

The Rev. George Arceneaux, Curate
May Crowning, 5/2/2021 (The Fifth Sunday of Easter)
Church of the Ascension, Chicago, IL
John 14:15-21, Acts 8:26-40

Sources consulted: Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007),
Scott Shauf, “Locating the eunuch: characterization and narrative context in Acts 8:26-40”;
Catholic Biblical Quarterly 71, no. 4: 762-775, 2009,
Marianne Bjelland Kartzow and Halvor Moxnes, “Complex identities: ethnicity, gender and
religion in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40)”; *Religion & Theology* 17, no.
3-4: 184-204, 2010

This morning, I hope to share something that happened this past week, an experience I had which has helped shape my understanding of our readings this Sunday morning, and an experience which has made me relish that the revelation of the Holy Spirit we hear of in scripture truly does show up in the tangible present of today. It’s an experience I had as a result of my job as a hospice chaplain, a job in which I get to spend time with folks facing the end of their lives. The conditions which lead the folks I see to hospice range from cancer to congestive heart failure. But the majority of the people I see suffer from various forms of dementia including Alzheimer’s which ultimately lead to their losing their lives. Such is the case for Tess, the woman of whom I think this morning, a hospice patient I met more than a year ago. Tess isn’t really able to talk anymore because of her Alzheimer’s. She has taken to wandering about the nursing home in which she lives, often seeming listless, and at times tearful. This past Thursday, I went to see her in person, eager because this was to be the first time to see her in person since the pandemic began, with all my prior interactions through the year having been mediated through a screen. I found Tess at the end of a hallway, walking much as she had a year ago. And I called out to Tess. Her body turned towards me, though her face stared straight past me, somehow seeming

ignorant of my presence yet beckoned by the call of her name. And as she came closer to me, I reached out my hand to take hers, hoping to make a connection and convey to her that I wanted to be with her. And she took my hand, yet rather than continuing to walk she turned into me and embraced me, and began to softly cry. It took me a moment to realize I was crying too. It seemed that this woman, whose mind and identity had been ravaged by disease, conjured for me all the sadness and longing I had felt through the pandemic, my desires to see her and all the others patients and colleagues and friends I have missed these long months.

This kindness which Tess showed me, it exemplified for me how the Holy Spirit, the advocate whom our Gospel mentions, is in those people and places which we may not fully know or understand, like a woman affected by dementia but still able to convey the love of Christ which surpasses all understanding. Tess evidences for me what I think our Gospel and our story from Acts claims: that the Holy Spirit is abundantly present in the world.

This claim about the Holy Spirit's prevalence is certainly spoken to in our Gospel as Jesus mentions the advocate not leaving us as orphans, but if there is any scriptural account that details the Holy Spirit's influence it is Acts. From the very beginning of the text, Acts speak to the Holy Spirit's influence expanding to the furthest reaches of creation. It does so explicitly, picking up right as Jesus ascends into heaven saying to his apostles and I think us, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The whole rest of the Acts relates the stories of the various early Christian leaders spreading the Gospel and finding that the Holy Spirit has been spreading throughout the world. And truly I think my favorite example of this comes from our story today; that of the Ethiopian eunuch. I think it has become a favorite story for me in no small part because it has been claimed by the

LGBTQ community and particularly the trans community as a story of humanization for people who have otherwise been othered by the powers that be; it's a story about the Holy Spirit being everywhere, including those people and places which are outside of our own personal and individual experiences, or what society's norms and expectations may be.

The radical presence of the Holy Spirit in everyplace and everyone is communicated through the Ethiopian Eunuchs' identity and characterization. We don't get a name, we just get that he is Ethiopian and he is a eunuch, characteristics which are implied to be different and outside of Phillip's experience. Indeed, the Ethiopian eunuch is rather outside of the four Gospel narratives as well, we've not seen too much representation of the world at large during the stories of Jesus life. But when Phillip sees the Ethiopian Eunuch coming from worship in Jerusalem and reading Isaiah, Phillip finds commonality which supercedes any difference from identity or nationality which would preclude relationship between the two. In the Ethiopian Eunuch we see that the Holy Spirit is not confined to the apostles or even to the region of Galilee in which Jesus ministered but is already at work in everyplace in the world. Prophetically for our society and culture, the Ethiopian Eunuch shows that the Holy Spirit is present despite a sexual and gender identity which society at the time would have characterized as abnormal or strange, a result of his being a eunuch. Philip's encounter with this man and the Holy Spirit in him shows that there is no boundary which the Holy Spirit cannot cross, no human being or experience of living in which God is not at work.

And what a wonderful and promising notion: that just as we are able to experience the Holy Spirit at work in our friends and families it is also present in those people and places whom we do not know or whose experiences we may not understand. As Philip meets the Eunuch, I think we may see it true that, as the Gospel states, we are not left orphaned. Philip met the Holy Spirit

in a man in whom he would not have expected. For me, I truly believe I found the Holy Spirit in Tess. A woman whom I feel society has in many ways discounted because of her age and her disease; wandering in lost memory and in the halls of a nursing home yet whose humanity conveyed to me a divine love which I had not realized I so sorely needed.

One of the greatest gifts of the world we live in, in spite of its brokenness and the pain, is that it is abundant and inhabited with goodness. There are always new places and people to discover who can convey the love of God by virtue of that Holy Spirit in them.

This is one of the blessings of being part of a parish; to continue discovering more of the Holy Spirit in one another. In just the past year or so I have been here, I've gotten to relish such discovery. I've gotten to hear stories of folks like Charley Taylor and what he meant to people. I get to hear about folks finding passion in playing the organ and I'm not even just talking about David White; I get to find out, hey I'm not the only video game nut in the congregation, or heck I get hear people talk about making sourdough in the pandemic and teaching class over zoom and how good the food is down at Gibson's or friends wrestling with philosophers ranging from Kierkegaard to Alasdair Macintyre, I get to hear the joyful and good specifics of what make this communal life we live specific and abundant.

I suppose what I hope I can convey this morning is that the Holy Spirit is out there, heck, it's in here too. You can find it. Amen