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Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter  
St. Mark's on the Campus  
May 14, 2006

I WANT TO RETURN us to our first reading from the book of Acts. Our reading takes place at the point at which the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is spreading *beyond* the band of brothers and sisters that accompanied Jesus *into* the broader world. And not just to *any* world, but specifically to the non-Jewish world, to those who stood outside the covenant people in one fashion or another.

The most prevalent interpretation of this passage from Acts argues that the fact that this Ethiopian is a eunuch makes a considerable difference. That's because the book of Deuteronomy clearly states that a eunuch "will not be admitted to the assembly of Israel. (23:2)" At this stage in the story, the writer of Acts wants to emphasize that, in Jesus Christ, God is reaching *beyond* the boundaries previously understood and established by the faith community.

This Ethiopian eunuch is a court official for his queen. He has considerable responsibility in the court hierarchy; he oversees the queens' treasury.

He is returning from worshipping in Jerusalem, so he already has some connection with the God of Israel, even if he has been marginalized to the edges of the faith community because of his sexual reality.

The Holy Spirit guides Philip to talk with this man, and their conversation about Jesus leads to baptism into the community of those who follow Christ, into the community of the church, into *our* community. We can speculate that, maybe for the first time, this eunuch hears that he is whole despite his mutilation, despite the fact that he is different from the norm. Maybe for the first time, this eunuch is

understanding that being different from the majority of people can be sacred, even if it is at times filled with pain.

And perhaps this is the first time that he hears that God accepts him - without reserve, and that there is also a community which will accept him - without reserve.

And remember the passage that he is reading when Philip approaches him: that passage about the suffering servant in Isaiah, the one who is led to the slaughter and has justice denied him. Surely as someone who knew both suffering and injustice in his own story, he's connecting with the story of the suffering servant. And Philip, by connecting the story of Jesus with the story of the suffering servant, connects both to the Ethiopian - and most importantly, to the God to whom this eunuch has been lifting his heart, the God who vindicates Jesus in the end, who vindicates even suffering itself - who assures us that suffering can be more than empty and meaningless, that suffering can actually be redemptive, both in our own lives and the lives of others.

I found myself wondering what God, through this text, might be saying to us as St. Mark's on the Campus.

At its retreat in April, the Vestry placed as its priority for this community to very deliberately and very consciously turn our attention to reaching out to the college students in Lincoln. The Vestry adopted that priority based on the results of the focus groups in which many of you participated, and in which you expressed that goal as the *number one* priority for this faith community in the coming years. It's also a return to the focus of your original reason for being as a community; St. Mark's on the Campus was founded for the very purpose of outreach to the university community.

So how do *this passage* and *that mission* go together?

Let me make the following observations:

First, as we live out that call of God upon us, we – like Philip in our story from Acts – must be listening for the voice of God guiding us in our work, and then trust enough to follow that guidance. Philip is called by God to go to a wilderness road, not the most secure place he could have been called, no doubt a place of some risk. No surprise there; ministry usually does call us into places of risk of one kind or another. As the Holy Spirit rises up in our midst, out of us and through us, “to guide us into all truth,” as we pray in the Eucharistic prayer on Pentecost Sunday, you can bet that the Holy Spirit will call us into some places that will feel to us a bit risky and uncertain. And we must have the courage to follow where the Lord calls us.

Another observation:

As is so often the case with Jesus in his ministry – and with Philip in this story – in those risky places, St. Mark’s on the Campus will likely be called to serve those who most need to have *their* stories connected with *God’s* story. Sometimes it’s people to whom some of us *literally* serve green beans and lasagna at The Gathering Place each month.

But let me give you another example. Recently a couple of parishioners brought to the Welcoming and Diversity Committee letters that they had received from the GLBT Concerns Committee at the University of Nebraska, from students who are struggling with issues of difference from the majority, differences that have often left them on the margins of the faith community – and still do. People in some ways like the eunuch in our story this morning. People like the ones Jesus went out of his way to serve, with his life and with his death.

These letters were requesting support in whatever way it could be given.

With my blessing, the Welcoming and Diversity Committee promised this faith community's support in a variety of ways: first of all, making sure that we expressed clearly that everyone is welcome to worship God with us, alongside of us, as part of us; that *God* welcomes them here. Also by making our lounge space available for meetings and gatherings; by offering my leadership in spiritual teaching about scripture and sexuality, and whatever else they want to explore in their spiritual lives; by promising to have members of the community present for their meetings as often as possible; and, finally, I committed \$500 from the Rector's Discretionary Fund to the work of the Concerns Committee. I am asking the Vestry to reimburse or add to that amount so that this faith community makes a significant statement to that group, that we believe that God's love *has* no boundaries, and that they are fully included within it. As is true for us all. And, as is also true for us all, that *their* human suffering, for *whatever* reason they suffer – that suffering is known in the very life of God, and in the very heart of God. And therefore that suffering is not meaningless, but it can bring redemption and new life - for ourselves and for others.

I have two other observations about this passage and our mission. Have you noticed how scripture has been showing up all over the place in the sermons since Easter? What's that about, I wonder? Because here it is again. Right at the heart of this conversation between Philip and our Ethiopian.

Maybe the Lord is reminding us that in the life of the church today, differing understandings of scripture are dividing us, rather than the centrality of scripture for our life together drawing us together. We need to be both articulate about how we understand scripture and articulate about why it's important to us. We need to *know* how our story connects with the multitude of stories in the Bible, so we more deeply understand how our *life* connects with the life of God. A couple of weeks ago, Sidnie charged you for the summer with engaging yourselves with scripture. I

want to build on that charge and ask you to let me know what questions arise for you as you do so. And how do we need to deal with those questions so that *as a community* we can be ever more articulate and grounded in our sharing of the scriptural story with the students in Lincoln.

My final observation has to do with where that conversation between Philip and the Ethiopian leads. It leads to baptism. It leads to this eunuch becoming more deeply a part of the community of faith. His story suggests that, if we are doing the job given to us as the Body of Christ in this place with our particular mission, we'll be bringing others into this community, by baptism literally, and symbolically by returning again and again to the source of who we are. Repeatedly, God will bring us – together with those who are not yet with us – to the very font of our identity as God's children: again and again we'll return to the grace of God pouring over us and making us one – not just with each other, but with every one and every thing that the good Lord has made – because that's who *God* is one with – *every one and every thing*.

It takes a certain fortitude to be in campus ministry. People come and go in this place with regularity, and that will only increase as our student outreach increases – which means that we need to remember that people are already one with us the moment they walk through the door – not because we *choose* to make them one with us, but because they are already one with God, as we *all* are – by the gracious choice of God, whom we know and love, and who knows and loves us with an undying love, in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.