking, even milk carton filling and sealing, is visible to the customer. You have to see it to believe it, and the institution has had its difficulties.

But one of the great things about the place is the entranceway. Everyone pushes from the parking lot past an enormous boulder -- about SmartCar size – into which is carved the declared philosophy of the store’s founder. Rule 1: “The Customer is always Right.” Rule 2: “If the Customer is ever Wrong, reread Rule 1.”

Now Stew Leonard did not coin the phrase, but that boulder is very impressive, and effective. You get the feeling they mean it. And it’s simple, clean fun that points us to the absurd persistence of human pride. Because Rule 1 already contains all the information required to get the philosophy of the founder: “Always.” It doesn’t say “Usually,” or “Mostly,” or “The Customer is to be considered right until proven otherwise,” but Always Right.

And yet, and yet... any of us who have ever been in retail, or service, or had kids, or had parents, or been married – all of us, in fact – know, that the customer is occasionally (dare I say frequently?) wrong. But there’s just no escaping the rule, much as we might want or think we deserve to.

It reminds me of the old, slightly risqué’, and thus especially favorite Sunday school song, “Rocka my soul in the bosom of Abraham (early gender equality) Rocka my soul in the bosom of Abraham... so wide, you can’t get around it, you gotta go through the door.” That’s Rule 1. There is just no escaping it. The rule is the door, and we have to go through it.

In today’s story about Philip and the Ethiopian, we have a beautiful illustration of Rule 1. It is one of Luke’s many genius stories, stories that challenge, provoke and refuse to comfort us unless we come through the door. Luke pushes our buttons. The amazing thing is that eleven hundred years after this story was composed, it still pushes the

same buttons. An Ethiopian? Don't sound like one of us. And yet, the hunger for faith in Yahweh has been alive and well in Ethiopia since the time of Solomon. That's where the Queen of Sheba came from. If this fellow was reading Torah on his way home from Jerusalem, he must have been worshipping, or at least interested in the temple there: a kindred spirit, co-religionist even, but nevertheless, not really "one of us." It's nice that this chap is interested in scripture, but he can't be a serious believer. And of course, the gender problem: A eunuch?!? Luke uses the term five or six times in the short passage, lest we forget and think that it's just a "normal" seeker Philip is meeting on the road.

That door we gotta go through can seem awfully narrow; we make it so. Every one of us wants to feel just a little bit unique and privileged, especially when it comes to our access to God. So Luke pushes buttons. Luke dares the listeners to be smug, patronizing or brief in our engagement with inquirers after faith who strike us as sketchy, dubious, probationary, different.

The wondrous parabolic twist to this story is that Philip, the supposedly fulfilled, inspired and trusted functionary of the faith is really the one who gets saved here. The Ethiopian is earnestly seeking God when the story begins, and is still doing so when we leave him. He's the one who says, "Let's get down in the river and pray." But it is Philip who is summoned and driven by the Spirit to engage in a full-on, compassionate and eager encounter with someone truly hungry, yet also unfamiliar, potentially disturbing and avoidable. Philip is hereby converted to a life of godly love and conversation that knows no bounds. After this, his mission is to all.

In Islam, there is a marvelous description of the book of deeds that constitutes a life. When anyone dies, their book is closed, except for three things, all related:

1: The righteous prayers of your children (even after you have died) are added to your book.

2: Whatever charitable works you have begun, as long as they thrive, their activities will be added to your story too.

And, 3: If you have taught someone, anyone, anything valuable, as long as these teachings are passed along, the entries in your book continue to grow.

What an amazing lens through which to consider Philip's interaction with the Ethiopian. Philip's book will continue to grow with each conversation this man has about how Jesus of Nazareth has demanded: "Love one another as I have loved you." That demand is as unmistakable as the motto, etched in stone at the World's largest dairy store. If you wonder whether it worked, check out the 8th wonder of the World, 11 Christian Churches carved out of solid rock in the 13th century in the Ethiopian city of Lalibela. It is the customer who is always right, even when (especially when) the customer is wrong. Love each other as I have loved you. Let's not kid ourselves that each other means us friends only, the members of our inner circle. By each other, Jesus means each and every other, even and especially when the others are strange, difficult or seemingly downright undeserving.

It might be a good idea for us to consider the many, ways we still resist this commandment: reserving our support, withholding our affection and trust, carefully rationing our love. It might dismay us to admit that, even in our Episcopal Church, where diversity and inclusiveness are central motifs, it sometimes looks as though what we're really saying is that we're really, really willing and eager to have anybody at all... to come do it our way.

Jesus didn't say that. Jesus said, "Love each other as I have loved you." Lay down your life so that others may live. Be humbled so that others may flourish. Be a conduit and facilitator of others' spiritual discovery, not an arbiter and sheriff of their religious behavior.

Oh, but that is a tall order! Let us thank God for the stories and the mysterious Spirit that prove to us that such an enterprise is possible, even as we are falling short. Let us give thanks for the Christ who has proven to us the reality, the certainty of love beyond our conceptions of the parameters of righteousness.

Prayers

Let us pray for the Church and for the world: Grant, Almighty God, that all who confess your name may be united in your truth, live together in your love, and reveal your glory in the world. Lord, in your mercy, ***hear our prayer.***

Guide the people of this land, and of all the nations, in the ways of justice and peace; that we may honor one another and serve the common good. Lord, in your mercy, ***hear our prayer.***

Give us all a reverence for the earth as your own creation, that we may use its resources rightly in the service of others and to your honor and glory. Lord, in your mercy, ***hear our prayer.***

Bless all whose lives are closely linked with ours, and grant that we may serve Christ in them, and love one another as you love us. Lord, in your mercy, ***hear our prayer.***

Comfort and heal all those who suffer in body, mind, or spirit; especially Latifah... are there others? Give them courage and hope in their troubles, and bring them the joy of your salvation. Lord, in your mercy, ***hear our prayer.***

We commend to your mercy all who have died, especially... that your will for them may be fulfilled. And we pray that they and we may share with all your saints in your eternal kingdom. Lord, in your mercy, ***hear our prayer.***

Gracious Creator, giver of life and health: Comfort and relieve all who are ill, recovering from surgery, in mourning or otherwise suffering this day, especially Latifah, and all those we name now, silently in our hearts or fervently with our voices. Give your power of healing to those who minister to their needs, that all for whom our prayers are offered may be strengthened in their weakness and have confidence in your loving care. ***Amen.***

Accept O Lord the fervent prayers of thy people. In the multitude of thy mercies, look with compassion upon us and all who turn to you for help; for you are gracious o lover of souls, and to you we give thanks: Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier. ***Amen.***

Hymn 450 -- All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name Vss. 1, 5 & 6

All hail the power of Jesus' Name! Let angels prostrate fall;
Bring forth the royal diadem, and crown him Lord of all!

Sinners, whose love can ne'er forget the wormwood and the gall,
Go, spread your trophies at his feet, and crown him Lord of all!

Let every kindred, every tribe, on this terrestrial ball,
To him all majesty ascribe, and crown him Lord of all!

The peace of God which passeth all understanding keep your hearts
and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of God's son our
savior Jesus Christ. And the blessing of God Almighty, Creator,
Redeemer, Sustainer inspire you this day and remain with you forever.

Amen.

Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord. ***Thanks be to God,
hallelujah, hallelujah!***