

Devotions – November 12-18, 2017

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THE RESURRECTION AND THE OUTCASTS

Sunday, November 12, 2017

Text: John 20:11-18

“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.”

A few years ago, National Geographic published a story titled, “6 Women Scientists Who Were Snubbed Due to Sexism”. It highlighted just a handful of stories about women who made significant scientific breakthroughs that changed the world as we know it; women like Jocelyn Bell Ball, who discovered pulsars, the remnants of supernovas, only to have the Nobel Prize be awarded to Anthony Hewish, her male supervisor; or Rosalind Franklin, who discovered the structure of DNA, only to have her discovery shared without her permission and later credited to someone else. History has a long and ugly tradition of ignoring, co-opting, and outright stealing the work of women.

In the Gospel according to John, Mary Magdalene is the first to discover that the tomb of Jesus Christ is empty. She runs and tells Peter and the disciple Jesus loved, and they run to the tomb to discover the truth of her words. After they leave, Mary remains behind, and there encounters the resurrected Christ in the flesh. Amazed, frightened, and delighted, she again runs to the disciples and exclaims, “I have seen the Lord!” Mary Magdalene, without a doubt, is the very first apostle, the very first evangelist, to proclaim the good news of Jesus’ resurrection.

And yet, later that day, the disciples are still huddled in a room, scared, not believing that Jesus has indeed risen. In the Gospel according to Luke, the two disciples walking along the road to Emmaus know that the women who went to the tomb found it empty and told them so, but they don’t believe the women either. The church is not immune to discrediting and ignoring women leaders and evangelists; it wasn’t then, and it still isn’t now.

Yet it is through the women at the tomb—through Mary Magdalene—that the good news of Jesus Christ risen from the dead spreads to the end of the world. Without the faithfulness of women, without their bravery, without their fiery spirit, the church would not exist. Thanks be to God for the women!

Let us pray: *Heavenly Father, you entrusted the good news of your Son's resurrection to the faithful women at the tomb. Give us their faith, their courage, their spirit to boldly proclaim your Gospel. In the name of your Son we pray. Amen.*



Monday, November 13, 2017

Text: Acts 2:17-18

**“In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.”**

I confess to having a love/hate relationship with Peter. On the one hand, I can't stand his pompousness, his smugness, his need to be right, his brashness, his betrayal, his denial, and his utter inability to understand a word Jesus says. Even when he accidentally stumbles on the right answer, such as declaring that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, he immediately blows it and gets chastised by Jesus right back. He's probably the worst disciple of the lot—none of them really know what's going on, but Peter always thinks he knows, especially when he doesn't. Some days, I think it would be better to just put Peter in a room somewhere with a bunch of kiddie toys and not let him out until dinner.

But then you have days like Pentecost. On that day, around fifty days after Jesus' death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit fills this misfit band of losers and dunces, manifested in the appearance of fire, and they go out into the streets. And Peter, the worst of the lot, the dunciest of dunces, gives a speech that includes the above text, itself taken from the prophet Joel. Peter is on fire; Peter is alive; Peter gets it; Peter is *woke* (well, mostly).

You never know how the Holy Spirit is going to shake things up. It's easy for the church to do just what I did: to look down on people who aren't totally "in line" with what our mental image of the church should be, to believe that people like "them" could never amount to anything. What an amazing surprise it is, then, when the Holy Spirit completely and totally upends our expectations, does something new and radical, and does it through the most unlikely people!

Let us pray: *God of surprises, you took someone like Peter and made him a powerful preacher, teacher, leader, and evangelist for your Gospel. Mold us, imperfect as we are, as you see fit, to see visions, dream dreams, prophesy, and work for justice in a world just as imperfect as we are. In the name of your Son we pray. Amen.*



Tuesday, November 14, 2017

Text: Acts 8:5-8

“Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralyzed or lame were cured. So there was great joy in that city.”

Years ago, in my youth, my congregation sent me as a voting lay representative to the Metropolitan Chicago Synod Assembly. It was my first time ever attending a synod assembly. Even with an entire day ruined because the hotel we were meeting in lost power, it was an incredible experience. Workshops, plenary sessions, voting with green and orange cardboard cards, it was all exciting, and I drank it up. It opened my eyes to the existence of the church outside of the congregation, a lesson I have carried with me wherever I've served. But there's one experience at that assembly I'll always remember, and not in an altogether positive way.

Sometimes, synod assemblies have business that doesn't generate much discussion. Other times, it can generate a *lot* of discussion. Such was the latter case at this synod assembly. A resolution was brought to send financial aid to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. It was resolution to send help to our own Lutheran, Christian, brothers and sisters living in a highly contested, hotbed of violence, where they are a minority in the population. I would have expected that such a resolution would easily pass, or if there were any problems with it, it would be the amount of money sent. I was sadly mistaken.

