

Arden Pastoral Charge

May 9, 2021:

The One and the Many

Rev. Cheryl McMurray

Jesus said: "When two or three are gathered in my name, I am there."

Today we gather in Spirit, and Christ is here.



Gathering Prayer:

Glorious and Gracious God, we come together this morning, not as we might like.

We will not meet in the churches we love,

we will not see the smiles of our neighbours, or hear their words of welcome.

Many of us will not see our mom's today.

We will not offer hugs or share a meal with them.

Glorious and Gracious God, we confess we are fatigued, we are fed up.

We want to be in each other's company once again.

And yet... You are with us in our fatigue.

You are with us in our disappointment.

You remind us that we are not alone.

You remind us that these acts of self isolation are acts of witness.

Witness to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who commanded us

to love one another,

and to love not in word only, but through our actions.

Strengthen us in our resolve to love,

and be with us this morning, bringing us the reassurance of your holy presence.

Amen.

Scripture: Our scripture this morning comes from the book of Acts. The apostles have been passionate in their sharing the good news of Christ to whomever would listen. Their witness has turned to preaching and teaching and healing. Immediately before this scripture, we find them together in Jerusalem. ‘Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, and Stephen was arrested, stoned and killed. Persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem and many left the city going to Judea and Samaria.’ (Acts 6: 8 – 8: 1).

Reading Acts 8: 4 – 8, 26 - 40 from the New International Version

⁴ Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. ⁵ Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. ⁶ When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷ For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.

²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

³¹ “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

³² This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

*“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

*³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.”*

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

³⁶ As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” ^[37] ³⁸ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.

³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Thoughts Along the Way:

For the past few weeks we have been sharing stories of witness. Witness from the letter writer John to the Johannine communities; stories of witness from Peter and John at the temple in Jerusalem. Today it is a story about Philip. Our scripture tells us *‘Philip went to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah. He taught, and he healed, and he cast out impure spirits.’* But Philip’s acts of witness were not only for the crowds that gathered to hear him shout out the news of resurrection and life in Christ, and watch him heal with miraculous powers granted by God. His acts of witness were not only for the many, but for the one.

That is a lesson that is sometimes difficult to remember. When I was in social services, offering programming that varied from 'parenting classes' to 'kids after school cooking classes' to 'toddler story time' to 'educator workshops', tracking attendance was key. How many registered? How many showed up? How many came back? A lot of it was about the numbers. And having those numbers was satisfying – no doubt about it. BUT... numbers did not tell the whole story. Because it was also about the one. I remember the one grade eight boy who came to the after school cooking classes and who collected each of the simple, inexpensive recipes I offered and who told me that was a big help for him because he was the one who did the grocery shopping for his family.

We, as we are about the business of the church, often think of the many. There is something special about coming into a sanctuary that is filled with people. There is a sense of surprise, and joy and excitement, and perhaps some anxiety if you are the preacher. There is a sense of fellowship in gathering, and in knowing those who are present. There is a sense of relief for the leadership of the church – a sense that we must be doing something right, that the coffers will benefit, and we needn't worry about how we are going to pay the bills. And as much as we celebrate the gathering of the many, we must not forget the one. The one who enters our sanctuary who has never been here before. The one who can no longer attend because of infirmity. The one who hasn't attended in a good long time for some reason or another. The one who is channel surfing on youtube and finds our worship recording by chance. These are the ones who seek, who are looking for a place of worship that welcomes them, who want to be remembered and in fellowship regardless of whether they walk through the church doors, who are looking for evidence of God in their lives and in the world around them.

Philip sought out such a one. Guided by an angel of the Lord, he made his way to the desert road, where he found an important and educated man of wealth from a foreign country, who was more than just interested, but actively seeking to know the one true God of the Jewish people. The author of the book of Acts, "Luke, describes him as a eunuch – a castrated man. It was common in the ancient Near East for men who had been castrated to serve in positions of

state. He was the chief finance minister of the Ethiopian court under the queen, Candace.”¹ Biblical scholar N.T. Wright, notes that “it is very unlikely, virtually impossible, that this man would have been Jewish; and being an eunuch, he could not have been a convert to Judaism. He was then, an outsider. But there was something about the Jewish God and the Jewish way of life which attracted him, as it did with many in the ancient world. So, he had made the long journey to Jerusalem to worship, perhaps at one of the festivals. He had procured, or perhaps he already possessed, a copy of some or all of the Jewish scriptures.

Like many then and now, the Ethiopian was benefitting from a simple truth. When you find yourself attracted towards the faith, the scriptures provide, marvellously, something you can have and hold and take away and which, however far you are geographically from a place of worship, can become the source of living water from which you can drink at your own pace, and in your own way. But of course, sooner or later, you find yourself faced with a passage which sounds powerful and important – but you don’t know what it means.”² Scripture tells us this man was reading from the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The powerful and important passage he was reading, and asked Philip about is from Isaiah 53: 7-8:

*‘He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.’*

N.T. Wright notes that “it is important to stress how the early church read the prophets. It wasn’t just a matter of discovering strange passages here and there and lining them up to point to Jesus,”³ as this passage which can be read to describe Christ’s crucifixion, does. “The Hebrew scriptures were viewed as a

¹ N. T. Wright, Acts for Everyone, part 1, 133.

