

Bible Study for 5th Sunday of Easter

The first reading was from Acts 8: 26-40, Philip evangelizes the Ethiopian. As background, let us first look at Acts 6: 1-8. The Apostles point out to the disciples the main ministries of the early Church, prayer, the ministry of the word and the ministry of the physical needs of others. (The ministries we have prioritized for ourselves at C & E). In verses 3 and 5 they then set the standards that must be present for these ministers. They must be full of faith and full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Does this not also apply to us as disciples and as members of this church body?

The labor is then divided and Philip along with 6 others including Stephen, are chosen and ordained to do a special ministry. They were appointed to “serve tables”. Imagine a Bishop laying hands on some of us to become waiters... how would you feel about that? What is the role (ministry) the Holy Spirit expects me to perform and am I ready and willing to accept it?

As we now read Acts 8:26-40 we see the Holy Spirit in action. We see The Spirit doing to Philip what we see Him doing throughout Acts and even doing today in our own lives, we see Him providing an opportunity to serve God. Philip, because he is “full of the Holy Spirit”, hears the Spirit's request and seizes the opportunity without fear or hesitation and a new disciple is baptized into the Church. Are we prepared and ready for the opportunities the Holy Spirit will bring our way?

The second reading, 1 John 4:7-21 explains the driving force behind the actions of Philip, the Apostles and the disciples. Here John defines God in very simple yet profound words, “God is love”. He also says, “Love is from God”. God defines love, not the other way around as the world would want us to believe. God's love is the model for us and without it we would never be able to love. Because God loves us we are able to live in new ways (verses 11-12), to love one another. Our relationship with God is tied up in this love. Love for God and love of neighbor are linked.

In verse 18 John says, “Perfect love casts out fear”. Do we ever allow fear to cast out love? Does fear of what people may say, or how will this look, or our reputation, or not being able to stand some person or giving up our time or freedom ever prevent us from showing love for one another? Read verse 21, we have no choice, it is a command, if we love God, we must also love one another.

This kind of love is not easy. The Gospel reading, John 15:1-8, informs us of the only way we will be able to comply with this command. Love and service are fruits we as branches are asked to bear. Unless we abide in the vine, we cannot bear fruit, we cannot love. How do we remain attached to the vine? Prayer, Bible study, worship, meditation, obedience and service to others for God's sake not ours. How do we detach from the vine? We accept distraction, fatigue, selfishness, disobedience, self-reliance, distrust, detachment. What Jesus is asking for here is an intimate relationship with Him. He wants us to identify with Him, take our life from Him, and to bear His fruit. Here Jesus is giving us His model for a Christian community. A community with no stand-alone individuals, but one that circles and supports one another. A community that does not depend on its own efforts but on the vine for its nurture. A community that is known for acts of love they do in common. This, Jesus says, is how we glorify God. If this is how we live as a community then verse 7 tells us that whatever we wish for will be done and verse 11 says, “...our joy will be full.”

