

“Vision 2020: Serving”
John 15: 9-17, Acts 10:44-48
Rev. Anne Weirich, May 6, 2018

Last Sunday we heard the story about Philip studying the Isaiah scroll with an Ethiopian Eunuch - a story which ended in baptism.

I’ve always wondered what it must have been like when Philip finally made it back to Jerusalem.

All the disciples must have been filled with stories about how the Spirit was sending them here and there. Philip had been sent to the Samaritans before he ever met the Ethiopian. While he was there, he healed a lot of people - and the joy of that healing and his preaching convinced many to believe in Jesus. They were baptized.

Then Peter and John came when they heard the good news. They laid hands on the people and who then received the Holy Spirit, too.

None, perhaps, were as surprising or “outside the box” as the Ethiopian, I’d imagine. Changes like this are drastic. And they create possibilities for all kinds of things to happen. Philip didn’t get to see the Ethiopian departing in joy. So - I wonder if he approached his story to

the others with some trepidation... Or, maybe it was a kind of, “Well, you’re never going to believe what happened to me the other day, when I was minding my own business...”

Our reading from Acts today is a couple of chapters later. Peter has been preaching and teaching, healing, even raising a woman, Tabitha, from death in Lydda. Peter’s ministry was still only among the believers. But I have a feeling, he was open to more - after witnessing what happened to the Samaritans and perhaps hearing about the Ethiopian eunuch.

Just before our passage, the Spirit, an angel, a strange and powerful vision and a contingent of six from Caesarea had sent him to the home of Cornelius - a powerful Roman family. Peter wasn’t alone. He was traveling with other believers. Peter didn’t really understand the dream, the command to present himself, or any of it. But when the Roman Cornelius said he’d had an angel tell him to send for Peter, Peter leaned in and told the story of Jesus.

He started with a quote which harks back to an earlier time. “God is impartial,” Peter says. Peter isn’t saying that God is impartial to

religious or theological differences - those things are not irrelevant to God. God is impartial when it comes to God's justice and fairness in judging human beings according to their actions. (Deut. 10:17)

And God's impartiality stirred things up. This time, when Peter preached to the gathered Romans, he didn't have to lift a finger to lay hands or his voice to pray. This time the Spirit came unbidden and unbound. The gifts of the Spirit and the praise of God took hold. And the believers with Peter were astounded at what had been done by God.

Because this wasn't the case of the Spirit including a single person, traveling away to Ethiopia. These were folks who were right there - at the center of power - there to stay.

Peter, like Philip would have to go back to Jerusalem and justify the baptisms of the Roman gentiles.

What astounds me is the double conversion that happens - almost with out a word preached on both sides. Cornelius and his family converted to believers in Christ. Peter converted to a new understanding of who his brothers and sisters were.

Peter must have thought back to the vision Listen to it now.

Peter went into a trance and, “He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.’ The voice said to him again, a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

The vision, with God’s voice saying “Nothing I have created is unclean,” (Acts 10:11-14)

Nothing I have created is unclean. Nothing....

Later, when the six men came to bring Peter to Cornelius, the Spirit interpreted the vision for him saying, “go with them” and don’t “make a distinction between them and us.” (Acts 11:12)

I think that this little story from Acts teaches us what it means to love as we are loved.

So often, we show partiality. We distinguish between clean and unclean. We resist the idea that there is nothing that separates us from God and from one another.

Even though we come to this table over and over again in our lifetimes, a table which we know, shows no partiality - a table where heaven and earth meet and there is room for all who love God, who are curious about God, who wonder about God, who used to love God, who are angry with God or who don't have a concept of God are invited... we still favor some over others. We still love some more than others.

We are those who are called upon not to limit the power of the Spirit to take hold wherever and whenever and however the Spirit takes hold. And I believe that this is how we best serve one another.

I heard this great story on the news awhile back about a woman in prison...

I'm going to tell you the story - and I'm going to tell you how I felt as I heard it - because it was a story of conversion for me.

This woman was in prison for murder.

She didn't deny she was a murderer. She had murdered her husband. And was serving a life sentence - with no chance of parole. I thought, okay... so what?

In prison, the woman had started to study. First her GED. Then, a bachelor's degree in something. And I thought, okay... well GED is good - nothing wrong with that. A bachelor's degree - well I wonder who pays for that? A BA for a murderer... Okay I can go along. I know I'd be tortured without learning - maybe she's the same.

Next, the woman received a Master's Degree.