There was considerable vocal opposition to the resolution, but it had nothing to do with how much money was going to be sent. Instead, the problem was this: the ELCJHL is almost entirely Palestinian in makeup. It didn't matter that they were Christians. It didn't matter that they were Lutherans. It didn't matter that the ELCA and the ELCJHL have an intimately close working relationship. It mattered that they were Palestinians. And because they were Palestinians, many of the voting representatives at that synod assembly opposed helping them.

The author of the Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles doesn't spend much time talking about Philip's preaching among the Samaritans. But these are the same Samaritans that were hated, reviled by the Judeans; the same Samaritans who could never be a part of God's chosen people. And yet Philip crosses those boundaries, ethnic, religious, political, to bring them the good news. It doesn't matter to Philip or God that they're the “wrong” people. Philip goes anyway.

I'm proud to report that though the discussion around the resolution at the Metro-Chicago synod assembly was tense, the resolution passed by a wide margin. God was at work that day, and every day, to tear down our prejudices and discrimination. Thanks be to God!

Let us pray: *Wall-breaking God, through Philip you expanded the reach of the good news of Christ's resurrection to a people hated as outcasts by your Chosen People. Tear down our own prejudices and*

empower us to reach out to “those people”, seek forgiveness, and grow in our shared life together. In the name of your Son we pray. Amen.



Wednesday, November 15, 2017

Text: Acts 8:26-39

“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.”

The Ethiopian figure is a curious one. He appears to be at least a God-fearer, since he's on his way back from Jerusalem and reading the prophet Isaiah. Maybe he's someone who's devoted himself to following the Judean God as best he can. But this Ethiopian can never be granted full access to Judaism or the temple—not because he's of a different ethnicity, not because he doesn't understand scripture (we'd all be in trouble if that was the case), not because he's a foreigner. It's because he's a eunuch.

Because of his sexual status, the law in Deuteronomy explicitly forbids him from ever being a full member of the assembly in temple. “His kind” were not welcome in the house of God. He is forever an outcast because of his sexual status.

That makes Philip's work that much more important. On the one hand, Philip doesn't acknowledge the Ethiopian's sexual status. But on the other, neither is his sexual status a barrier. The answer to the question, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” is a total and emphatic, “Nothing!” Not even being a eunuch, a sexual outcast, prevents the Ethiopian from receiving the full grace of God.

Church tradition says that this Ethiopian eunuch, named Simeon Bachos, returned to his home country to preach the good news of Jesus Christ that Philip had taught him. His sexual status, which once prevented him from being a full participant in his faith, is no longer a barrier to being an apostle, a leader, a preacher.

Sex and sexuality continue to be hot topics of discussion in the church. While we anticipate a clergy shortage, we still have a significant number of non-heterosexual and transgender pastors unable to find calls, as well as women and people of color. The story of the Ethiopian eunuch is a reminder and a sign of hope that we too can grow in our understanding of the gifts of all God's people, whether they are like us or not.

Let us pray: *All-encompassing God, when your people said 'no' to the Ethiopian eunuch, you said 'yes', choosing him to be an apostle to his people regardless of his sexual status. Lift up those whose sexuality and gender differ from our own, whatever that may be, and tear down the barriers that separate us, that we all may work together for the sake of your Gospel. In the name of your Son we pray. Amen.*



Thursday, November 16, 2017

Text: Acts 9:26-30

“When [Saul] had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.”

It might seem strange to include Saul in a set of devotions dedicated to stories of outcasts and those on the margins experiencing the power of the risen Christ. Saul is the poster-child for the not-outcasts. By his own words in his letter to the Philippians, “If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” He's the cream of the crop, so it were! And as a Roman citizen, he's granted an extra layer of enormous privilege, which he's not afraid to leverage.

After his experience on the road to Damascus, Saul is in a different position though. Trying to leave his former life behind, he goes to meet the disciples in Jerusalem, and is met by fear. And rightfully so! He was a zealous persecutor of the church, and they have no reason to trust him. All of a sudden, Saul finds himself on the outside looking in.

Giving up privilege is a difficult process. It's a humbling process. How wonderful it would have been for Saul if, when he went to Jerusalem, the disciples had said, “Saul, you've changed! Welcome to the club!” But that's not how it works. Saul is treated with contempt, mistrust, and suspicion, and has to earn their trust. Threats are made on his life by multiple groups and people because of his preaching. Only then,

leaving the privilege of his old life behind, is he able to fully know what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

We Christians enjoy an enormous amount of privilege in our country. This is especially true for those who are white, male, heterosexual, and cisgender. That privilege can be a powerful tool—Saul used his privilege whenever he could to advance the good news of the risen Christ—but it is also a barrier that separates the privileged from the outcast.

