

Homily 5th Sunday of Easter, St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Middleburgh May 3, 2015

Acts 8:26-40 *Philip tells the Good News to an Ethiopian eunuch and baptizes him*

Psalms 150 *Praise God with strings and pipe.*

1 John 4:1-21 *Beloved, since God has loved us so much, we should love one another.*

John 15:1-8 *I am the vine, you are the branches.*

[The Gospel is the same as the one read in Catholic congregations for this Sunday, the first two readings and the Psalm are different but similar]

When I was just beginning my walk with God as an adult, I was introduced to the first Letter of John at a retreat the week before I joined the Franciscan community as a novice in 1967. It was two months after I had graduated from Siena College and this Scripture opened up a whole new world to my spirit. I had read the Bible before, but the words never lit up the way they did as I listened and read them at that time.

It could have been the Jerusalem Bible translation, one of the first translations into contemporary English [published in 1966], or it could have been that my heart was ready to really listen as I started a whole new part of my life journey. It was probably a lot of both. In any case, the passage we heard today is still revealing the teaching of Jesus to me & it still gets me excited.

The first word in the reading sums up the message. It must be important to the writer since it is repeated 3 times in the reading we heard, and 6 times in the whole letter. The word is **BELOVED**. That is how Jesus addresses us. It is how he names us. It is the same word that he hears from his Father. That is the word that the Holy Spirit puts on the pen of the one who writes to us in this letter. **Beloved!**

Can you hear Jesus say that to you? Can you hear the Father and the Spirit together speak that truth to you? Can you hear them sing it to you?

♪♪ I have loved you with an everlasting love, I have called you and you are mine! ♪♪

The rest of that passage expands the meaning of that one word, and reveals that Jesus knew jazz. He took the words of Jeremiah - the lyrics of the song I just sang [Jer. 31:3] - and improvised on them - leading to a whole new song:

♫ Love one another as I have loved you. Care for each other. I have cared for you.

Bear each other's burdens. Bind each other's wounds; and so you will know my return. ♫

I had to play and sing because the Psalm we prayed calls us to do just that - to praise God with strings and pipe!

The second time John says, "**Beloved.**" he puts those two songs together - "*Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.*" That is all we need to do. That is the whole message of Jesus about how to live our lives as his disciples. It seems very simple - and it is - but it is far from easy. How can we live that command to love one another as Jesus loves us in our own place and time?

Part of the answer is in the Scriptures we have already heard. The second reading states that *"every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God."* Notice that Scripture says that Jesus has come in the *flesh*. He has entered into relationship with the whole of creation, taking on the earthly elements that make up our bodies. And by the chemicals in his body and his very DNA, Jesus is connected with all creatures, not only human beings.

That's why the 1st letter of John and the Gospel of John use the Greek word, "*Sarx*" which means "*flesh*", rather than the Greek word for human [*anthropos*] or man [*aner*]. St. Francis got that point, and called all creatures his brothers & sisters.

We are called to love not only our human sisters & brothers, but all of creation. All creatures and the earth itself are among the "*one anothers*" that Jesus calls us to love. That has not yet happened globally or even nationally, possibly because we are not yet really conscious that **we** are part of a web of creation and that what we do *for* or to *all* creatures affects our lives and the lives of the most vulnerable. Because of greed & addiction to consumption, we do violence to one another as well as to creation itself.

The result of neglecting to love all of creation is the extinction of species, dangerous & rapid climate change and so called "natural" disasters, many of which are caused by human neglect or greed.

Another response to the question of how we can live the command of Jesus is in the Gospel passage I read: *"I am the vine, you are the branches... abide in me as I abide in you... bear fruit and become my disciples."* Jesus calls us to stay connected to the vine - and to let God prune us.

You invited me & Sr. Anna to be with you because we Catholics & Lutherans are disciples of Christ together, sharing the same baptism & the same faith in Jesus. Together we are connected to the vine. And we are connected to the same Jesus as our Methodist and Reformed brothers & sisters. [We have a history here- especially since Hurricane Irene caused so much destruction to our homes, businesses and places of worship.]

How do we *stay* connected?

We need to take time in prayer as individuals and to join with each other to worship - as we do each Sunday.

We need to celebrate our connection with Jesus and all his brothers & sisters by eating together as families, as congregations & as a community - as we do every Wednesday at the NET dinners.

And we need to let ourselves be pruned of the judgments we so easily pronounce on anyone who disagrees with us, or anyone who is different, or even on ourselves. We need to let the Lord prune us of any "*them & us*" games.

Jesus is the only judge who judges with knowledge, fairness and compassion. That is in the creed we all say we believe in - the Apostles' Creed. But we like to sit in *his* chair sometimes & play judge. The only way to really do that is to get out of his chair & let Jesus be our judge.

I would like to ask you to repeat a prayer after me. It is a simple prayer - about who is the true judge - I say it often, and regularly ask people who come to me for counsel to say it. "Jesus be my judge" [repeat] "Jesus be their judge." [repeat].

To live that prayer is the beginning of the path to living the prayer we call the Lord's Prayer - Especially the part that goes, "*forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" And sometimes the most difficult person to forgive is myself. I can too easily forget that I am one of the "one anothers" Jesus calls me to love.

And, in times of suffering and grief, we need God's help to forgive what is.

Finally, we need to learn to live in a creative tension between nurturing the love we have in the community of the church - or even the family - and reaching out to spread the Good News of God's love. This is the tension between the 2nd lesson, from 1 John and the 1st from the Acts of the Apostles - when Philip is called to share the Gospel with the Ethiopian Eunuch.

The image I think of to express this tension & all the tensions we all experience is a violin string. When it is separated from the violin, it makes little or no sound. But when it is on the violin, it can make beautiful and powerful music.

What is the difference? Tension & connection.

And not just any tension, each string has to be tuned to exactly the right degree of tension. So we must be tuned to the tension of the Gospel and connected to the vine, as Jesus tells us in the Gospel, like a string on a violin.

And Jesus sends us out to bear fruit, teaching us by his life and his words how to live day by day in the tension between being *in* the world without being *of* the world.

You are in a time of tension here at St. Mark's. You are between pastors & still discovering new ways to live and serve. That is why I am here today with Sr. Anna. You have been here before - in your history you have come through fires & floods & changes in pastors.

How can you keep your balance as you move forward? How can you always be tuned to the Gospel tension? The way to live creatively in the tension that is a part of every human and Christian life is to believe that we are loved, to stay connected to the one who loves us with an everlasting love, to see ourselves as connected to each other & to creation and to let ourselves be pruned of our pride and judgment so we can live out of our deepest true selves - made in the image of God and giving flesh to the humanity of Christ by our lives.

So I urge you to continue to reach out to spread the good news that we are loved. Continue to reach out to be a blessing to others and creation. Your food pantry, clothing closet, & Phoebe ministry are ways of following the command of Jesus to go & bear fruit. We do that by being present to each another, working with each other, feeding each other.

Let us go forth today, living the words of this song.

♪ We are many parts, we are all one body,/ and the gifts we have we are given to share.

May the Spirit of love make us One indeed.

One, the love that we share,/ one, our hope in despair, /One, the cross that we bear.

God of all, we look to you, we would be your servants true,

Let us be your love to all the world.

First Reading: Acts 8:26-40

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. 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.

Second Reading: 1 John 4:1-21

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world.

Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

We love because he first loved us. 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.

Gospel: John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. The Father removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit God 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.