

Sunday, May 2, 2021

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B

Prayer of the Day

O God, you give us your Son as the vine apart from whom we cannot live. Nourish our life in his resurrection, that we may bear the fruit of love and know the fullness of your joy, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

First Reading: Acts 8:26-40

Led by the Spirit, Philip encounters an Ethiopian official who is returning to his African home after having been to Jerusalem to worship. Philip uses their encounter to proclaim the gospel to him. Upon coming to faith in Jesus, he is baptized by Philip.

²⁶An 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.) ²⁷So 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 ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³²Now 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.

³³In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth."

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶As 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?" ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When 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. ⁴⁰But 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.

Psalm: Psalm 22:25-31

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD. (Ps. 22:27)

²⁵From you comes my praise in the | great assembly;
I will perform my vows in the sight of those who | fear the LORD.

²⁶**The poor shall eat | and be satisfied,
Let those who seek the LORD give praise! May your hearts | live forever!**

²⁷All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn | to the LORD;
all the families of nations shall bow | before God.

²⁸**For dominion belongs | to the LORD,
who rules o- | ver the nations. R**

²⁹Indeed, all who sleep in the earth shall bow | down in worship;
all who go down to the dust, though they be dead, shall kneel be- | fore the LORD.

³⁰**Their descendants shall | serve the LORD,
whom they shall proclaim to genera- | tions to come.**

³¹They shall proclaim God's deliverance to a people | yet unborn,
saying to them, "The | LORD has acted!" R

Second Reading: 1 John 4:7-21

We love God and others because God first loved us. We cannot say we love God, whom we have not seen, while hating fellow Christians, whom we regularly see. Love toward God is to be matched by love toward others because the essence of God is love.

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In 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. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So 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.

¹⁷Love 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. ¹⁸There 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. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those 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. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Gospel: John 15:1-8

On the night of his arrest, Jesus taught his disciples about the relationship they would have with him. Those who abide in his word and love bear fruit, for apart from him, they can do nothing.

[Jesus said:] ¹“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide 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. ⁵I 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. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

Sermon

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen

When I was in seminary one of the courses offered was about church and society. It dealt with the church's voice in society. I also remember a quote but not who coined it – the preacher should carry the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

The reason I mention those two items is that I first read the lessons for today on April 21st – the day after the verdict was known in the George Floyd murder trial in Minneapolis.

I, like you, I'm sure, heard the verdict the night before – Tuesday April 20th. Many thoughts crossed my mind as I watched television news report on what was taking place after the verdict was made public.

Two thoughts stand out for me as I look back: 1 – justice has been served in this case, and 2 – Minneapolis is not going to see riots and likely more deaths associated with this event.

Thankfully people gathered in very peaceful ways, believing that justice had indeed been served as many felt vindicated after protesting similar incidences for decades.

The sight of peaceful gatherings, of people coming together celebrating a sense of unity that has been so fleeting and seemed to be only a long-lost dream was encouraging and a welcomed sight. And not just in Minneapolis but throughout our nation and indeed the world.

I'm not interested in, nor am I going to get into politics and policies and laws surrounding the trial. That's a minefield I do not want to step into.

Instead, rather, I want to explore what our terrific texts today have to say, what they can add to the narrative that is on the minds and tongues of so many people today.

It's amazing to me how many times we find Jesus involved with folks who are on the outside: women, foreigners, the poor, the ill, the disenfranchised.

Our first lesson from Acts is about "an Ethiopian eunuch." And its importance should not be underestimated. Eunuchs are on the list of the marginalized people noted by Isaiah, who proclaims that God welcomes those whom society often fears or despises. Isaiah says: It is "the Lord God who gathers and welcomes eunuchs, foreigners and outcasts."

Psalms 22 picks up on that very theme – and lists the criteria for the inclusion of all – God welcomes all who seek the Lord, who "remember and turn to the Lord" from "all the ends of the earth" and "all the families of the nations." "The Lord [who] rules over the nations" ultimately determines who is invited in, often overturning human categories, prejudices, and proprieties to welcome the eunuchs, foreigners, outcasts, tax collectors, and sinners who seek to enter into the reign of God.

Our reading from 1 John expands the criteria by which we judge ourselves and our communities: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God."

Communities of all shapes and sizes so often ignore this complicated, yet simple, criterion and enforce more culturally established, exclusive measures, such as those we've already listed. We can only imagine what a church would look like if it took our selection from 1 John as literally as other verses often cited to "prove" who do or do not stand as our brothers and sisters. God's unlimited love challenges our traditional limitations on whom to love in the same way God loves us.

In our gospel text today we find that our faithfulness to the word of God that both cleanses us and enlivens us is most assured when we approach that word with the same mind as does the Ethiopian eunuch – assuming we always have more to learn.