We don't have to have a Damascus Road experience to recognize our privilege. But will we use it to further God's mission and the spread of the good news of Jesus Christ, taking us into uncomfortable places? Or will we use it to shield ourselves from the difficulties of life experienced by those God loves?

Let us pray: God of reversals, you took Saul, a persecutor, and flipped him into one of the most important and compelling missionaries in the history of Christianity. Give us the courage to lay down our privilege and experience life "in the trenches" alongside those who need your grace the most. In the name of your Son we pray. Amen.



Friday, November 17, 2017

Text: Acts 10: 34-48

“Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.’”

“While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.”

Again we return to Peter, that lovable/hate-able, bumbling fool who experiences the power of the Holy Spirit and becomes one of the most influential leaders of the church.

Here, he has been sent to the family of a man named Cornelius, a Roman centurion, who is said to be “a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.” Cornelius, being a Roman, is obviously not a Judean. He's a Gentile, specifically not of God's chosen people. After receiving a vision from God, he sends for Peter to come and visit him.

Peter, meanwhile, has his own vision, a vision of ritually unclean animals he's commanded to eat. Peter, acting as a proper Judean for maybe the only time in the Bible, politely refuses. The Law says hes' not allowed to eat those, so he won't. In response, a voice from heaven commands, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” After visiting with Cornelius, hearing about him and his family and their visions, Peter launches into this speech, when he finally realizes that the good news of the risen Christ is indeed *also* for the Gentiles, the “unclean”, the outsiders. And just like with Philip in the Ethiopian eunuch, he finds nothing preventing them from being baptized and receiving the full grace of God. In fact, God seems so in a rush to get Peter to welcome these outsiders, they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit *before* they're baptized! God is impatient when it comes to dolling out grace...

It takes Peter and the other apostles a while to truly understand the breadth and scope of God's saving grace. Poor Peter has to be lit on fire, give speeches, and have visions before he gets it. Accepting those on the outside doesn't come easily when one spends their entire life reinforcing the separation between the in-group and the out-group. But the way I see it, if even Peter can come to this realization, then with God, nothing is impossible!

Let us pray: *Impatient God, you delighted in revealing to Peter your intentions for all people, Judean and Gentile, in-crowd and out-crowd. Delight in us as well, revealing to us the breaking down of the barriers that separate us. Come quickly Lord Jesus! In the name of your Son we pray. Amen.*



Saturday, November 18, 2017

Text: Acts 15:12-19

“The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, 'My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

“After this I will return,

and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;

from its ruins I will rebuild it,

and I will set it up,

so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—

even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.

Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago."

Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God."

Paul caused a lot of trouble when he went out to preach to the Gentiles. Even after Peter's experience with Cornelius, he and the other apostles in Jerusalem still believed that the Judean people were the only ones worthy of receiving the good news of the risen Christ. Paul's missionary journeys to the Gentiles were so scandalous that a council had to be called in Jerusalem. Ultimately James, the leader of the church, decided that yes, the Gentiles *should* be included in the church, and that the Judeans should no longer trouble them over it. Not that it would have made much of a difference to Paul—with or without Jerusalem's permission, he was going to continue his mission to those left out by the Jerusalem church.

The church has always struggled with reaching out to those on the margins, the outcasts, those left out and forgotten. Whether it was Gentiles, Romans, women, eunuchs and sexual minorities, former "enemies", people of other ethnicities and nationalities, the poor, or anyone else typically left out by society, the church has had to overcome its own prejudices to truly see and understand the radical nature of God's welcome and availability of God's grace.

It's a never-ending process of self-discernment, self-reflection, self-criticism, and yes, self-forgiveness. We'll never get it perfect. We're human beings; human beings striving for something better, something greater, but human beings nonetheless. Despite our best efforts, we'll fall short. It's important that we recognize it, work at, and forgive ourselves when we don't live up to God's expectations for us.

But the history of the church is also one of an ever-expanding tent that will not stop until it covers every people, every group, every outcast. God has worked tirelessly and impatiently to keep sewing additions to the tent so that none will be left out in the sun. And God has always used people like us—like Mary, Saul, Simeon, Peter—to do it. Through us, God rescues the outcast, the forgotten, those on the margins; and through them, God rescues us. Thanks be to God!

Let us pray: God of all people, in your eyes, none are forgotten, none are outside, none are left out. Take your vision of the church from concept to reality, from unfinished to finished project; and may your grace know no bounds, no limits, no prejudices. In the name of your Son we pray. Amen.

