

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Fifth Sunday of Easter
29 April 2018

Scripture readings:

Acts 8:26-40 Psalm 22:24-30 1 John 4:7-21 John 15:1-8

I'm interested by the text from Acts this morning and what it informs us, I believe, about the deep roots of racism in our Church and in our society and in our government. Here we encounter a man who is unquestionably a black man. He is from Ethiopia and charged with a very large responsibility of protecting the Candace's - the queen's - treasure. We not only know that he's black, we also know that he's gelded. He's been sexually disconnected for the purposes of being trusted. He is encountered by Philip in his chariot reading Isaiah. Now how unlikely is that? First of all, I wonder whether or not there is a book pocket in the door of a chariot. *[laughter]* And that may have been a scroll.

But here he is, and he asks some extraordinary questions of Philip and starts to get an education about Jesus, and then in all of his disqualifying splendor - as a black man and as the gelded eunuch - he is nevertheless, because he spots water, eligible for baptism, full membership in the Body of Christ - despite being doubly categorized as incomplete or less than equal.

Do you remember the discussions in the Church about ordaining women? Yesterday? My question occasionally in those days was, *We don't take the baby's legs apart before we baptize them. What's the problem with being called to Word and Sacrament Ministry in terms of gender?*

I think if you look up the names of congregations such as St. Philip's in Harlem, you will find that often the churches named St. Philip's were black congregations because of this text. St. Philip's in Harlem was, I believe, the slave chapel of Trinity Church at Broadway and Wall Street. It's there for a reason.

So here we have biblical evidence, it seems to me, of the deep-seated, historical position of racism in our institutions, in our faith, in our government, and in our society. We don't like that, but we'd better admit it. It was one of the things that rejoiced my heart most about our new bishop-elect when he talked about being more concerned for his adopted Asian son when he goes out into public than he is for his white children when they go out. And he talked about the need of this Church to address black men in particular. That's significant for me because you have seen my question that I submitted to the Diocese to be asked of both candidates, that in a Diocese such as ours, where within the boundaries of our geographical definition are the urban centers of Allentown, Bethlehem, Easton, Scranton, Hazelton, Wilkes-Barre, Stroudsburg...and Hamlin - that when we gather as a Diocese there are no delegates of color or primary language other than English - with the exception a couple years ago of our own Melvina Black from the Poconos, from here, the only one.

And then what deeply disturbs me, friends, as a Diocese in convention, a ballroom filled with white delegates to the Episcopal Church, will look at slides of people in Kajo Keji, Africa, all of whom are black, all of whom we are helping by sending money there, all of whom we are being self-congratulatory about, being such nice white people in North America helping the colored people in Africa. You get my point? All the while ignoring our neighbors who are within arm's reach. There is a flaw, and it needs to be addressed, and we will get to it, and that will start with our ability to say this is so. Because if we don't say it's so, we engage in the business of denial, and then we pretend there is not a problem, and then we continue to perform the way we have.

Then I'm engaged by the gospel text for today of what it should mean to us when Jesus says, *"I am the vine, and my Father is the vine grower, and you are the branches."* Well, it seems like a completely different metaphor from last week. Do you remember last week when we talked about the good shepherd who has a fold, a stone wall into which he gathers his sheep, for which he functions as the door by laying down in the opening to keep the dumb and dirty sheep in and safe. But then he reminds the dumb and dirty sheep that he also has other sheep on the other side of that wall who are his also - like maybe the Ethiopian eunuch or the un-welcomed immigrant.

I had an e-mail exchange this week which ostensibly was a letter from a German doctor who was complaining about the onrush of immigrants in Germany and particularly the strain that this is putting on the German health care system and hospitals in particular and how these people are coming with AIDS and tuberculosis and syphilis. The

point of the communication was the last sentence. This was intended to frighten you and me - white people. *“Is this coming to your country???”*

Well, I responded by saying, *“AIDS and tuberculosis and syphilis were in Germany long before the immigrants ever came, but syphilis didn’t exist in this country until Columbus got here. Now that’s a reality we could talk about. Nor were Columbus or the Pilgrims or other folks ever legal immigrants into Indian territory.”*