I thought, "Hold on. For someone never getting out.... I'm not so sure that seems right." I'm not proud of these thoughts, mind you - but I'll admit them.

The reporter then said something that astounded me. "Now she has started on a PhD."

Really....

The scene shifted to an interview with the woman. In my mind I was thinking, "Well, this should be good."

The woman was really slow to start talking. But she began by saying that she'd understand how people might feel about her spending her time getting degrees while in prison. What a waste, folks must think. She said, that's what I'd think if it were me. After all, I'm never getting out.

She said, "Yes - I'm not getting out. But I'm in here with a lot of younger women who did lesser crimes. And they will be getting out someday. And when they see me studying hard for something, it inspires them to try it, too. And some of them go on to get their GED's and their degrees - so when they get out, they've got something to work with - and their chances of getting out of here for good are that much better. So that's why I'm working on my PhD."

I don't know if you were converted by her story - but I sure was. I felt - and still feel - such joy for her conversion. I know God will show her all fairness in judgment - no partiality - and I'm glad to do the same.

This is a sermon about the S in the PCUSA vision 2020. The S is for Serving....

- As followers of the One who washed his disciples' feet, we listen to and serve our neighbors, working to meet their practical needs.
- We partner with others to become the hands and feet of God in the world, showing compassion and generosity to all creation.
- We venture beyond the familiar, meeting people where they are as we share Christ's transformative love.

For me, this vision of serving is contained in the final word of this understanding of service. The word LOVE.

Christ's love is transformative because it shows no partiality in the way that God shows no partiality. No thing, no one, is made unclean. Therefore, there is no separation among us, between us, in any way. The LOVE is impartial. We are met where we are. And we must meet all others where they are.

Jesus is trying to explain this to the disciples in our passage from John. Jesus is saying good bye to his friends. He knows what lies ahead - he knows he will die - just as we all know we will die. And he's offering comfort by trying to teach them how close we all become in Christ - even when he no longer can lay hands on them or sit beside them or share a meal with them.

“Your love itself will be the sign of all signs that we are acting together, living together, abiding together. Look at my intimacy with God: it’s based on my listening and embodying and abiding in God’s commandments to love, and in this way, God and I are inseparable. So - go and do likewise! Listen and embody my commandment to love, and we’ll be inseparable, too.

And here’s the point of all this: I want us to be so close that my joy is yours, so that your joy will be perfect joy, complete joy, joy in all its fullness. Isn’t that what every loving parent wants for his or her children? That’s what God wants for you! And so: even though the heavens may seem to fall over in the days ahead, as I am handed over and sent down into the valley of the shadow of death, remember this: what I want for you, and what I promise you, and what I give to you - is joy.”

<http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/5/1/love-for-the-sake-of-joy-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-6>

Sometimes serving God, serving one another, can seem like a “should,” or an “ought.” We become weary or wary. Compassion fatigue sets in. We wonder if it is worth it. Is it doing any good?

All of these questions are judgments, my friends. Qualifiers that come from our own lack of conversion to the Spirit’s ability to act - even when we think it isn’t possible, or it’s undeserved or a waste.

Jesus wants us to be converted from being this kind of servant.

Jesus wants us to become servants who act out of joy.

For some - faith is most important. For others, like myself, it is love that is most important.

But John’s Jesus seems to tell us that there is a place where faith and love abide - and that place is joy.

Remember - the Ethiopian felt it - going on his way in joy.

Peter and the others felt it in Samaria - rejoicing at the Spirit’s coming and the new believers baptized.

The Spirit showed it in Cornelius’ family - all kinds of joy shown forth in praise and tongues.

I don’t know about you - but I think I’m converted.

I think it's important to have faith, to show love, for the purpose of joy - complete joy - where we are called friends, instead of servants.

Friends are those, who like Jesus, lay down their lives for their one another without partiality.

When Jesus comforts us by asking us to keep the commandment to love, he means do nothing, and follow no command, that does not build up our neighbors in love, ourselves in love, and the world in love.

This is the service of friendship.

And when it seems hard, or when we mess up or ignore or forget, or engage in all the other ways in which we cling to our old vision of clean and unclean, we can remember that we do not serve in vain.

Because, Jesus says, you didn't choose me for this kind of service, I chose you. And my love for you is steadfast. Nothing you do can change it. I chose you, I choose you, you are being chosen. And I commission you to go and SERVE - bear fruit, fruit that will last: serving one another, works of love for the sake of joy. (Ibid.)

That's what friends do!

Amen