

“Good News for Cut-off Branches”

Sermon: Year B, Easter 5

Texts: Acts 8:26–40, 1 John 4:7–21

Preached: April 29, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you from the Spirit who leads us places we don't expect to go. AMEN

Many years ago, when I was in my late 20s, I was a member of a congregation in Chicago that prided itself on how welcoming it was. And indeed, it was a very warm and friendly group of people, trying hard to live out the Good News. I had immediately felt welcomed there, myself, and had become a member almost immediately because of the reception I was offered. We frequently patted ourselves on the collective back for our hospitality and inclusivity, considering it the hallmark of who we were as a congregation. Until Candace showed up one Sunday for worship. As we sat in worship that morning, you could literally feel the rustle of heads turning behind you, could sense that something was happening, and within seconds, virtually every eye in the room was turned toward her. She was dressed in a bright red, sparkly dress, had on way too much makeup, and was unsteadily coming up the aisle on very high heels. She was probably 6'4", had shoulders like a linebacker, and a prominent Adam's apple. It didn't take too much to deduce that Candace had not always been known as Candace. Candace was a trans woman who had not yet had gender alignment surgery. She sat down in the row in front of me, looking straight ahead, trying not to notice the eyes that were burning into her from all sides. To this day, I cannot imagine the courage it had taken for her to enter that church that morning. When it came time for communion, she got in line, and you could see the people shrinking back a bit, leaving an unusual amount of space around her, as though to get too close would taint them in some way.

When worship ended, we all gathered for coffee in the gathering area. Candace stood alone at one side, clutching a Styrofoam cup of coffee in hands with brightly painted red nails, and in a congregation that prided itself on warmly greeting all guests during coffee hour, not one person approached her. Everyone was either looking at her surreptitiously in wonder and curiosity, or they were studiously avoiding even glancing over. She stood there in embarrassment with a clenched jaw, staring awkwardly straight ahead, and tears sparkled in her eyes as she watched other guests being greeted, but not her. Finally, the Spirit nudged me, and one other woman and I looked at one another shamefacedly, and then walked over and introduced ourselves. Candace dabbed at the tears that were brimming over, and gratefully shook our hands. We chatted for a few moments, and then she excused herself. The heads turned once again, as she exited, moving through the crowd that hushed a bit as she passed. And then the buzz began. You know the buzz. I'm sure the phone lines were burning that week.

I figured after that cold reception that we would not see her again. But the next Sunday, I walked Candace again. I don't know what courage, and stubbornness, it took for her to return. But return she did, and took her place right in the middle of the assembly, and walked with dignity up to communion, and then took her place once again in coffee hour. The same woman and I went and talked with her. This went on for weeks. But every Sunday, there she was again. Gradually, others began to speak to her. A few of us invited her for lunch after worship, and we began to learn her story. It was a painful story of rejection and abuse. She had come out as trans to her spouse, who had kicked her out of the house, cut her off from seeing her children. She had been cut off from her people. Her family had disowned her. She had been fired from her job. She had endured cruel comments, icy stares, and physical assault and a beating. She had been kicked out of her congregation where she had once been a leader, told that she no longer had a place among God's people. She felt entirely alone, an outsider, a dried-up, cut-off branch. But still she hungered to know God's love for her.

In today's passage from Acts, we fail to grasp how radical the story really is. Here we have a man who is both a foreigner and a eunuch, a man who was probably castrated as a young boy. In many Middle Eastern cultures, there was a class of government officials who were made eunuchs before they even reached puberty in order to provide a caste of "safe" men to surround female royalty. They were trusted advisors, and often rose to positions of prominence in the royal courts. In this man's case, his intelligence had secured him a position as secretary of the treasury to the Candace, the title given to the queen of Ethiopia. But to Philip, an observant and righteous Jew, such a thing would have been an abomination, because God's law in Leviticus declared that a man who had been maimed in this way could not even enter into the assembly of Israel, could not enter into the temple, could not even become a proselyte. Such a person was not to be touched, such a person was not to be

