

28 April 2024, Easter 5B
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

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

Step-by-Step Toward Relationship

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Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. **Amen.**

With as many times as the word “love” shows up in my sermons, you’d think today’s readings – especially the reading from 1 John – would be right up my alley. This week even has one of my favorite Bible stories: Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. These readings, though, have been tough for me over the last two weeks or so that I’ve been wrestling with them.

Each of these readings reflects something amazing about love. And then we look at the world around us. I don’t know if things have been materially worse over these last two weeks, but recently, I’ve been particularly saddened by the many ways in which we are so unloving toward one another.

The headlines themselves are not important. What's important is what those headlines say about our relationships with one another. There's a lot that is not good there. We are quick to assume that our neighbors have the worst intentions. We make snap judgments – actually, snap condemnations. We swiftly declare individuals to be evil and unredeemable, not even entertaining the possibility of repentance or reconciliation. We don't listen to one another. Instead, we focus on what we want to say next and do not actually engage in dialog. We even fabricate facts to support our positions.

As the old saying goes, we hate the things in others that we most hate in ourselves. I'm also susceptible to making snap condemnations, to not listening to others, and to not making space for repentance and reconciliation. I contribute to unlovingness in my own ways. We all do.

Does loving and not condemning mean that we don't call out injustice? Absolutely not. Of course, we stand and speak against injustice. I'm also not saying that there aren't times when the best way we can love another is by distancing ourselves from them. We are not called to remain in toxic, abusive relationships. We are called to continue loving one another at the same time as we call out injustice and demand liberation for the oppressed. We are

called to love one another at the same time as we may not love many things others do.

Where is there hope? Or, as Peter Wenner would ask, “Where is the grace”? Let’s see if we can find some.

I’ve mentioned the novel *The Shack* before. The protagonist, Mack, experiences the horrific murder of his young daughter. Consumed by the “Great Sadness,” Mack receives an invitation to spend the weekend with God at the shack where his daughter was murdered. There, he encounters the Father as a Black woman called “Papa”; the Son as a Middle Eastern man named “Jesus”; and the Holy Spirit as an Asian woman named “Sarayu.”

At breakfast one morning, Mack is amazed by the graciousness the these three persons show one another, and he asks, “Isn’t one of you more the boss than the other two?” Sarayu responds:

“Mackenzie, we have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. We are in a circle of relationship, not a chain of command or ‘great chain of being,’ as your ancestors termed it. What you’re seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power. We don’t need power over the other because we are always looking

out for the best. Hierarchy would make no sense among us. Actually, this is your problem, not ours.”

Jesus adds,

“Once you have a hierarchy you need rules to protect and administer it, and then you need law and the enforcement of the rules, and you end up with some kind of chain of command or a system of order that destroys relationship rather than promotes it. You rarely see or experience relationship apart from power. Hierarchy imposes laws and rules and you end up missing the wonder of relationship that we intended for you.”

The discussion continues and then hits the hardcore question: *Why does God not prevent people from doing evil?*

“Mack,” said Papa with an intensity that caused him to listen very carefully, “we want to share with you the love and joy and freedom and light that we already know within ourselves. We created you, the human, to be in face-to-face relationship with us, to join our circle of love. As difficult as it will be for you to understand, everything that has taken place is occurring exactly according to this purpose, without violating choice or will.”

There is the grace: relationship in a circle of love. There is hope because God is always in relationship with us, and because sometimes we get it right and work to remain in relationship with God and each other.

Philip is minding his business, preaching the Gospel. So of course, an angel gives him more work to do. Philip goes, and he encounters an Ethiopian eunuch, who it seems is Jewish. The fact that he is Ethiopian probably wouldn't have been a big deal for Philip. As a eunuch, though, he is a sexual minority, and, at that time, the stereotype was that eunuchs were sexually immoral.

Philip doesn't say anything about any of that. He is not deterred. He engages this man. Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch enter a relationship, which culminates in this officer of the Queen of Ethiopia being baptized, joining the community of Christ followers.

God prompts Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch into relationship. Philip has an angel and the Holy Spirit getting him over to that chariot. Our Ethiopian brother is prompted to engage Philip by Scripture, both the one he is puzzling over and the Hebrew Bible's mandates to be hospitable to others. Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, without regard to any of their differences, both accept God's prompting toward relationship.

Jesus says, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. . . . I 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”

Read through a lens hierarchy and power, you could take Jesus’ words to mean that “those people” will get their comeuppance – whoever “those people” are, but of course it’s never us. Hierarchy and power lead us to conclude that God is pruning “those people” and throwing them into the fire.

But what if we read this through a lens of relationship and love? We might hear a calling to remain in relationship with God. We might learn that, in remaining in relationship with God, we remain in relationship with one another; we are connected through the divine vine. We might wonder if, instead of pruning away people, God prunes away the things in each of us that are enslaved to hierarchy and power and inhibit relationship and love. We might consider that, when we don’t remain in relationship, it isn’t God who throws us in the fire; we do it to ourselves. The branch cannot survive apart from the vine. When we don’t remain in relationship with God, when we don’t remain in relationship with each other, we wither.

Easy to say just stay in relationship, but it's not easy to do. It takes removing ourselves from hierarchy and power and seeking Christ in all persons. It takes finding even just a single point of connection, even if it's just "Dear God, please help me not to strangle this person." One step toward relationship, even a small one, leads to another and another and another. Then we're moving step-by-step toward relationship with God and toward the perfect love that casts out fear. In seeking God, we find relationship with God and with each other.

Each Sunday we take one of those steps. We come to this altar where there is no hierarchy or power, just relationship and love. Don't let the collar or the clothes or the fact that I say most of the words mislead you. We celebrate Eucharist together in a circle of love as equals in mutual ministry and service. Not even God clings to hierarchy and power. God, instead, chooses to relate to us in love.

The grace is that relationship in the circle of love is possible. God made it possible. God lived it with us. God prompts us and strengthens us to do it. Connect and listen. The branches can't survive apart from the vine. Being connected to the vine and to the other branches is how we are meant to live.

Amen.