It is not difficult to understand that abiding in Christ is not a static state. Even those who abide in the vine are still "becoming" disciples as they grow and bear fruit. The true vine, the vine grower, the branches, and the fruit – all exist to be and share the life and love that flows from God into the world.

I believe our text from Acts calls each of us to reflect on all the barriers we seek to place between God's people and God's limitless, free gift of grace.

And our reading from 1 John calls each of us to break down these barriers with love. We simply cannot hope to love God, unseen, if we fail to love our siblings who we can see. The love we show for our siblings -including Phillip's transformational act of love at the roadside, for example – is how we know and experience God's love for us and for all creation.

You may well remember part of the Lutheran liturgical history when we confess: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” So then it logically flows that if we seek to place barriers around God’s grace and love, we deceive and bind ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But there is good news. God is faithful and just. And God’s love abides. God’s abiding love is like the patient fussiness of a gardener or a vine grower: picking beetles off leaves, pruning, watering when it’s needed, checking the sky for signs of rain. God’s abiding love provides. It is truly a nourishing gift.

Congregations throughout the world have and forever will include petitions in their prayers for peace and justice. Hopefully our individual prayers contain a petition or two for peace and justice.

But, just how does peace and justice come about? How does any community, large and small, arrive at a time of peace and justice, at least, relatively speaking?

Those questions are heavy weight, for sure. The verdict in the George Floyd murder trial points out just one of the ways we address those questions. And that is to say, the verdict moved the needle a fraction, but it moved in the right direction to achieve the goal of peace and justice.

It is a fact that nations and local communities throughout the world deal with unrest and injustices daily. Sometimes the slow simmering pot boils over and it seems that Hell’s fury has descended upon us.

Obviously, the events surrounding the George Floyd murder trial is but one example of unrest and injustice that plagues our nation and local communities.

If we were to create a list of the outsiders, outcasts, marginalized, foreigners, etc., we would end with a list that, might just stop us in our tracks. And perhaps find us momentarily speechless.

All on the list we create are reasons for us, as a nation and individuals, to form cracks and create divisions in our society and culture. But that’s not new – it just seems to be getting much worse much quicker than in the past.

So back to peace and justice. How do we turn this ship of unrest and injustice around and head toward a welcoming and reconciling, peaceful and just shore?

The answer, in summary, in broad strokes is before us in our texts today. Please take these lessons home with you and study them. Meditate on them. Pray in relation to them.

The simple, yet extremely difficult, answer is love. We are all aware from our own life experiences that sometimes love is easy and sometimes it is anything but easy. It can be difficult, messy, frustrating and sometimes very elusive.

The love referred to in our texts today is a love that works from top down and bottom up. That is, it is a love that individuals can live out as well as organizations and governments – not that you can legislate love, but legislation can reflect love for all who are under it.

Bottom line is we have a huge problem: us, our nation and the world. We are fractured and divided as perhaps never before. We do not live a wholly peaceful existence and we experience injustices of all sorts. And we have the prescription by God himself – love.

I can only trust that each of us and us as a congregation of Christ's one Church may begin serious dialogue as to how to show, how to live out the love God has first shown to us. That is the challenge before us at this moment in time. May we be up to the task of accepting that challenge.

God's love abides, and we abide in the vine – a vine much bigger and more interconnected and interdependent than we probably know. The vine's job isn't to prune, it is to abide. The result of abiding – taking part in the mutuality of the vine receiving the care and love of the vine grower – is bearing fruit. The fruit we bear connects us even further – in mutual love, celebration and interdependence.

He is Risen. He is Risen Indeed.

Thanks be to God.

Amen

Prayers of Intercession

The prayers are prepared locally for each occasion. The following examples may be adapted or used as appropriate.

Alive in the risen Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, we bring our prayers before God who promises to hear us and answer in steadfast love.

A brief silence.

God of all fruitfulness, you abide in your church and your church abides in you. Cleanse us by your word and give yourself to the whole church on earth so that it bears fruit and witnesses to your love. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

You have created the heavens and the earth. As we wonder at the beauty of creation, may we seek vital connections among all that depends on the earth for life. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

You rule the nations with justice and love. Give the leaders of the earth assurance of your abiding presence, that they lead not by fear but with love for those they are called to serve. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

You have loved us so that we can love others. We pray for all in need of your love: those who are poor, lowly, outcast, weak, or fearful. Provide for the needs of all (*especially*). Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

You gather us with all the saints by the power of your Spirit (*especially with Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria and those we name before you*). With them, may our hearts live forever in your keeping. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

In the hope of new life in Christ, we raise our prayers to you, trusting in your never-ending goodness and mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.