

**April 29, 2018 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**

**Acts 8:26-40, Psalm 22:25-31**

**Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope 1 John 4:7-21, John 15:1-8**

**Let us pray...** may the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our life blood, our hope. Amen.

**Grace and peace beloved of Christ Jesus.**

**In just a couple of weeks, this year on May 20<sup>th</sup>,** to be precise, we will celebrate Pentecost.

That's the festival when we hear again the story from the beginning of the Books of Acts where the Holy Spirit comes to the community in a rush of wind and tongues of fire,

in a cacophony of languages.

At Pentecost we dress up the church and ourselves in red praying for the Spirit's fire to make all things new.

**The first Pentecost...that is the story from the Book of Acts that we know the very best.**

The 20-some chapters of adventure that follow don't often get their due.

Maybe they are too "out there", too daring, too risky, too bold,

too much what the church *could* be like,

if only we let go of what we think the church *should* be like, and allow the Holy Spirit to do her thing.

I'd love to read the book of Acts with a group of you this summer, so nab me if that piques your curiosity.

While that story of the Spirit's arrival at Pentecost garners the attention, the whole Book of Acts, and I'd even say, our lives, are filled with little Pentecosts.

**One of those little Pentecosts** is in chapter 10, in the story about Peter and Cornelius.

In a vision, God speaks to Peter, after all those years, widening his sense of who the Gospel is for—even for Gentiles, Peter realizes in a vision!

That is precedent setting.

Peter's vision from that story in Acts opened the door.

It eased long-held limits.

It allowed the church then, and I'd say now, to follow the Holy Spirit's call in new directions.

I'm thinking of the the ELCA's vote in 2009 welcoming the leadership of those of us who are LGBTQ+.

**Today, in chapter 8,** we hear another Holy Spirit story, another little Pentecost from the Book of Acts.

Today it's the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch.

I wonder what the eunuch's name was?

All we know is that he came from the African continent, for in those ancient times Ethiopia included significant land south of Egypt.

We know there was a thriving Jewish community in that region, so it's no surprise he would travel to Jerusalem to worship. Why not?

We know that a eunuch is simply a man who has been castrated.

Society, their culture (as has happened over the centuries for sexual minorities) set them to the side.

They were seen as outsiders, non-threatening—to women, and thereby to other men—trusted outsiders: trusted with money, trusted with women, trusted with secrets, trusted with privilege, with power, relational power, religious power, civic power, like this fellow, in charge of the entire treasury for the queen of Ethiopia.

**There he is, traveling alone**, perhaps returning from a personal pilgrimage,

perhaps from well-timed court business where he just happened to be able to worship in that holy city.

On that wilderness road, bumping along in the chariot he is reading from the Hebrew scriptures.

That's when the Holy Spirit gives Philip the nudge to casually engage him about the reading.

Do you understand? Philip asks: Do you understand what you are reading?

And so begins a holy conversation about scripture, and Jesus, and the threads that knit together the Jewish tradition this man knows so well, and that just-emerging Jesus movement.

Chapter 8 says, Philip began to share with the eunuch the Good News about Jesus.

I'm curious what Good News Philip shared.

### **What would you say that good news is?**

Certainly it's about Jesus' life and death, but go farther:

I might share how that good news is for you, for me, how it's personal.

How we are claimed in that good news, named as God's beloved, forgiven and loved.

How Jesus welcomes those on the outside, those so often left out.

I could share how it counters the bad news, the painful news, the injustice all around us,

a devastating diagnosis, the honest glimpse at our mortality, uncertainty about jobs or school or money, it counters it:

tipping the scales toward love and wholeness, toward hope in this life and trust in the life to come, buoying us with the promise that we never walk alone.

I could share how in Jesus, we belong to Christ's community, to Christ's own body,

and how together in faithful community, with the Holy Spirit's power, we are able to do far more than we can ever do on our own—healing and holding, standing up to sin and evil in ourselves and all around us.

This week I've listened to more than a few of you reflect just how hard it is to keep going, to keep believing, when the world feels to be in a dire place.

The good news is that when it is all simply too much, then, especially then, we abide, we rest, with God.

**We don't know what precisely** Philip said to the eunuch that day on the wilderness road,  
but we do know what comes next.

**What is to prevent me from being baptized?** The eunuch asks, What is to prevent me?

That's a good Holy Spirit question: What is to prevent me?

Apparently nothing, for they stopped right then and there and he was baptized!

We are so often wired to look for the limits, the boundaries, that rule or guideline or social norm that will  
keep us from going too far.

Sometimes I wonder, though, if it isn't the Holy Spirit bidding us to follow.

**What is to prevent me?**

**Last Sunday Matt Fry was assigned as our lector, our reader, in church.**

Recognizing that in his family they speak both Spanish and English,

fully aware of our life as a Sanctuary congregation,

Matt choose to read the lessons not only in English, but also in Spanish.

I am sure some where confused and others pleased.

For me, as one who in most setting in these parts hears the scripture read first or only in my own mother  
tongue, what is to prevent someone else from hearing it in their mother tongue?

Nothing, nothing is to prevent us but our own self-imposed limits.

Perhaps it's the Holy Spirit bringing us beyond ourselves to the place where we need to be.

**Just yesterday** some of you began work on our new bread oven in the north parking lot.

After worship today we'll go outside for a little ground breaking, bread breaking and a blessing.

Two years ago, in the span of a few of weeks, three or four of you independently came to me on fire about  
building a bread oven here at the church.

Bread is biblical, it's sacramental, it draws us together.

It addresses the hunger in our bellies, for food-insecurity is real right here, right in our neighborhood, and  
it addresses the hunger in our souls, hunger for community, for belonging, for something holy and real.

**What is to prevent us, they asked...and just take a look at our parking lot now!**

The Holy Spirit is at work.

**What is to prevent us? We could ask that question all day every day.**

Today's other readings offer guidance as we discern the Spirit's call, as we answer that question.

In the Gospel Jesus says, "I am the Vine, you are the branches."

That's a good indicator to help us in our discernment.

What is to prevent me?

Will this cut me off from the vine?

Will it cut someone else off from the vine?

From our roots, our core?

Or will it help me abide? Will it help another abide?

And similarly, from 1<sup>st</sup> John, is it born out of love, active love, love for our neighbors and those around us?

These questions guide us, freeing us to follow the Holy Spirit **and** at once tethering us to vine.

### **What is to prevent me....**

What is to prevent us from believing that we are God's beloved, and so is my neighbor and the outsider?

What is to prevent us from trusting that we have enough and that God will care for us, always?

What is to prevent us from sharing what is tender and real and even raw in our lives.

What is to prevent us from trying that new thing?

What is to prevent us from valuing health and sobriety and rest?

What is to prevent us from naming the Good News that we experience that we witness.

What is to prevent us from speaking our truth in courage, even when it scares us?

What is to prevent us from reaching across the aisle or the fence or the table?

What is to prevent us from trusting that God is calling us, even us, into community?

### **Dear friends in Christ, the eunuch asked, what is to prevent me from being baptized?**

How do you finish that question: What is to prevent me...

How are you at risk of holding yourself back from the Spirit's call? (pause)

And how are you abiding with Jesus? (pause)

**Let us pray:** God of holy conversation and faithful action, we thank you for sending your Spirit at the first Pentecost and again today. Open us to what your Holy Spirit is doing in us—in our hearts, in our bodies, in this community, in our neighborhood. Make us bold. Let us abide in you, and you in us, this day and every day. Amen.