

Easter 5B 2015 Sermon

Acts 8:26-40 *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.

John 15:1-8 *Jesus said to his disciples, "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."*

I have been listening to an audiobook which tells about the life of St. Francis. We are all familiar with Francis' great sense of oneness with all of creation. We know of his love for animals, how he preached to the birds, befriended a wolf, and would pick up a worm from the path in case someone might step on it. But Francis didn't just experience a oneness with *animals*; he knew himself to be one with **all** of Creation, animate and inanimate. In his *Canticle*

of the Creatures, Francis speaks of Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire, and “Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.” All of Creation was Francis’ brother or sister.

Now, it is easy for us to stand back and admire -- even sentimentalize -- Francis’ deep connection with the animals, the sun, the moon. But the part of Creation with which Francis spent the **most** time was his fellow human beings, and this -- for him as for us -- proved more challenging than birds. Like all people in his day and age and in his culture, the young Francis Bernardoni found lepers repugnant. When he happened to pass by a leper, even at a distance, he would hold his nose, refuse to look at the leper, and refuse to approach the dwellings in which they lived. Then one day, resolving to follow the example and teaching of Jesus, the young Francis, upon encountering a leper on the road, dismounted from his horse and kissed the leper. Francis came to know that this leper was -- like the birds, the sun and wind and fire -- his brother. Francis knew the words of Jesus, “Whenever you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me,” and he wanted to be faithful to Jesus. (Matt. 25:40)

Francis’ ongoing conversion into an ever-growing understanding of all humans and all creation as his sisters and brothers reaches a high point when, in one of the most remarkable events in Christian history, Francis of Assisi travels to Egypt during the 5th Crusade in the year 1219 and attempts to bring peace by sharing the Gospel with a Muslim Sultan. Crossing enemy lines, Francis is brought before Sultan Malik al-Kamil, who welcomes him and listens to him. Some scholars believe that Francis stayed with the Sultan as long as three weeks, he and al-Kamil discussing together their understandings of God. Francis listened attentively to the Sultan, and the Sultan listened to Francis -- even allowing the Christian friar to preach in his court!

The Sultan was so impressed with Francis that he showered him with gifts -- only one of which Francis kept: a horn used to call the faithful Muslims to prayer. Francis used it among his brothers in calling *them* to prayer. That horn is on display in Assisi today.

We can see how closely Francis followed Jesus if we contrast **Francis’** approach to the Muslim Sultan with the reason Pope Innocent III gave for calling a Fifth Crusade. Innocent’s rationale for launching the Crusade was -- amazingly -- “love of neighbor”! Innocent wrote: “How does a man love... his neighbor as himself when, knowing that his Christian brothers in faith and in name are held by the perfidious Muslims... he does not devote himself to the task of freeing them?”

The fact that Pope Innocent only considered **Christians** to be his neighbors is in starkest contrast to Francis, who saw the Sun, Wind, and Mother Earth as his brothers and sisters, along with lepers, soldiers, popes, and Muslims. Francis saw the Sultan as a fellow child of God and found points of connection between the Sultan’s Muslim faith and Francis’ Christian faith. Despite Jesus’ clear message in his parable of the Good Samaritan (in which Jesus showed that a hated enemy is a neighbor), Pope Innocent could only see other **Christians** as his neighbors, and despite Jesus’ command to love our enemies and do good to those who persecute us, Pope Innocent III called for the slaughter of the Sarazens for a fifth time.

Francis' listening to the Sultan and the foreign leader's listening to him echoes our reading from Acts today, where, as one scholar descriptively states it, "at the intersection of race and ethnicity, the Greek gentile apostle Philip crosses paths with the black Jewish bureaucrat serving an African queendom. And God builds the beloved community through the encounter of these very different bodies. God can use them to transform the world, starting with each other, because they listen to and hear each other." (the Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney, <http://www.odysseynetworks.org/on-scripture-the-bible/preaching-reflections-on-freddie-gray-and-baltimore/>)

They listen to and hear each other.

