**Easter 5, Year B 4/28/24**

**Acts 8:26-40, Ps. 22:24-30, 1 Jn. 4:7-21, Jn. 15:1-8 Eliza Linley**

In this season between Easter and Pentecost the lectionary gradually turns from the Resurrection to the season of mission and the spread of the gospel. Last week’s reading about the Good Shepherd told us that Jesus has other sheep in other folds who will listen to his voice, and this week we meet one. And, while I often preach on the gospel, the really great story today is in the Book of Acts. The Ethiopian eunuch, to me, is one of the more endearing and winsome characters in Scripture. But he is for sure not who Philip was expecting. Here’s the setup: an angel appears to Philip and tells him to make his way to the wilderness road between Jerusalem and Gaza. And Philip, on foot and alone, heads out into the wilderness, where he might be set upon by wild beasts or by bandits. Nonetheless he has faith, and comes upon something totally unexpected: a handsome, exotic chariot with a driver, and in it is a passenger. Not only that, he’s reading the Book of Isaiah. Philip knew this because the man was reading out loud. Silent reading just wasn’t a thing in ancient times; everybody who could read did it out loud.

This passenger is none other than the treasurer of the wealthy nation of Ethiopia, known in ancient times for its trade in ivory, silks, gold, spices and emeralds: a man of considerable position and influence. He was literate and could read Greek. Approaching the carriage, it becomes apparent to Philip that the man in the carriage is rich, black, and queer.

We can be pretty sure Philip had never met anyone like him.We’re told that he was a eunuch. At that time, men whose families destined them for positions in a royal court involving women would sometimes be castrated

as children to avoid having children themselves who might threaten the dynasty, or just to avoid temptation in the court of their future employer, and this man worked for the queen of Ethiopia. So in one way he was extremely privileged, but, in another, he must have found it hard to fit in anywhere. He was a “God-fearer”, but not a fully-included Jew. How do we know this? Because the Law of Moses, as written in Deuteronomy, clearly states that eunuchs are expressly forbidden from entering the temple or the assembly of the Lord. Yet he was devout, loved God, he must have longed for spiritual community, and he spent a small fortune and many weeks to travel from the kingdom of Cush, in Ethiopia, to Jerusalem. What did he find there? Did they let him in? was the inner court of the temple, for Jewish men only, barred to him? Did he experience discrimination because he was black? Was he relegated to the outer court, the one where Jesus had taught, where the first Christians met, the place for the leftovers, the rest, the unclean and differently-gendered? Full of hope and expectation, he may have made it to the Court of the Gentiles, may have believed, despite his color and his transgressive gender, that he, too was created in the image of God.

But there the line was drawn. He was most probably shown the door and prevented from full inclusion in the faith of his choice. Yet he still had power, influence, and plenty of money, enough to buy a handwritten scroll of the Book of Isaiah, a prophet, (and surely this was not by accident) of hope and inclusivity. So in his take-home reading he hears, not a reinforcement of exclusion, but a song of hope from a God who “promises peace to those who are far off and those who are near”, a prophetic visionof a time when “the house of God will be called a house of prayer for all nations”.

And here comes Philip. He may know a thing or two about being an outcast. He has just been run out of Jerusalem due to the Great Persecution that has broken out against the church. So he is no longer welcome at the temple. He, too, has now been rejected and is living on the margins. And he’s just finished a preaching tour among Samaritans, another excluded group. Not only that, we’re told in the Book of Acts that he has not one but FOUR daughters who prophesy. So, clearly, the Kingdom of God with its radical inclusivity has already broken out in HIS house! Now no doubt hot and tired from the road, he trots along beside this fabulous vision of a chariot spouting the Suffering Servant passage from Isaiah, and inquires if its passenger knows what he’s reading.

Well, the treasurer is no fool. Of course he knows what he’s reading. But he is gracious. “How can I know unless someone guides me?” He invites Philip to take a load off those hot, dusty feet and to join him in the chariot, whereupon Philip gets in and expounds on Isaiah. As he does, the treasurer, who himself has experienced humiliation and injustice, might indeed wonder who the passage refers to. When Philip explains the text as a prefiguring of the coming of Christ, he must really have found it good news: here was someone who, like him, had experienced rejection from his own people, who had experienced suffering, who was acquainted with grief. But here was someone who had come to save the world from its own sinfulness; its prejudice, its inability to love. The treasurer has just found the beloved community that he wants to be a part of. No wonder he asks to be baptized. And Philip complies. And so the Holy Spirit creates a little community of outcasts on this wilderness road, a holy rolling apostolic church of reconciliation, of radical welcome, of total inclusion.

Our lectionary follows this text with First John’s mystical word salad of divine and human love, and the compelling image of Jesus as the vine and we as the branches. The metaphor of this little story points up those messages. God’s love is perfect, and perfect love casts out fear. It’s fear that makes us prey to unconscious bias, when we trust people like us and reject those who are different. Look at the history of struggle against racism we’re still engaged in today, bias against immigrants, or the internecine conflict of religion against religion. Look at the long fight for full inclusion in the church by people of color, and by the LGBTQ community. Most of the time we can’t even see our own biases.

As people who are generally included, we tend to be blind to the structures that keep others out. The angel had to take Philip out of his world and put him down in the middle of the wilderness so he could really see and come to know someone who was so much “the other”. The Ethiopian treasurer’s heart was opened, not by his riches, his power or influence, but by the fact of his rejection, his longing to be part of a beloved community. In the Bible, as in Shakespeare, change often comes about in a wilderness setting, where we’re taken away from the props that make up our familiar world.

What does it take for our eyes to be opened here and now? What is there to prevent us, as the eunuch said, from being baptized into a new awareness of God’s love, a new and more complete understanding of what it means to be the Body of Christ? What is there to prevent ANYONE from being fully included in the family of God, with all our warts included, where all can truly be accepted?

When we can say, “nothing”, then we’ve got the gist of the gospel. Then we can go on our way, rejoicing.