

Address

Address by Jan Wiersma to
Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota
5th Sunday of Easter - May 2, 2021
Texts: Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:7-8. 16a-19; John 15:1-8

Acts 8:26–40

The author, Luke, relates a colorful and almost magical story of the early church. Notice how the Spirit works through Philip, who has fled to Samaria to escape persecution in Jerusalem.

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.

1 John 4:7–21 *Once again, John reminds us that God’s love lies at the heart of all faith, and at the heart of all life.*

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 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.

GOSPEL READING John 15:1-8

We hear this text a full month after Easter. According to John, Jesus spoke these words to his disciples the night before he died. Does timing affect how you hear them? Also, the “you” in Greek is plural. Jesus doesn’t speak here to individuals, but to the community of disciples - and to all of us

together, as church.

”I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You all have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in all of you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you all abide in me. I am the vine, you all 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 all abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you all wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you all bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

This is the good news which we have received, in which we stand, and by which we are saved.

TBTG

Nomadland: has anyone seen it? The Oscar-winning film is based on the true story of 21st century American nomads, a woman who just got up and went, people with no fixed address. Not homeless, one of them says in the trailer, just houseless. I haven't seen it but I'd like to. I never lived in a van or RV, but I did travel a good piece of the world with a backpack and one companion. Those were ancient times, before internet and cell phones. I'd write my family about what city I might wander to next, and hope they'd send me a letter there, general delivery. My news from home might be a month old by the time I picked it up - a pretty tenuous connection. I have to confess, though, that I had no real goal in mind except, you know, having adventures.

If I've been a bit of a nomad in my life, my aunt has been the opposite. Yet at age 95, after living in the same city for 70 years, she somehow embarked on the adventure of moving to a new city to be near family. Not only does she have a new address, but the phone number she had since the 1950s is no more. My cousin confided, "Losing that number is almost like losing a member of the family." My aunt herself told me, "I am eager to make the move but have anxiety as well." Doesn't that tell the covid recovery story? Eager, but anxious. Questioning, but trying to trust.

In today's sparkling story from Acts, Philip apparently had no fixed address, but he did have a goal, set for him by his higher power. When the angel addressed him with the order, "Get up and go," he got up and went--down the wilderness road from Jerusalem toward Gaza. Gaza *is* a fixed address; it's been in the same place for 3000-plus years, and is home to the same people, still burdened with too much grief and heartache. But that's another story. So there on the wilderness road, Philip meets an important Ethiopian official. Think cabinet secretary level. Probably the man is a convert to Judaism, since he had been in Jerusalem to worship - in person! - and now he's headed home, reading from the Bible. Isaiah. Philip addresses the man, briefs him on new developments, namely Jesus, and, at the guy's own eager request, baptizes him in a handy stream. Then, poof! The Spirit whisks Philip off to somewhere else; and the cabinet secretary goes on his way rejoicing. Meanwhile, Philip wanders up the Mediterranean coast, talking to whomever. He doesn't need a fixed *address* to *address* people with the good news about Jesus.

“Address” is a word with a lot of meanings. Originally it meant, to set things right; addressing yourself literally meant straightening your clothes. Addressing a letter meant directing it to the right person, so the *address* came to mean the place they lived. But an address can be the message, too, like a President’s address to Congress, setting everything right. Right. We can always hope. That’s another story, too. Now, of course, our email address and our cell phone number travel with us. We can be anywhere in the world, and get news without delay.

But “address” also means a manner of speaking. Note Philip’s form of address: direct, no small talk. Curious, but respectful: “Do you understand what you’re reading?” Philip lets the man tell him what he needs, and he accepts the official right where he is--not just on the Gaza road but on his spiritual journey. Philip is helpful. Informative. Persuasive. What does he say? All we know is, it’s “the good news about Jesus.” Nowhere does he list hoops the man has to jump through to join the club. Philip’s address is pure good news. And that’s what this man hears. He trusts Philip enough to want to start a new life. Baptism is a gift, not a duty. Like a fairy tale, everything happens like magic, almost instantly. Almost like the speed of communication nowadays.