My friends, our *failure* to listen to those who are different from us and see the other as our neighbor, after the example of Francis and the Sultan, Philip and the Ethiopian official, Jesus and the Samaritan woman, is at the heart of so many of our problems today. We all admire St. Francis when he cares for the animals, but do we even begin to understand his solidarity with all manner of people, including society's outcasts and those of other faiths and cultures? Applying what Francis teaches, we can see that those suffering from the devastating earthquakes in Nepal are our brothers and sisters. The issue of same-sex marriage which the Supreme Court is considering and which our Episcopal Church will again consider this summer involves real, live human beings – our brothers and sisters – and their deepest experiences of love and relationship. Whether we agree with them or not, have we *listened* to them and valued them as our sisters and brothers? The conflicts between black and white, rich and poor in our nation are conflicts between brothers and sisters. Do we understand that, accept that? Are we willing to listen – really listen – to those who may have a different skin color or may be of a different socio-economic status than us?

Episcopal priest and Old Testament professor Wil Gafney sees great similarities between the people of the Bible and our current cultural situation today. "We can't escape the violence in the scriptures or in the streets," she writes. "The violence imposed on the body of Jesus was neither the beginning nor the end of his story. And it was not only *his* story. His people were subject to lethal violence, whether guilty or innocent, on individual and national levels. The story of the Jewish people is one of slavery, deliverance, occupation and subjugation in times of desperation, resistance, rebellion and retaliation. Aspects of the Israelite story are shared with the poor, marginalized and oppressed in every time and place, including ours.

"Dr. [Martin Luther] King taught us that riots are the language of the unheard. Are we listening? Will we hear the voices of today's street-prophets? Or will we allow the spectacle of violence to become an excuse to turn away? The Church has listened to these stories read and preached for millennia, but have we truly heard them?" (*ibid.*)

One of Jesus' two "Great Commandments" is a quotation from Leviticus: "Love your neighbor as yourself," or in other translations, "Love your neighbor who is as yourself" or "who IS yourself". Can we understand that those suffering from the devastating effects of the earthquakes in Nepal are our neighbors, our brothers and sisters; are us? In light of the recent death of Freddie Gray while in police custody, and the deaths of other African-Americans killed by police in the past year, can you and I truly hear the message that blacks in our nation live in

fear of the police and that the desperately poor who live in run-down neighborhoods like Freddie Gray's can see no hope for their lives? My friends, I have observed how, on Facebook, for instance, so many of us shy away from even thinking about the fact that a brother human being died while in police custody, hiding, as we do, behind our moral indignation at the riots. I know this is true, because I have a strong tendency to do the same thing – to push Freddie Gray totally out of my consciousness and focus entirely on the looting and destruction of property. For to think about Freddie Gray would necessitate asking hard, uncomfortable questions about the structures of our society; while forgetting Freddie Gray and choosing to see only the looting and burning allows my ego to feel morally superior. But when I set myself above others like that, I can no longer see them as my sisters and brothers. My friends, will there ever come a time when you and I are brave enough, humble enough, obedient enough to Jesus that we will climb off our high horse and kiss the leper – and find that he is our brother?

In our Epistle today, we read, “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.” These words of Scripture are so crystal clear; and yet, do we ever put them into practice?

In a poem titled “Please Call Me by My True Names”, contemporary spiritual leader Thich Nhat Hanh, echoing the spirit of St. Francis, writes of his oneness with all creation and all sorts of people, whether they be innocent or guilty, victim or perpetrator. He writes

I am the mayfly metamorphosing in the
 surface of the river,
and I am the bird which, when spring comes,
 arrives in time to eat the mayfly.

...

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
 my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,
and I am the arms merchant, selling deadly
 weapons to Uganda.

I am the 12-year-old girl, refugee
 on a small boat,
 who throws herself into the ocean after
 being raped by a sea pirate,
and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable
 of seeing and loving.

(Emphasis mine)

My friends, none of us is wholly innocent or moral; nor is any of us wholly guilty and immoral. Each of us has been both one and the other at different times of our lives, even different hours of our day.

“I am the vine, you are the branches,” Jesus says in our Gospel. We all draw our life from the same source, the eternal Christ, whether we know him by that name or not. God’s vineyard is unfenced, our lives entwined with our neighbor. You and I **are** the Nepalese woman or man trapped under the rubble of the earthquake. You and I are Freddie Gray. You and I are the police officers in that paddy-wagon; we are the protestors and the looters; we are the shop-owners whose stores were looted or destroyed. None of these persons is anything other than you and I, entwined branches drawing our life from the same life-giving vine.

AMEN