So now in the next week after understanding Jesus as a shepherd who has these sheep all over the world, Jesus says that as believers we are branches of a vine which is Jesus himself and the vine dresser is God Almighty. Now I don’t know whether or not you’ve ever had any experience with grape vines. You know how grape vines are taken care of. At the end of the growing season they’re cut back to the root stem. I remember driving through the wine region in France a couple years ago and seeing acres and acres and acres of just the stumps of grape vines, beautifully dressed in rows. There wasn’t much more to them than my forearm and fist. They had borne their fruit, they were cut back, they were arranged along wires up which they would grow and where their heavy fruit would hang. They were cut back for a reason, so that they would bear larger and juicier fruit. And they were planted in earth that was known to produce the kinds of flavors and acidities and all the rest of it that are important to wine makers. Jesus is using this as an example for us as Christians - that as Christians we are members of that established trunk. We are branches of that vine, and we are under the care of a vine dresser whose purpose is to have us bear big, fat, plentiful, juicy clumps of tasty grapes. That’s the purpose of a vine - to bear fruit.

Jesus reminds us that if we’re separated from the vine there won’t be enough or any juice that gets there. There won’t be the leaves to extract from the sun the energy needed or from the roots the water required to create this gorgeous fruit, and severed from the vine the branches die and bear nothing.

I thought about this image a little bit, and I thought if that’s who we are as the branches and we are indeed engaged in the business of bearing good fat clumps of juicy, gorgeous grapes, what do we think we’re doing when we say we offer God anything? The grapes we bear are God’s work using us to get the sunlight and the energy and all of the nutrients from the earth and the sky into those big, fat, juicy fruits of good works. They’re not our offering. They’re God’s work *with* us. That’s our purpose - to be fat and juicy and tasty and nutritious and to be used to feed the world and, in fact, get the world a little tipsy!

How we mess that up by thinking that our good works are offered to an angry God to make her happier with us because *“we done good.”* Baloney! You can’t do good, but you can be a branch on a vine and bear fruit which is what you were made to do. So what is the big deal? Why do we have to give awards to people for occasionally doing a good thing? What a perversion of this understanding of who we are as Christians. The understanding of who we are as Christians is a unique and wonderful thing, and it has something to do with what we do and how we live in the world today.

Last week I addressed the issue of the criticism that *“his sermons are too political.”* Well, no, they’re not. They’re always based on scripture which is political. There is politics in the gospel. It’s the politics of how we live our lives in the world. And so it is the concern of mine this week that the House of Representatives in this country no longer has a prayer - oh, a pray-er. However you pronounce that, apparently when a Christian clergyperson expresses the gospel in the halls of Congress, gently, fairly, that is unpalatable and costs the man his job for praying that a tax scheme would be fair and concerned about poor people - that we who are capable of bearing the juiciest fruit in the world should keep it for ourselves rather than for the purposes that God intended.

Now you may call that political. Go right ahead. But I base my purpose in saying that on my knowledge of a man who also was a pastor in Germany during the Second World War, a Lutheran man who initially supported the programs of Adolf Hitler. This man’s name was Martin Niemoeller. He came to realize that he was involved in something that was not right, and he became eventually a part of the Confessing Church which opposed the politic of the day. He’s best known for these words which are, I think, at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. They are words to which I return because one of the people I studied with in my college days between 1965 and 1969 was a man named Hagen August Karl Staack. Dr. Staack was also a part of the Confessing Church in Germany during

the war, and he told us horrific stories of what happened to the communities of faith - not just Jews, but Jews for starters, in an intolerant government. These are Pastor Niemoeller's words:

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out -
Because I was not a Socialist.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out -
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out -
Because I was not a Jew.*

*Then they came for me -
And there was no one left to speak for me.*

Father Patrick Conroy is a Jesuit. I'm sure he's not perfect, and I'm certain that politics isn't perfect, and any brand or stripe of Christianity isn't either. But, friends, if being branches of the vine of Jesus Christ means anything...

I've also heard this question asked. (This is a part of being a part of the vine) - *Why does he talk so much about the pope in Rome?* Why not? We are all connected to a root which gives energy and life and resources and substance to a fruit that is to be borne in the world for which we are created - our purpose, our *raison d'être*. Our reason for being is to bear fruit - not to bear fruit to make God happy, but to do what God creates us to do. And if we don't understand that ours is one branch of a larger vine, then you will not be able to tolerate Methodists who do not ferment their grape juice, [*laughter*] and you won't be able to tolerate the pope because he's Roman Catholic and we're not.

Let our concerns be with our faith - how we live our faith in the world in which we are planted and how it is we bear the best fruit possible because that is our job as Christians - not as people looking for God's favor, not as those who are better than anybody else, but those who are doing what, in fact, we were created to do - to be the world's largest, fattest, juiciest, tastiest grapes in the world and for the world's consumption and God's honor.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.