dined with, such a person was not really even to be associated with. He was unclean, by his very nature. To Philip's mind, such a man would have no part in the things of God. And while foreigners could convert to Judaism, most remained outside the "inner circle," and were referred to as "God-fearers," and not as fully Jewish. So to the faithful Jews who formed the early church, a foreigner and a eunuch would not seem a likely candidate for inclusion in God's unfolding plan. It's actually something of a mystery why a man who would be rejected would nonetheless make the long, desert trek from Ethiopia to come to Jerusalem to worship Israel's God, a God whose temple he would not be allowed to enter. That's determination.

So imagine Philip's shock, when, at the nudging of God's Spirit, he's told to go out to a road that leads in from the desert, and then is told to run up and run alongside this particular carriage. As he approaches, he hears a voice inside reading the Jewish scriptures aloud, a passage from the prophet Isaiah. (Point of historical fact: Silent reading was pretty much unknown until the 17th century. Prior to that, texts were read aloud, even when you were by yourself.) As Philip peers in to this classy carriage, a Mercedes carriage, let's say, and begins to converse, there would be no mistaking from the smooth, beardless skin and the high-pitched voice that the man is a eunuch. Everything in Philip's religious upbringing would be telling him to abort the mission, to step away in disdain, because surely *this* man could not become part of God's holy people. God's law said he was unclean, unworthy. Surely the Spirit must be mistaken, Philip must be thinking. But God's Spirit has sent Philip here, so when the eunuch invites Philip to get in the carriage and sit beside him and explain the scriptures to him, these scriptures that are making no sense to him, Philip climbs in and sits down, and begins to tell him God's good news in Jesus, begins to explain the scriptures that are puzzling him.

I wonder if they got to the passage just a little further in Isaiah where it says, "Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, 'The LORD will surely separate me from his people'; and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.'" For thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them beside those already gathered." The Good News for the Ethiopian eunuch that day was that Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. A man who literally had been cut off from God's people, regarded as a useless, dried up branch, had been grafted onto the true vine, watered by baptism.

Now this is not just about eunuchs. There are lots of folks the church has made to feel as though they are cut off from God's grace. As the church, we can get so focused on our understanding of God's Law that we fail to announce and live out the gospel, the Good News spoken to us in the Prophet Isaiah, that the eunuch and the foreigner, all those who are outcasts, all those on the margins, have a place within God's walls, and a name better than sons and daughters. We've made women feel like outcasts, we've made people of other races or cultures feel like outcasts, we've made divorced folks feel like outcasts, we've made LGBT folks feel like outcasts, we've made single folks and widows and widowers feel like outcasts, we've made the elderly feel like outcasts, we've made the Millennial generation feel like outcasts, we've made those with substance abuse problems feel like outcasts, we've made the poor feel like outcasts, we've even made other Christians feel like outcasts. But here's the Good News, people: In Christ Jesus, there are no outcasts. Philip learns in this encounter that God's Spirit speaks to and falls upon *all* those who were once far off, and that there is nothing that prevents them from finding a place among God's people. Nothing. And we all have been far off...we all are, in our own way, outcasts who have been welcomed.

You see, it's not about becoming perfect, and then earning a place among God's family. It's not about some small circle of people who have earned their way in. It's not even about how much we think we love God, because John tells us that what matters is that God has loved us first. God's Spirit gets poured out the people we're conditioned to think aren't "worthy" of God's love. We are sent by God's Spirit to run alongside all kinds of people that we meet on the road, to listen to their hungers, to listen to their questions, even to their doubts, to share with them our stories, and to assure them that in Christ Jesus, there is welcome, there is acceptance, and a place where they can be gathered in, a place to call home, a place where they can be named and loved, where they will no longer be cut-off branches. Can we be that kind of place? AMEN