But just because we have the internet, and Instagram, and WhatsApp doesn’t mean things happen like magic now. Trust doesn’t usually come that quickly, no matter where you live, what address you use. Sometimes what people get online even undermines trust. When my pastor friends and I meet on Zoom, the first thing we ask each other is, “When are you going to start worshipping in person again?” Most take it slowly, as we have, surveying members, asking how confident they feel. As eager as people are to be together, do they still feel anxious, too? The saddest story I heard was of one church member who told her pastor that no way did she feel safe coming back to church. Not because of COVID, but because she’s Cambodian, an Asian woman. Sometimes, in re-opening, you move at the speed of the most vulnerable. You move at the speed of trust.

I’ve mentioned the Nonviolent Peaceforce to you before - how they have honed strategies for community-based peacebuilding in international war zones like the Philippines, South Sudan, and Myanmar. Now they’re working in Minneapolis, bringing the same techniques for unarmed civilian protection to schools and neighborhoods. They teach people without weapons to stand up to people with weapons, letting their own strength and the strength of the community emerge. All of it sounds a little crazy, not least that *my* Minnesota is like some kind of war zone. Someone asked how the NP staff address school administrators, teachers, and parents who fear for their children’s safety. The answer: “We move at the speed of trust. We can only move at the speed of trust.” I love the idea of Philip, flitting about the ancient world on the wings of the Spirit, preaching and baptizing on the spur of the moment. But that’s not how it usually happens, even in cyberspace. Just as fears have built up over time, people need time to learn to trust.

Remember, too, that Philip and lots of others had run away from Jerusalem because of the terrible persecution they experienced there; eager as they were to spread the good news of Jesus, they were afraid for their lives, too. It was in Samaria that Philip gained the trust he needed to get up and go when the Spirit told him to. He went in the strength of the Spirit of the same Jesus who said, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

(Matthew 8:20 and Luke 9:58). Jesus was a nomad, too--houseless, but not homeless, because his home was in God.

What this all comes down to, I think, is balancing fear and anxiety against love and trust; having no fixed address yet feeling secure in an eternal abiding place. This is where Jesus' address to the disciples on the eve of his death makes no sense at all, and at the same time cuts to the heart of their concern. Just before he died, he said, "Abide in me as I abide in you and you will bear fruit." "I'm going away - but I'll always be with you." How can you abide in someone when they are dead and gone? Never do we feel more empty than when a beloved companion has departed from this life. But it must have meant something to the disciples because the other John picks up the same theme: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.... And perfect love casts out fear." Don't you long to be in that place of perfect love with no more fear at all? Please note: this does not mean refusing to get vaccinated because, "Hey, Jesus said if I trust in him I don't need to be afraid of covid!" Quite the contrary! We still move at the speed of the most vulnerable and only as fast as trust permits. We build trust by being trustworthy, and share love by showing it, by getting vaccinated, protecting ourselves, protecting our loved ones, protecting our neighbors, by learning how to be allies with those whose fear is real, like the Cambodian woman from my friend's church.

I hear the real-life people in Nomadland teach each other survival skills. Isn't that another way of sharing love and subduing fear? That's the beauty of community. That's the beauty of the life in Christ that we call church, too. We all come with needs; we all come with strengths and fears, with passions, and with purpose. We all come looking for a place to be together, to work together for good. But we also come seeking that eternal abiding place with God, immersed in love. Both/and, not one or the other. This is why we'll continue with virtual worship as well as on-site. Both/and, not one or the other, so everyone, far or near, can feel at home here.

Abide in love and love will abide in you, wherever you are. Love will speak through you, landline, cell phone, or no phone at all. Love will live in you and flow from you, house or no house. You may have no fixed address, but you do have a home forever. Amen. TBTG

Prayers

God, our eternal home, our abiding place, the source of all fruitfulness, we thank you for reaching out to us, guiding us with your Spirit, placing in our hearts the eagerness to share the good news with the world. May your life within us cast out all our anxiety and fear.

At the same time, we grieve over the death that has overtaken so many in the world: for covid victims here and around the world, and especially now in India; we grieve those who lost their lives in Israel even as they worshiped together. We ask your comfort for the families of all who mourn. We pray for tender companionship for those who are isolated or feel alone.

We ask your blessing on this congregation, and your guidance; for only when we abide in your love can we be the people you created us to be. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who came to show us the way of love. Amen