² N. T. Wright, Acts for Everyone, part 1, 133-4.

³ N.T. Wright, Acts for Everyone, part 1, 134.

narrative. This was a story that stretched from the creation of the world and of humans, and the disaster of human rebellion, through Abraham and Moses and David and the prophets, and on to the present day. The question was not whether there were passages which gave a foretaste of what was to come, but how does this story reach its climax? And how do the hints and guesses along the way contribute to that climax?

Isaiah wasn't simply looking through a long range prophetic telescope, seeing Jesus a few hundred years away, and describing him in cryptic poetry. Isaiah was meditating on the fate of Israel in exile, and on the promises and purposes of God which remained constant despite Israel's failure to be the light to the nations. Gradually a picture took shape in his praying, meditating mind: the figure of a Servant, one who would complete Israel's task, who would come to do for Israel and for the whole world what they could not do for themselves. To offer himself, to bear the weight of the world's shame and wickedness, even to his own death."⁴

Isaiah offered different images of his vision: the image of a servant, the image of a shepherd, the image of a king, the image of a prophet. All of these described the one who would fulfill the promise of a new covenant:

*'Now the Lord says –
he who formed me in the womb to be his servant
to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself -
"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people,
to restore the land and to restore its desolate inheritances.'* (Isa 49: 5-6, 8).

⁴ N. T. Wright, Acts for Everyone, part 1, 134-5.

The salvation that Isaiah envisioned for the nation of Israel, he also imagined envisioned for the Gentile nation. And a few chapters later, for the eunuch himself.

'For this is what the Lord says:

"To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,

who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant –

to them I will give within my temple and its walls

a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever." (Isa 56: 4-5).

Philip sat with this seeker, talking about the scriptures, telling him the good news about Jesus. This winding, meandering narrative of God and humanity, of sin and salvation, had come to life in Jesus. "No wonder the Ethiopian was excited. When you tell the story of Israel, with Jesus at its climax, it opens up to include everybody, including people like him, doubly excluded and now wonderfully welcomed. No wonder he wanted to share in the death and resurrection of this Jesus by being baptized, by having the whole story become his story too."⁵

Tradition has it that this Ethiopian became "the first evangelist in his own native country."⁶ So it was the one became many. Seeking turned to witness, witness turned to preaching and teaching. It is a story that continues today, and we are all part of this story. We seek, we witness, we teach; in different ways, in different places, at different times. When we share the good news of Jesus, the story continues. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Glorious and Gracious God,

We listen to the stories of the apostles who turned their witness to teaching,

⁵ N.T. Wright, Acts for Everyone, part 1, 135.

⁶ N.T. Wright, Acts for Everyone, part 1, 135.

who acted with passion in their love for Christ,
in order to share that love with others.

We confess that while we profess to believe,
our professions of faith are often not spoken of, and are not shared.
Forgive us.

Glorious and Gracious God, we are assured,
now and always, of your love for us and of your forgiveness.
Strengthen us, embolden us, to speak openly of our faith,
to witness to your presence and works in our lives,
to speak and act with love as we have been commanded.

Glorious and Gracious God,
We pray for the needs of all during this time
– for health, for family, for food and shelter, for financial security,
for justice, and for equality.
We pray for wisdom for leaders of nations.
We pray for courage and comfort for medical staff, and for front line and essential
service workers.
We pray for patience as we and our communities struggle with the conditions set
upon us because of COVID-19.
We pray for those who are ill, in body and mind and spirit,
and for loved ones who cannot be close enough to care for or comfort them.

We pray for all who have asked for our prayers...

We pray for all who have no one to pray for them...

We pray especially for those near and dear to our hearts.....

“Where hope has grown tired and thin, lift our sights,
so that we may see hope beyond hope, life beyond death,
and you, lifted up before us.

We pray all this in the name of Christ who gave himself for our sake,”⁷
To our Mother of Wisdom and our Father...

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

We give thanks to God for blessings and gifts given. We, in turn, offer our gifts of time, talent and treasure to God. Your gifts can be sent to June Hughes for Arden United Church, Sheila Deline for Henderson United Church, or Sharon MacMunn for Mountain Grove United Church. You can also visit our website – www.ardenpastoralcharge.ca – where you will find a ‘Donate’ button.

On behalf of the congregations of Arden, Henderson and Mountain Grove, I do want to thank you for your ongoing financial contributions to our churches.

Benediction:

“May our lives be a witness to Christ’s life
So that others may come to believe that the Lord is risen indeed.”⁸
And now, may the grace of Christ attend you,
the love of God surround you,
and the Holy Spirit keep you. Amen.

⁷ Feasting on the Word: Worship Companion, Year A, Vol 1, 103.

⁸ Feasting on the Word: Worship Companion, Year B, Vol 1, 154 (adapted CMM).