

“Holy Teaching, Holy Learning”
May 12, 2019

Acts 8:26-35

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.

Psalms 146 (to be read by teachers and students antiphonally)

Students: ¹Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul!

Teachers: ²I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

Students: ³Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.

Teachers: ⁴When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.

Students: ⁵Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God,

Teachers: ⁶who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever;

Students: ⁷who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.

Teachers: The LORD sets the prisoners free; ⁸the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous.

Students: ⁹The LORD watches over the strangers; God upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked God brings to ruin.

Teachers: ¹⁰The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

Pastor: For as long as I can remember, my dad was a Sunday School teacher. When I was a little kid – probably no older than 5 or 6 – I remember sitting at our big kitchen table, watching my dad pour over books he had checked out from the library. Books on the Gospel of Mark, or Genesis, or 2 Kings, or one of Paul’s epistles, or Revelation – my dad covered it all. He would read through his books, taking tons of notes – notes that he would later turn into his Sunday morning lesson plan. My dad spent hours lingering over the books, his notes, the scripture. As Sunday grew closer, he would even practice parts of his lesson out loud – forming questions and observations in a new way as he imagined speaking in front of the class.

He was committed, my dad was. Committed to being a life-long student of the Word. Committed to taking seriously his role as a Sunday School teacher in our church. Committed to passing on this wisdom about the importance of Sunday School, well, to me. My dad was committed, in other words, to holy teaching, and to holy learning. Sometimes, I wonder if I would even be doing what I do if it weren’t for my Sunday School-teaching dad.

1: At first glance, the Psalm we just read together, Psalm 146, may not seem to have much to do with Sunday School at all.

2: It’s a psalm of thanksgiving: “I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.”

3: The writer of the psalm goes on to tell us that we will be happy, or blessed, if we put our trust in this God: the One who made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in it. Good stuff, huh?

4: But it’s the end of verse 7, going into verse 8, that seems really important on a day like today. It reads: “The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.”

5: There’s something in those words that seems to say to us: “Pay attention to that!”

Pastor: St. Augustine, who lived way back in the 5th century, knew a thing or two about sin. He often describes sin as being “curved in on oneself.”¹ That sounds about right: sin defined as being curved in on ourselves.

6: Many of us probably know what this “being curved in on ourselves” feels like.

¹ Latin, “*Incurvatus in se*.”

7: It happens when we're so stuck in our own heads – stuck in our own beliefs and biases, our own preconceived notions and fears – that we really *do* feel like we're in prison, as the psalmist rightly calls it at the end of verse 8.

8: It's like we are trapped in a deep darkness, and no light can get through.

9: Why does it feel so dark like that sometimes?

10: It's because our own thoughts and fears and ideas about things are blocking the light. And you know, this is a scary place to be.

11: It's true. It *is* a scary place to be, stuck in our heads like that... but it's only scary *when we are all alone*.

12: Did you hear that? It's only scary when we are alone.

13: You see, people of God, *there is a solution*: and the solution is that we don't have to go in there alone.

14: No matter what we are all worked up about or scared of or unable to let go of – or, as Augustine would put it, no matter what we are turned in on ourselves about – once we invite someone else in, once we check out our thoughts with another person, we can start to see where we have strayed.

15: Once we bring someone else into the picture, a tiny ray of light breaks through; and we begin to see that there is another way.

16: Take reading the Bible. That Ethiopian eunuch in our lesson from Acts was right on the money – he knew he couldn't interpret the scriptures all alone; he knew he needed someone else to help him sort out his own thoughts and fears and prejudices from the truth. That Ethiopian eunuch – he knew exactly what he needed. He needed other people. He needed the church.

17: And so do we. To escape from the prison of our minds, to free ourselves from all of our preconceived notions and distortions and biases – many of which we're probably not even aware of – to escape from all that, we need to invite someone else in. Someone who can gently say to us, "Hey, I don't think that's what God is up to here. I don't think this is what God is trying to say."

Pastor: So...back to Sunday School. It's so very important to the life of any church. Now I can understand why Sunday School was so for crucial my dad, and to the church I

grew up in. And... it's for that very same reason that it's a vitally important ministry here at St. Paul's.

18: So, today, we are saying "thank you" to our children and youth Sunday School teachers for the 2018-2019 school year.

19: Now, we can assure you that our amazingly gifted, and giving, Sunday School teachers do not teach because they are bored and are looking for something to fill their time. They are not doing this because they don't have enough going on outside of church. They are doing this because *they get it*.

20: Our Sunday School teachers get that we need each other to free ourselves *from* ourselves. They understand how scary our minds can become when left unchecked and unchallenged. They lead these classes because they know that to be the church, we all need a little gentle guiding now and then. They know, in other words, all about holy teaching, and holy learning.

21: So here we go: THANK YOU!

ALL: THANK YOU!

22: Thank you, teachers, for teaching us this year. Thank you to Sharra, Diane, Lisa, Wes, Pat and Chris.

23: Thank you for giving so much of yourselves, your minds and your hearts.

24: Thank you for guiding us on this journey, so we don't have to get stuck in our minds all by ourselves.

25: Thank you for bringing the light!

26: Thank you for reminding us we are not alone.

27: Thank you, in other words, for your holy teaching.

28: Thank you for helping *us* in our holy learning.

ALL: Thanks be to God for you!