

Church of the Resurrection, Centerville – 5 Easter (B) – 5/10/09 – Homily by Ruth Eller

*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?" (Acts 8:36)*

The story of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch is especially poignant right now, when the Bible has become a battle ground and many religious people are wondering about including people who seem different; and many other people—equally religious, by the way—are wondering whether it's worth trying to be included at all. And that might just be you, might just be me—because we're all different, aren't we, no matter how hard we try to be like everybody else?

Anyway: Here was a man reading deeply in the scriptures—yet he was every kind of outsider, as far as some passages in those scriptures are concerned. Eunuchs were made—literally—to be court officials. They held positions of influence, though of course could not dream or scheme to become rulers, since they couldn't have heirs. That was who he was in his own society in Ethiopia. As far as the Bible was concerned, some of it told him he belonged to the wrong nation, even the wrong race. It would have told him he was wrong sexually—that eunuchs were lesser persons than other males—they could not become priests, for instance. Unlike other Gentiles, he could never even hope to become a Jew. That's what the Bible told him. Yet he kept on reading. Why?

Probably he kept on reading for the same reason other so-called God-fearers did. God-fearers were Gentiles who had become deeply attracted to the Jewish religion. They would attend synagogue and read the Bible and try to conform their lives to its teaching. They were attracted because this was a way of believing that was quite different from what they were used to. Even though it told them they were lesser than the true Chosen People, it also said that there is one God who is God of all. Not just a little local god, but God of *all*.

Furthermore, this God was not just a glorified human being. The stories about this God didn't recount squabbles with other gods or amatory adventures with humans. This God was truly beyond all that. You weren't even allowed to make pictures or statues of this God. Furthermore, this God was the God of justice. The Jewish ethical code was outstanding, including even the way servants and foreigners were treated. Most amazingly, this God cared about people. The creation was the product of God's love, and God continued to love all creatures, including ourselves.

So even though there was one special people, the Hebrew Bible said that all people were loved by God, and would eventually come into the family. No wonder many Gentiles became God-fearers. Some even converted completely, with the males undergoing circumcision and both men and women taking a ritual bath.

In today's scene from Acts, the eunuch knows he can never be accepted in this way. Still, he has gone to Jerusalem to worship. Even though he cannot be part of the family, he still believes in the God of Israel. So when he meets Philip, he is on the road spiritually as well as physically. He is on the road to the God of the Bible. But what he doesn't know yet is that the Messiah has arrived. This is the one who made the Bible's prophecies come true. Finally, everyone—*everyone*—really is invited to the table.

That's the message that Jesus taught and that's the life he lived and that's the reason he died. And that's why God raised him from the dead—because Jesus' message and God's message were one and the same. That's the Good News that Philip and the other

disciples proclaimed to the world. It no longer mattered *at all* that the Ethiopian was not a Jew. It no longer mattered *at all* that he was black. It no longer mattered *at all* that he was sexually different. The Good News was for him just as much as for anyone else.

The Ethiopian knew this, even without being told in so many words. And we know that he knew because he said to Philip: *"Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"*

And the answer was: "Nothing. Nothing at all."

Somehow, over the centuries, even when the church was at its most exclusionary and hateful, those who have been rejected and despised still clung to the faith, knowing that the God of the Bible was way bigger than the Bible's human interpreters. They believed in that God, and they believed in the promise. After all, the Messiah himself was "despised and rejected", just as Isaiah had said. And he was raised from the dead. So they stayed faithful.

Take women, for instance. On this Mother's Day, that's an appropriate example. The first generation of Christians had no trouble accepting women among their leaders. No distinction was made, either, when people joined the body of Christ: men and women went through the same initiation, called baptism.

But this elevation of women to actual personhood was seen as scandalous by their neighbors. So the next generation started playing down the role of women. Only recently have the lessons in Paul and the book of Acts been taken seriously again: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus," writes Paul in his letter to the Galatians.

And those of other races: how many Christians supported the institution of slavery in this country? Yet the people from Africa, so brutally treated by Christians, embraced Jesus with a fervor that is astonishing, under the circumstances. Think of the great spirituals. Like the Ethiopian eunuch, African slaves saw the deep truth of the Bible and the Christian faith in ways their so-called masters did not. The rest of us are still trying to catch up.

We have a ways to go, though, don't we? Racism is alive and well, no matter what we say. Rejection of those from other nations, too. And as to the sexual issue—well, our own beloved Anglican Communion is in turmoil because some of us have had the audacity to take the Bible at its word, and allow the God-fearers among us to become baptized Christians, with all the privileges pertaining thereto.

Please note that this inclusion does not say "anything goes". The love of God that the Gentile God-fearers found in Judaism was not a license to leave morality behind. In fact, part of what attracted them was the Jewish ethical code. In this time and place, the core values of our tradition as Christians remain the same as they ever were: Love of God, love of neighbor. Justice. Generosity to those less fortunate than ourselves. Honesty. Compassion. Faithfulness to our spouses.

I know that some of you may disagree with what I'm saying today. And I know there are different ways of reading the Bible. But I can only preach the Gospel as I hear it. And this is the way I hear it. I hear Good News. Good News for everybody. Everybody—because inclusion in the church is like freedom in society. In society, I am in bondage to the old class or slave system until you are free. I am subject to old ways of being and behaving. I cannot be fully myself. In the church, I am in bondage to sin until your baptism is as good as mine. If I don't see your baptism as equal to mine, how can I obey God's command to

love my neighbor as myself?

But when I take the Good News seriously—then I am free. I can relax, and let God's love flow through me, as God intended.

Good News? You bet. This is news so good that anybody can ask, "*Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?*"

And the answer will be: "Nothing. Nothing at all."